

**“Nuestro gozo en el pozo:”  
Pleberio and the Place without a *Telos***

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The final act of *Celestina* comprises one of the most disquieting and controversial scenes in Spanish literature. It is Pleberio’s soliloquy spoken before the lifeless bodies of his wife, Alisa, and his suicide daughter Melibea. Superficially, the scene rehearses a long established tradition of medieval sacred and profane texts, but especially texts from the dramatic and elegiac traditions. Yet in its poignant intensity and the intellectual postulates that sustain it, Act XXI of *Celestina* represents both the culmination and dissolution of these traditional elements since in it the consolatory oration, or *planctus*, and the figure of the *expositor*, or *interpres*, of the medieval drama (see Curtius 80-82; Chambers 10-11, 26, 30, 48), become vehicles for the expression of a whole new set of values and ideas that challenge the history and meaning of the very forms from which Pleberio’s lament emerges.

Rojas prepares his readers for Pleberio’s lament in Act XX, where Melibea, disconsolate over Calisto’s death, confides in her servant Lucrecia and says:

De todos soy dexada; bien se ha adereçado la manera de mi morir . . . Todo se ha hecho a mi voluntad; buen tiempo terné para contar a Pleberio mi señor la causa de mi ya acordado fin. Gran sinrazón hago a sus canas; gran ofensa a su vejez; gran fatiga le acarreo con mi falta; en gran soledad le dexo. (Rojas 1989, 331)

Melibea prophesies her father’s pain and loneliness, the suffering he will feel as a result of her demise; she foresees the grief that is at the center of Pleberio’s closing speech. But more importantly, Melibea intuits and anticipates the extraordinary vision of the world – one of radical solitude, bewilderment, and abandonment– that will be at the center of the words uttered by her despondent father.

Pleberio’s recapitulatory and moralizing function was initially recognized by María Rosa Lida de Malkiel (473), and is easily discernible in any reading of the text itself. After long, anguished condemnations of the World, Love, and Fortune, Pleberio synthesizes the action of everything that has preceded the suicide of Melibea. Addressing the World, he summarizes the key events of *Celestina*:

La falsa alcahueta Celestina murió a manos de los mas fieles compañeros que ella para tu servicio emponçoñado jamás halló; ellos murieron degollados, Calisto despeñado. Mi triste hija quiso tomar la misma muerte por seguirle. Esto todo causas. (341)

Pleberio, however, constitutes far more than a didactic mouthpiece that summarizes events. Lida de Malkiel also noted nearly fifty years ago that, although “Rojas mantiene dentro de la *Tragicomedia* la máscara docente que recita la moraleja . . . esa máscara es al mismo tiempo un personaje, un concreto caso humano, y su lamento, atestado de aforismos y ejemplos generalizadores, acaba en una desgarradora pena individual” (473). *Celestina*’s originality lies precisely in the fact that Pleberio is individualized through his suffering. Pleberio’s role in the work is thus one of recapitulation and exemplification, but the examples he draws from the events that have befallen him are transformed into an anguished expression of deep personal distress. He is the recognizable figure of the *expositor* of the medieval drama, but one now endowed with a profound sense of consciousness and self-awareness. It is through this unanticipated ability to feel and introspect by means of the questioning provoked by suffering that Pleberio surpasses the identifiable textual tradition from which his character springs.

In his capacity of *expositor* or *interprete* in Act XXI, Pleberio pronounces an elegy that points to a moral. Unlike the traditional elegy, however, the dark moral Pleberio extracts from the events he narrates is far from consolatory. To be sure, Pleberio’s words constitute an aggressive and impious judgment upon the World and, by extension, all of Creation. He describes a hopeless universe in which humankind’s existence consists of perpetual self-deception, false security—a topsy-turvy world ruled by confusion, devoid and despairing of transcendental answers to his questions and empty of all consolation and solutions. The topical figure of the *expositor* and the well-known consolatory themes of the elegy are overturned in Pleberio’s speech to convey a cruel vision of what Stephen Gilman called the “arbitrary aggression” of Creation (Gilman 375).

The consecrated forms of the medieval didactic and consolatory tradition in Pleberio’s speech mask a radical nihilism in his message. Inverted, hackneyed figures of moral rhetoric are broken down to convey a sense of human isolation and vulnerability in a universe created by a distant God ruling over a detached, impassive nature, materialized in the meaningless trees Pleberio has planted, the ships and edifices he has built, which he invokes as he stands by the side of the lifeless body of his daughter (Rojas 1989, 337). The scene’s emotive force, its striking poignancy, emerges from the negation of an expected reciprocity between literary form and content. As Américo Castro argued in regard to *Celestina*,

Esta obra, para tantos lectores admirable, surgió como una ruptura de la tradición literaria de la Europa medieval y de la grecorromana. No puede, por consiguiente, ser calificada ni de medieval ni de renacentista. El intento de sus autores no fue continuar o desenvolver temas y formas anteriores, sino embestir contra ellos, derrocarlos y trastocar su sentido . . . En *La Celestina* encontramos negados los signos positivos de lo literariamente admitido, no con miras a destruir por destruir, sino a fin de poner a desnudo la escueta voluntad de existir, demostrar la posibilidad de que una obra literaria continúe subsistiendo privada de su marco típico, como una negación de su

forma previa, como un rebelde que compensa con su desatada violencia la pérdida de lo que había sido serena e indiscutida perfección. (Castro 95-96)

Pleberio conjures the universally destructive powers of life, the “dance of life” as Gilman called it (377). It is a collective, senseless, circular game –a partsong round of pain– that encompasses all humankind in the dance step of worldly torment:

. . . me pareces un laberinto de errores [Mundo], un desierto spantable, una morada de fieras, juego de hombre que andan en carro . . . hazes mal a todos, porque ningún triste se halle solo en ninguna adversidad, diciendo que es alivio a los míseros, como yo, tener compañeros en la pena. Pues desconsolado viejo, ¡qué solo estoy! (Rojas 1989, 338-39)

The World’s common legacy to humankind constitutes deception, misery, and solitude. Spiritual pain and loneliness are the only shared experiences of the human species. All its members join hands in a circle to dance to a chorus of grief, to the painful cries of the living. Adding irony to injury, despite the universality of the experience, no comfort or fellowship may be found in common misery, only solitude and silence. Only suffering marks the fellowship of the living.

Although Pleberio’s grief is personal, he stresses the need to proclaim it in order to share it and grieve with others, to mourn and to relieve the anguish: “Ayúdame a llorar nuestra llagada postremería. ¡O gentes, que venís a mi dolor! ¡O amigos e señores, ayudadme a sentir mi pena!” (336-37), he pleads. However, no one answers his call for comfort and companionship in sorrow. The compulsion to convey and share the suffering, to grieve and expiate the pain through communal mourning, is precluded by a basic isolation. Pleberio stands alone in the presence of the dead, in absence of any living being. In this way, the ubiquity, and at once paradoxical silent loneliness, of the tomb is cast upon the landscape. Pleberio finds only solitude where the consolatory tradition offered remedies through the possibility of the shared experience of collective grief. The last Act of *Celestina* portrays a world of the living dead. Pleberio’s soliloquy is a lament upon the purposelessness and solitude of life. It constitutes a dirge directed at the World and underscores the final irony of a bleak and lonesome end.

Apostrophizing the World, he describes his life in it as if it were a type of brutal torture:

¡O vida de congoxas llena, de miserias acompañada, o mundo, mundo! . . .  
Yo pensaua en mi más tierna edad que eras y eran tus hechos regidos por  
alguna orden. Agora, visto el pro y la contra de tus bienandanzas, me pareces  
vn laberinto de errores, un desierto spantable. . . verdadero dolor. (338)

The suicide of his only daughter constitutes an unmatched loss, greater than death itself. He does not, however, lament Melibea’s demise but the “causa desastrada de su morir”

(338) –the World, Love, Desire– the driving forces of existence itself.

Melibea's self-estruction offers Pleberio a welcome lesson: it brings disabuse and allows him to put life and its cruelty into perspective. Melibea's suicide –the loss and self-destruction of everything he has lived for– provides ironical clarity: the freedom to see clearly the final meaningless of existence. Invoking Melibea, he confesses that "Agora perderé contigo, mi desdichada hija, los miedos e temores que cada día me espavorecían. Sola tu muerte es la que a mí me haze seguro de sospecha" (340). Melibea's leap from the tower conveys a sudden realization; it permits Pleberio to see life as a process whose only end and purpose is death. He incongruously expresses relief with that insight, since he says that by means of it he now understands that there is no purpose or reason to the World other than suffering and pain; and that to believe the opposite is an illusion. At the crossroads of Pleberio's encounter with the finality and the ultimate reality of material death –the specter of the Real in Freudian and Lacanian terms– it is no longer necessary to fear Fortune or contingency, whose ultimate ends always prove adverse. Life is in time ultimately defined only by extinction; living becomes a process of self-destruction marked by blindness and unforeseen grief. The human will to achieve is a fraud: aspiration and desire are condemned to failure from inception. Hope is futile, and life, a slow progress toward an end that culminates in corporal death. The world to Pleberio is an non-transcendental "prado lleno de serpientes, huerto florido y sin fruto, fuente de cuydados, río de lágrimas, mar de miserias, trabajo sin prouecho, dulce ponçona, vana esperança, falsa alegría, verdadero dolor" (338). Presided over by love and desire, Pleberio stresses the constitutional emptiness of human existence, its spiritual misery and horror, whose end is an inevitable encounter with nothing.

If Manrique's *Coplas* stand as the great consolatory text at the close of the Castilian fifteenth century, Pleberio's lament at the end of *Celestina* comprises the single most intense expression of grim pessimism of the period. Surrounded by the lifeless, physically broken bodies of his family, there is no solace for the lone survivor; no reassurance beyond the unendurable pain of the moment. To be sure, Pleberio sees Melibea's and Alisa's insensibility in death as an enviable alternative to his own existence in a universe spilling over with unmitigated anguish, guided by deceitful, blind desire.

Pleberio's lament offers up an *anagnorisis*, or a sort of tragic self-recognition and sudden awakening that is brutally expressed through a breakdown of language, a kind of enjambment in Pleberio's speaking register. Taken totally unawares by his realization, his disabuse transforms all rational thought into the pained, colloquial exclamation he directs at Alisa when she initially comes upon the scene: "¡Ay, ay, noble mujer, nuestro gozo en el pozo; nuestro bien todo es perdido; no queremos más bivar!" (336). Wishing to die, for the decorous Pleberio everything is suddenly 'down the tube'; continued existence offers greater pain than death itself.

To be sure, the illocutionary force of Pleberio's summation rests on the fact that it is composed not so much of affirmations of suffering but exclamations of bewilderment and questions that search for an explanation. The larger part of his lament is comprised of a torrent of interrogations and interjections, a deluge of probing anaphora that, for lack of

an interlocutor and the absence of a response, remains just that, a flood of cries and questions that are never answered. In the strictest sense, Pleberio's questioning and expostulation become rhetorical, and in their very formulation and lack of reply his one-sided inquisition of the World provides its own response: silence. His are empty questions devoid of meaning, exclamations that receive no answer, iterations that are met with stillness.

Life for Pleberio is now empty of sense; even God exterminates those he creates ("Cata que Dios mata los que crió," he says, in an ambiguous reference possibly to the God of Love, 342). Rather than affirm the consolation of a providential salvation, Pleberio underscores the futility and anguish of the individual at war with temporality, in blind pursuit of things that ultimately signify nothing. He points to a loss of hope, confirmed by what he sees around him. Yet, he clamors for a sense of order, for a *telos*, and for a yearned but patently absent Providence. Although it might be tempting to find comic irony in Pleberio's rejection of consolatory authorities, it is a mistake to judge him as a vain, irresponsible father more concerned with himself than the well-being of his daughter, or to fault him for not having married her in a timely fashion (O. H. Green, Dunn 124-25). There is nothing in the text that instructs us to read his words in this way, just as there is nothing that points to the presence of some moral principle whose understanding could have led to an avoidance of the events Pleberio has just witnessed and retold. His words must be taken at face value, rather than as an expression of a set of ethical or transcendental references. Desire, which he calls Love, guides the World, it is inescapable; its ends are destructive. To be sure, some studies have even attempted to interpret Pleberio from a Carnavalesque perspective, finding comedy in his speech and concluding that his "lament brings all that is abstract and spiritual . . . down to the concrete and corporal level" (Fothergill-Payne 47). However, scenarios of death comprise the privileged places of gravity and meaning in literary tradition. Moreover, Rojas tells us that his first audience had understood his conclusion to be somber. In the prologue to the twenty one act version of his work, added between 1499 and 1502, Fernando de Rojas attests to his contemporaries' serious understanding of its end, and notes that since his readers had felt that it "acabava en tristeza," they clamored for him to change the original title from *comedia* to *tragicomedia*. Bending partially to his readers' desires, he settled on *tragicomedia*, acknowledging the presence of black irony (81) at the end.<sup>1</sup>

Tracing the stark limits of human existence, mortality is that against which most literary discourse defines itself. Standing before the shattered body of his only daughter, apprised of all the events that have led to this catastrophe, Pleberio endures as the lone witness to the final coalescence of human desire and death, denying all possibility of consolation. The confrontation with the reality of Melibea's demise ruptures the Symbolic order of his longing and opens it out into its beyond, to what Freud calls the realm of *das Ding*, the realm of the unspeakable, and to the breakdown of language itself. At the ends of desire, Pleberio cannot hold to anything, he finds only the material finality of

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<sup>1</sup> On the nuances and modulations of the titles assigned to Rojas' work, see Lawrance.

existence. All the vitality, all the energies of desire that drive the characters in the *Tragicomedia* are reduced to a brutal, corporal, substantive, material death. It is at this moment that Pleberio realizes love and desire cease to entice and demonstrates only how they mutilate and profane both their objects and their subjects. Human aspiration embodies the pursuit of an impossible and absolute union that can culminate only in destruction. Love and death are inextricably bound up because desire only achieves its ultimate and final goal in the transgression and separation of death. For Pleberio, love provides the allegory for this self-destruction, its quest leads to a total loss of self, to annihilation, in the pursuit of the desire of living.

Witness to the wages of desire, Pleberio is led to carry out an interrogation of the illusion of the possibility of unity through love and the human aspirations for fulfillment, underscoring the impossibility of any transcendental consummation. The only object of desire, its end and final resting place, is nothing, death. It is this intimate coalescence of desire and death at the edge of the abyss, of Eros and Thanatos without transcendence, that shapes Pleberio's world and understanding; it marks the absence of any metaphysical perception and a feeling of radical estrangement from anything beyond existence. It is for this reason that we can broaden J.A. Maravall's fundamentally Marxist observation that *Celestina* "encierra el primer episodio en la lucha contra la enajenación, que constituye el más hondo drama desde el Renacimiento a nuestros días" (165) to include something beyond social and class struggle.

It is more than social structures and literary and textual models that collapse at the conclusion of *Celestina*: it is the ideals that sustain and animate them that break down. The redemptive quality of love, desire's saving grace, meets a dead end, but not to be greeted by compassion or to be condemned in a pious *reprobatio amoris*, but to show instead that the aristocratic and religious versions of earthly and divine love of the late Middle Ages are both fictions. At the end of *Celestina*, Rojas confirms that it is just as impossible to live life like a Christian as it is to live it like a courtly lover.

*Celestina* systematically forecloses every expectation of redemptive desire as expressed in textual authority and tradition. Rather, we are left with doubt and the painful vital process of separation from all the ennobling myths, the master narratives of transcendence. Pleberio discovers that he has lived in an unknown, desacralized universe. Although *Celestina* at the outset seeks to locate itself within the textual tradition of the dialectic of earthly and divine love, its final assertions about love and human aspiration exceed that possibility and all its righteous underpinnings. Pleberio stands as a witness to universal indifference. His pain springs from the cruelty and emptiness of life in an unsympathetic world driven by blind passion, ambition, and yearning. Certain that he is trapped by life, the only certainty beyond is annihilation in an indifferent world. As Wardropper rightly observed long ago, Pleberio expresses "the anguish of man in spite of and beyond the consolations of religion" (152). However this is no momentary truancy from orthodoxy, but a final and conclusive statement of fact. In *Celestina*, Pleberio's speech is not followed by recantation, palinode, or enlightened understanding. We are left with a vision of a world that is never reconciled to conform to Christian beliefs.

Throughout the last act of the work, there is an undermining of both the expected forms of the medieval drama and the traditional themes and conclusions of the medieval consolatory tradition.

To be sure, Pleberio's summation proved sufficiently disturbing to early modern readers so as to compel momentous changes in it, to add a moral, draw a lesson, and offer a consolatory message through significant rewritings. This is clear from several of the sixteenth-century translations of *Celestina* that have come down to us. In Christoph von Wirsung's 1534 German translation, for example, Pleberio emphasizes how Melibea succumbed to passion, but was punished and paid for her sin by not being permitted to marry the man she loved. In 1577 Lavardin, the French translator of the work, created an entirely new character, Ariston –Alisa's brother–, who tempers the radical nature of Pleberio's words. Ariston interrupts Pleberio as he speaks to comfort him and counsel him to accept his fate and heed his duty as a father (Drysdall, ed.). But it is the anonymous Dutch translations (1550-80) that point to the broad-base social and doctrinal discomfort that many early modern readers must have perceived in *Celestina*, and how they intentionally sought to foreclose the possibility of a less than Christian understanding of the work. At the very end of Act XXI in the Dutch translation, Pleberio's speech is extended beyond his last words in the Castilian original. Between his closing interrogation, in which he dryly invokes the dark valley of tears inscribed in Psalm 84:7 as well as in the *Salve Regina* “¿Por qué me dexaste triste y solo in *hac lacrimarum valle?*” (343)), the Dutch translator makes Pleberio speak the following additional words:

Oh lamentable death, painful farewell, oh obstinate heart of my daughter! Oh deformed, ghastly, corrosive, disheartening deed! Oh painful death, oh tormenting love! I, poor miserable old man, now find myself alone in the world. What shall I begin to undertake now? For the life of Adam's children is nothing but hay! Mirror yourselves on this, parents: see to it well how you educate your children. Let your eyes not be deceived; observe with care and see to it that you not enter in the distress in which I, wretched father, find myself on account of my passivity, an example for you all. I must and I wish to offer everything up to the Lord: may He be our help and refuge in this miserable vale of tears. Amen. (Trans. Behiels and Kish 43, n. 104)

Clearly Pleberio's affirmations that the order of things does not hold to human expectations and Biblical pieties (in his universe children die before their parents (Rojas 1989, 337); the sins of children are visited upon their elders (341); and the blessed are those who never know the world (341-42); humankind inhabits a “laberinto de errores” (338) where everything deceives and points to something other; and where the possibility of salvation is implicitly denied by remaining unmentioned), compelled a number of early modern responses that sought to detour Pleberio's message in the original text by adding other characters or unambiguous words that underscored or pointed to a Christian moral.

Act XXI of *Celestina* thus provoked contention among its early modern readers. Couched as a lament on the misery of existence demonstrated through the use of traditional medieval didactic literary devices presented in an unorthodox way, elements from the traditional elegy are merged with the figure of the *expositor* but utilized to articulate the message of humankind's unavoidable impasse with an existence abandoned by Providence. The lesson taught by *Celestina* remains disquieting and conflictive rather than consolatory, skeptical rather than believing, pessimistic rather than confident. Pleberio in finding no comfort for his grief and suffering synthesizes the disillusionment, barrenness, and suspicion of Christian orthodoxy that many Castilians felt –doubtless Rojas among them–, at the close of the fifteenth century. As Francisco Márquez Villanueva has argued, there persisted a strong current of Averroistic skepticism in Castile at that time, exacerbated by social crises (civil war, Inquisition, the Expulsion of the Jews, etc.), that adhered to the notion of a universe created by a *Deus otiosus*, a God removed from all concern with the sublunar world inhabited by humankind. Although many intellectuals like Rojas were technically Christian, they were so only in name as they cleaved to the idea of humanity's abandonment to chaos in a contentious world driven by natural imperatives and devoid of Providence (Márquez Villanueva 284).

Pleberio's speech does not portray Melibea's death as a punishment for promiscuity, paternal disobedience, or as the wages of sin. Rather, her demise stands as brutal material proof of something intuited but never quite comprehended by Pleberio until the moment he contemplates his daughter's shattered, lifeless body, namely that death inhabits human desire: perversely, lethally, ecstatically. Existence is governed by a ceaseless process of desiring inseparable, in the end, from an inconsolable sense of loss, always in excess of anything in particular. It is Pleberio's experience of the implacability of desire and loss that shapes *Celestina*'s originality; it derives from the tension between the yearning for a transcendent, fixed reality to exist, and thereby redeem loss, and the understanding that, in fact, it does not. All possibility of happiness for Pleberio is irrevocably foreclosed. The result is an unprincipled universe circumscribed by a resolutely materialist outlook that repudiates a belief in providence, immortality, and hope. For Pleberio, it is as if an inscrutable God –if he exists at all– had created a world without His presence; one in which there is no distinguishable moral law, and where eternity is nothing more than the transformation of things into material death. It is a world in which an inanimate nature only punctuates the insubstantiality and futility of human life. Pleberio's insight is the discovery of the void of his subjectivity in a world blind to spiritual essence, a place without a *telos*.

Pleberio stands as witness that the only *telos* is the one that belongs to the progress of desire, which can move only toward extinction. Life is represented as a form of being that exists only to perish. Desire, which he calls Love, is the central negative principle that emerges as the constitutive force of finite life; as an axiom of the perpetually altering location of the self within a network of internal relations. In an effort to escape the vulnerability and nihilism of a life that fails to extend itself beyond being, desire animates the body with the negation of life's finitude, seeking to proclaim life as transcendent.

Desire seeks to escape the doom of death by preempting it with the illusions of power and consummation, only to be jolted by life's material finality.

In Melibea's example, Pleberio discovers the reality of life and the body: corporeality only as a guarantor of death. The promise of a new life—one beyond death—no longer shapes the moral horizon. Pleberio grasps the lie of desire, which endows its illusive end with value, and he understands it as a drive whose object is imaginary.

A suffering desire for what cannot be fulfilled, for what is known now to be radically absent, Pleberio's speech comprises an expression of mourning whose intensity is sufficient to kill. All his attempts to live beyond human desire, to prolong his life beyond it, are now recognized as futile. The evidence that there is no beyond desiring comes too late. He discovers that the lack of satisfaction as well as the satisfaction of the callings of human yearning end only in material destruction. Pleberio understands the impossibility of his earlier conviction that self preservation and the preservation of family, honor, and estate could be realized through the renunciation, policing, or suppression of desire. Both the absence and the presence of desire, however, can yield only one meaning: the inexorable finality of death. Caught in the synthesis of the dialectics of desire, Pleberio's speech marks a profound turning point in the history of the portrayal of consciousness in European literature.

Pleberio comes to realize that desire destroys meaning and that, in its obscurity, it ends by casting light on what we take to have meaning; that the meaning of meaning is in fact its meaninglessness, whose sense is impossible to discover without the catastrophic breakdown of human aspirations. Desire discovers meaninglessness for Pleberio because he comes to see that it operates beyond the strictures of all law and order, which serve only to defer, displace, or repress it. It also remains beyond the powers of language and signification, which cannot name it. Desire can neither be denied nor controlled. Life is perceived as a constantly unfolding narrative or circular dance driven by hunger and hope which claims truth when it should be questioning it, which endows value where there is none. The metaphysics of presence, which evokes a stable center of values, a redemptive core, and the possibility of transcendence fails to materialize in Pleberio's grief. Life's imagined center neither holds nor exists. The forces of desire, he says, operate beyond every notion of a center and a presence and point only to absence; to a deep, empty silence at the depths of the valley of tears.

In a perverse leap, Pleberio in his imprecation of Love and the World finds that the material energies of the universe reside not in the generative force of life but in the disintegrative potency of death. The destructive power of death is found at the heart of love, at the very center of the desire for generation. Through Pleberio's eyes, the world becomes disenchanting: nothing lies beyond the immediate actuality of the forces and events that propel it. There is no longer any mystery in being. The material impermanence and destructibility of things signals the fragility and fragmentation of being itself, rather than, as for an earlier age, their apparent stability and permanence had symbolized coherence and transcendence. Pleberio can no longer imagine himself as a protagonist in life's drama and imagines himself now only as a spectator in a world of objects and

events, as if he were watching a baffling play whose plot was initially envisioned as expressive of his own will and purpose but which has now turned unintelligible. Pleberio's lament constitutes the last thwarted outburst of longing in *Celestina*, a liminal primal scene where the energy to realize human ambition is simultaneously understood as an impulse toward death. Its release of emotional intensity and energy points to human desire as nothing but a struggle against the end, a detour before the abyss. At the close of events, then, seeking to impose control and understanding upon the Symbolic Order of his world through the mastery of the word, speech fails him and Pleberio is confronted by the Real: with death. Cut off from everyone, with no response to his pleas, he can only turn to himself in his quest for subjective understanding. Literally and figuratively the incarnation of Lacan's Law of the Father, Pleberio's quest for subjective individuation is thwarted by his inability to impose order on things in the face of annihilation. He both actually and symbolically fails to incarnate Lacan's Law, and his words remain inadequate, full of sound and fury but unanswered. Caught between the yearning for a mastery of the Symbolic power of language, which cannot be reinstated, and the finality of death, Pleberio falls headlong into a confrontation with annihilation, impelled by a failed craving for the reparation of the loss of Melibea and the realization that death is ultimately desire's only cure.

Regardless of its specific origins, be they *converso*, Averroistic (Márquez Villanueva), Epicurean (Menéndez y Pelayo, Alcalá, and Baranda), or a combination of these, the intricate tragic understanding of existence's radical material embodiment produces an irrefutable sense of mourning in Pleberio that goes beyond any simple, eventually remediable grief for his dead daughter. His distress, although rooted in a father's sense of loss for a deceased child, produces a sudden understanding of the untranscendental nature of human aspirations and human existence, the illusions that abide about the world and about the human place in it.

Although some would seek to find a moral lesson in the scenario of physical violence portrayed in the closing pages of *Celestina*—a visual sermon comprised of the broken bodies that litter the text (Pármeno's, Sempronio's, Celestina's, Calisto's, Melibea's, and Alisa's, see Sanmartín Bastida)—, that warns against the pursuit of pleasure in a retributive society, the very physicality of the material tearing and shattering of bodies in the work speaks to a greater, fundamentally worldly and temporal fragmentation: to a process of the amoral transformation of souls, the putative spiritual essences of human life, into inert, lifeless stuff. Melibea's demise teaches no lesson other than the senselessness of existence and provokes an anguish that defies relief. Through it, Pleberio defines himself and everything against mortality. He understands that life is discontinuous. Any attempt to recover or preserve the human spirit is set off against the silence of others and the sudden perception of the stark social and biological limits of every human aspiration. Human desire reaches its extremity in Pleberio, transformed into a longing to contract into nothingness. While all the various dialectics of desire that constitute the action of *Celestina* have been played out and find their ironic culmination in Melibea's shattered body, Pleberio reaches an ontological level at which the real destiny of desiring human

subjects is finally exposed. His final outburst does nothing less than stage the moment where perception breaks through repression to reveal the unmoving essential quality of life, its end in material disintegration.

*Celestina* in this way exposes Pleberio as the last remaining paradigmatic human subject in the world, left adrift in a universe moved by insatiable want, which is only a mask for death. Abandoned and alone like Lear before the storm, and cursed with the true understanding of the limitlessness of the valley of tears evoked in his last utterance before falling silent and away from language, Pleberio is left to mourn and contradict all religious doctrine by failing to invoke it. He belies commonplace ideals by being unable to discover any manner of solace in his grief.

Not even Freud's observations on the process of mourning can be applied here. Speaking of loss, Freud invokes the immediate human quest to repair it, noting that "Each single one of the memories and situations of expectancy which demonstrate the libido's attachment to the lost object is met by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists; and the ego, confronted as it were with the question whether it shall share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of the narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished" (*Standard Edition*, ed. Starchey XIV, 255). The ego's abolishment of what is lost and the reconciliation that marks the completion of mourning, as described by Freud, is never hinted at, let alone achieved, in *Celestina*. We are left with a shattered Pleberio who is forced to bear witness not just to Melibea's mortality, but to all mortality, and who sees nothing but death in the generative forces of life. Love is but a foreshadowing of human extinction. Pleberio's attempt to mourn becomes a moment of self-realization and reflection in which Melibea's suicide provides a glimpse into the abyss, the lens that permits him also to see not only her irrevocable absence but the image of himself caught in the snares of worldly desire and mortality. His words declare the incommensurability of loss and reparation to proclaim the final inadequacy and impotence of the human need for transcendence. The expected conciliatory transaction of grief and mourning with the logic of consolation as defined in the economy of reassurance that structures the medieval Christian *telos* is ruptured and the promise of exchange foreclosed. Contrary to religion, which conceals it, Pleberio sees the proximity of life to the void and, in the absence of all reassurance, acknowledges the void as the only final truth.

The medieval religious paradigm constructs an image of desire that, for good or ill, is always transcendent. The pursuit of God affirms desire's consummate goodness, the pursuit of the flesh its infinite evil; eternal salvation or damnation is always figured in it. In one way or another, through affirmation or denial, desire's transcendence is always asserted, never annulled. Yet in *Celestina*, desire is figured always as a sign of absence for which any presence is impossible. The work's genius and modernity lies in the representation of the human subject as something that emerges out of this reconceptualization of desire and from the trauma of the realization that desire's end is desire itself, something untranscendental and destined always to be obstructed. As a result, it produces only melancholia, the inability to mourn and transform loss into

consolation, as it forecloses the promise of redemption or catharsis by means of grief and sorrow. There is no compensation for loss and pain in the blank economy of salvation discovered by Pleberio. The shattered body of his daughter, the ruin of his world, are framed by a deeply nostalgic discourse of unredeemable loss and impossibility. Only grief abides and beyond it, death.

In his questioning Pleberio discovers the amorality of desire, which turns love into annihilation. The work's end looks back to trace the path of unbridled yearning and announce its inevitable encounter with the Real, which, like in Freud's Death Drive formulated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, remains the only genuine cure for the constitutional lack felt by all human subjects. In a universe of insatiable lack, only annihilation can silence the discourse of wanting. *Celestina* ends at the only place its ending is possible: at the crossroads of death and desire. At the end of Eros' subjugating chain, Thanatos is acknowledged as the only sovereign master of the human subjects of desire.

*Celestina* thus concludes with a bold challenge to literary clichés and their ethical foundations. In it we see the internal hemorrhaging of both literature and spirituality, the death throes of a way of life that once dead rose from its corpse to reveal, in the words of Américo Castro, "la posibilidad literaria del futuro personaje novelístico, nacido de la expresión de una autognosis conjugada con un acto de voluntad" (125).

Through Pleberio's vision of an untranscendental human mortality, the final act of *Celestina* casts off metaphysics and creates a space for an engagement with the only remaining alternative, secular ethics; an ethics removed from the notion of sin, retribution, and the sphere of religion, and one that marks the emergence of a modern epistemology that organizes the representation of a new kind of human experience. By coming to grips with their own temporality and the profound anxieties alluded to in something like Pleberio's lament, human beings at the threshold of modernity were required both to confront and to assume a more earthly sense of responsibility, one inexorably shaped by secular time and civic, rather than religious, duties, priorities, and obligations. In short, the last act of *Celestina* signals a decisive turn in the history of the portrayal of desire and in the direction of the emergence of the modern human subject.

At its close, through the vestigial figure of Pleberio, *Celestina* conjures up an unprecedented understanding of the radical untranscendence of human ambition. Pleberio's self-conscious reflection on the world, everything's place in it, and the failure of human longing to locate meaning only to find death and the void in its search constitutes a decisive rupture between the old and the new order by detaching itself from nature and from its own textual prehistory. Pleberio's revelation identifies the reality of human yearning with what he experiences: something inhabited by nothing. His vision displaces the authority of metaphysical illusions with the preeminence of experience in understanding, and it portrays consciousness of the world as a self-generated and autonomous realm of knowledge, which makes the idea of experience itself central to its reality. At the same time, this perception points to the insignificance of all metaphysical narratives –the love of God and the god of love– that seek to define human life as

subordinate to, and dependent upon, a greater spiritual, and therefore hypothetical, reality. In Pleberio's world, life is presided over by an acute self-awareness saturated with doubt, as meaning ceases to emanate from any external transcendental principle. Only the self remains as a medium of knowledge. Whereas the traditional understanding of modernity places modernity's origins at the beginning of the seventeenth century, hand in hand with Descartes and the *cogito*, in which the subject becomes the "subject of knowledge," for Pleberio at the end of the fifteenth century a similar human self-consciousness suddenly occupies the center of his world.

For Pleberio the world can now only be understood through the relations among things that belong exclusively to it. In this formulation, which reflects a new ontology, metaphysical doubt generates a persistent self-awareness that postulates a fundamental distinction between subjects and objects—a distinction that in the pre-modern worldview had little or no significance—to bring forth a new type of human subjectivity. A completely dissimilar set of differences ordered the structure of the pre-modern cosmos where the distinction between subject and object had no fundamental place (see Lovejoy, Gurevich, Haren, and Carlo Ginzburg) in a framework of interdependencies, where each thing owed its existence to a greater being. For Pleberio at the ends of desire, the human realm is understood as a self-defining domain that is not limited by, or subordinated to, a presumed preexisting cosmological order. Whatever order is revealed is only the result of the human craving for transcendence.

This can be understood as the principle in *Celestina* which allows for imagining the transformation of society from organic feudal forms of relationships toward individualized as well as capitalist modes of life. The relationship of subject and object, of self and other, becomes redolent with doubt and inclined toward a perception of continually shifting boundaries between familiarity and strangeness, order and disorder (Kristeva; Ricoeur). It is for this reason that Columbus's almost exactly contemporary encounter with America, originally conceived as a confrontation between the civilized and the primitive, between righteous Christianity and the fallen heathen world, became a dialectic in ensuing years in which doubt undermined any possibility of authentication. The voyage of discovery would become a powerful image for both physical and psychological investigation after 1492 (Pagden), but the process of self-discovery rather than reveal the righteousness of self-certainty trapped thinking subjects in a deepening well of despair.

Martin L. Pine suggests that "the immortality of the soul was an important aspect of the Renaissance," since "immortality became the mode through which individual achievements were projected into eternity. Should a man's soul perish with his body, the very essence of his achievements would be lost forever. Thus the projection of a life beyond mortal decay became a part of human dignity" (56-57). In the absence of God, however, only a form of secular ethics and temporal distinction could provide both continuity and a refuge from a hostile universe. In Spain, later works in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries like *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) and *Don Quijote* (1605), both profoundly influenced by *Celestina*, would develop just that possibility and confront the

dilemma portrayed by Pleberio at the ends of desire as one that could only profitably be approached through the growth, cultivation, and exercise of a secular human conscience.

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