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THE THEME OF DEHUMANIZATION IN THE  
WORKS OF MARCO DENEVI

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY  
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BY  
RUTH E. SMITH  
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THE THEME OF DEHUMANIZATION IN THE WORKS OF MARCO DENEVI

A DISSERTATION

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF MODERN LANGUAGES

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# THE THEME OF DEHUMANIZATION IN THE WORKS OF MARCO DENEVI

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Marco Denevi is a modern humanist whose works reveal him as a constant opponent of all the forces, external and internal, which threaten to limit and to destroy the best qualities of the human species. Denevi's novels, plays, and short stories offer a continuous condemnation of the dehumanizing aspects of modern life. They caution against the capitulation of man's dignity and individuality before the contemporary exhortations on behalf of an artificial life completely free of danger and surprise. Denevi recognizes man's own quest for comfort, security, and acceptance as one of the principal causes of the current supremacy of anti-humanistic institutions such as enormous bureaucracies and overly complex technology. Such creations threaten to

suppress those traits which have given humanity its ability to create and to appreciate

Leonardo da Vinci, las mesas y los sillones, las rosas, los discos con las nueve sinfonías de Beethoven, las tiendas de antigüedades, el vino de Burdeos, las oropéndolas, los tapices flamencos, todo Verdi, las azaleas, el palacio de Versailles.<sup>1</sup>

His works attempt to define the characteristics which have made man unique, and they counsel against the modern willingness to sacrifice any aspect of the human character for the sake of survival. Denevi is concerned not only with the continued existence of mankind but also with the quality of that life. His conclusion is that mankind cannot hope to enjoy the future if his imagination and independence have been destroyed.

Denevi's preoccupation with the quality of human existence is apparent throughout his works. However, it is possible to denote three phases which reflect a growth in depth and maturity in his analysis of the problem. Although his first novel, Rosaura a las diez, won the Premio Kraft in 1955, it does not directly confront the theme of dehumanization. Rather, it concerns the loneliness and search for acceptance on the part of its protagonist, Camilo Canegato. Nevertheless, Rosaura a las diez does contain traces of the

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Ceremonia secreta y otros cuentos, ed. Donald A. Yates (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1965), p. 8.



ideas which become of central importance in Denevi's first play, Los expedientes (1957).

With Los expedientes and Ceremonia secreta y otros cuentos (1960), Denevi's dramatization of the theme of the loss of humanity enters a second stage. Both the play and short stories introduce the subject of the effect of gigantic bureaucracies and the overmechanization of life as a central theme. This period reaches its fullest development between 1960 and 1970 when Denevi's short stories and novels constantly return to the theme of dehumanization and the ascendancy of antihumanistic forces. This confrontation occurs in three types of stories: fables with animal or insect characters, stories in which machines are the protagonists, and brief recreations of well-known legends or literary works. Denevi often exposes the spread of technology and the impact of routine and conformity in microcuentos, concise stories expressing one idea and having an immediate impact. These works show that the rapid increase of technological inventions completely transforms language, thinking, and behavior, and in the process, the original purpose of the machines is obscured. Therefore, instead of improving the quality of human life, they become self-serving and self-perpetuating. The growth in the power and independence of machines and bureaucracies creates a situation in which man has little reason for his life; all the physical necessities of existence are provided. However,

the corollary of a comfortable life is the rise in the monotony and dullness of contemporary society. As a result, hypnotized by the promises of a world devoid of friction and convinced of the need for technology and bureaucracy, man is entrapped in a system of perpetual motion, a cycle of greed, wastefulness, and boredom. Therefore, the fables and stories of bureaucracies and machines lead naturally to the author's attempts to rewrite or to alter the outcome of plots concerning Romeo and Juliet, Nero, or Don Quijote. No matter how much Denevi tries to recreate the established plot or how much man struggles to change the circumstances of modern life, both are doomed by tradition and time to play out the story as it is written. Nevertheless, this type of story offers Denevi the opportunity of exposing the threats of such a life in an experimental format. The extreme brevity of the microcuento and the choice of well-known plots illustrate his own desire to break with the routine and tradition of the short story and to test his own creative and imaginative powers.

The series of works in the second phase begins with El emperador de la China (1960), a drama which studies the role of bureaucracies in depth. In Antología imaginaria, a group of stories published in Cuadernos in 1963 and 1964, Denevi's experimentation in form and his attempts to recreate familiar stories become more prevalent. The trend reaches a

climax in Parque de diversiones (1970), a collection of stories, very brief plays, and anecdotes.

During the same decade, Denevi's analysis of the process of dehumanization attains more maturity in the play El emperador de la China and the novel Un pequeño café (1967), both of which deal with the effect of huge bureaucracies on the human spirit. The play is set at some unspecified historical moment and utilizes the highly ritualized culture of Imperial China for its background. However, the distance in time and space does not lessen the overall impact since the antihumanistic aspects of the Chinese court apply to the bureaucracies of today. Un pequeño café employs the same theme in a modern framework, for it examines the relationship of the bureaucracy to those human beings who seek shelter from individual responsibility in the labyrinthine organization of contemporary bureaucracies.

Marco Denevi's most recent works demonstrate a new phase in his treatment of the theme of dehumanization. Although several of the stories in Hierba del cielo (1974) and many of the episodes in the novel Los asesinos de los días de fiesta (1972) are concerned with the effects of gigantic bureaucracies and highly complex technology, Denevi is more interested in man's apparent willingness to suppress certain aspects of the human personality. Many of the characters in both works display complacency before the destruction of emotion, imagination, and individuality for

the sake of a life free of disappointment and commitment. The descriptions of the type of existence chosen by these individuals recall Denevi's stories about colonies of insects which have buried themselves in an artificial world offering complete physical comfort at the expense of a meaning and purpose for their lives. The latest novel and many of the newest short stories reveal more knowledge and concern for the roots of the problem of dehumanization.

This last development in the works of Marco Denevi demonstrates that he considers the problem of dehumanization to be multifaceted and, therefore, not easily resolved. On the one hand, it is necessary to recognize the elements of the human personality which encourage antihumanism. Mankind's desire for security and acceptance too often leads to conformity and monotony at the expense of imagination and individuality. In addition, the circumstances of contemporary life have so intimidated the individual that survival seems impossible without the assistance of large institutions. Therefore, in the quest for a secure life, mankind has developed the bureaucracy and a highly complex body of technology. As Denevi's works illustrate, the irony in the situation is that the production of such institutions represents the most serious threat to the continued existence of the elements of the human nature which originally conceived of these systems. Once surfeited with the artificial and insulated existence offered by such organizations, the

characters of Denevi's works discover their inability to regain their independence. They become the drones in a society which destroys natural resources and increases the routine and monotony of life. The tradition of the great artists, thinkers, and builders of the past falls victim to the new and powerful forces of mediocrity and conformity. As a result, activities which once challenged the best human qualities and produced a series of human accomplishments of amazing diversity and beauty soon are relegated to obscure memory banks, eventually forgotten or ignorantly erased. The modern man in Denevi's works is so concerned with protecting himself against the major threats of deprivation and widespread desolation that he leaves himself vulnerable to a more insidious, less obvious enemy. He becomes so dependent that his own independence and self-confidence disappear, and as a consequence, he is trapped in a plastic world of predictable choices and automatic responses.

Throughout his works, Denevi's style and approach conform to the development of his ideas on the theme of dehumanization. Between 1960 and 1970, he is mainly concerned with the analysis of the effects of this process; therefore, he concentrates on an examination of the external manifestations of this problem: technology and the bureaucracy. The stories from this period display a notable absence of human characters, and with several important exceptions, they deal with machines, animals, or well-known

literary and historical figures. The beasts and insects do tend to be anthropomorphic, and their barnyards or colonies are obviously miniature societies; nevertheless, they can only represent the most basic elements of the human character, principally the desire for security. In the same way, the recreations of famous characters such as Nero or Don Quijote add new possibilities to their personalities but do not attempt to capture all of the dimensions of the protagonists.

In addition to the lack of fully developed characters, another characteristic of many of the stories from this period is their brevity. In the microcuentos Denevi chooses a language almost devoid of metaphor and imagery and writes in a straightforward, direct manner which at times reflects the mechanical nature of the characters. The simplicity of expression recalls the style of the primitive, tribal storytellers, who offered the mere thread of the narrative without elaborate detail. As a result, the stories create the impression of timelessness and total universality, for there is nothing in them to reveal the origin of the author or the location of the action. At times they seem to take place in the future while some appear to have been acted out at some unspecified moment in the past. The absence of a chronological framework and the concise style are intentionally ambiguous and therefore make

the stories more disconcerting, a factor which contributes to the impact of Denevi's theme.

While the microcuentos are as close to the style of legend or myth as possible, the novels, plays, and longer short stories contain few attempts at experimentation and include a more traditional approach in plot structure and character analysis. There is an abundance of character types, and Denevi succeeds in concisely capturing their personalities mainly through self-revelation in their conversations. One constant in the human protagonists is a character deformed by timidity, fear, or cruelty. Indeed, Denevi frequently draws a parallel between individuals with physical handicaps and the leading figures in his works who are always limited by a nature in which certain traits or aspects have atrophied.

In the plays, novels, and longer short stories, the time and place of the action are more exact. However, Denevi avoids one of the defects of earlier Latin American literature, the tendency to overemphasize local color and regional dialects, thus limiting the universal appeal. The language in these works parallels that of the microcuentos in its simplicity of expression, but Denevi varies the style and choice of vocabulary to maintain verisimilitude in the action and in the personality of the speaker. This is

particularly important in Rosaura a las diez in which four characters tell their interpretations of the same events to a policeman.

The fascination with the narrator is another characteristic of the novels. In both Rosaura a las diez and Un pequeño café it is obvious that the characters are speaking directly to someone, but Denevi conceals the identity of these individuals until the middle or end of the works. As a result, both novels take on the atmosphere of a confession in which the total truth is revealed either consciously or unconsciously. The effect increases in Denevi's most recent novel, Los asesinos de los días de fiesta, a work which follows to some extent the form of a journal detailing the actions of six brothers and sisters. The narrator is never specifically identified, and all of the narration is given from the first person plural viewpoint. This technique strengthens the impression that the six protagonists contribute various characteristics in order to form one central personality. Unfortunately, none of the six possesses qualities to offset the cruelty and narrowness which predominate in the group as a whole.

Los corazones privados de amor se vuelven crueles, codiciosos y feroces como guerreros extranjeros en una ciudad vencida. Se entregan al pillaje y a la matanza de los demás corazones, y convierten los días de fiesta en noches de duelo.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Los asesinos de los días de fiesta (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1972), p. 213.



The characters in the novel represent the worst type of dehumanization, for they have chosen to cut themselves off from the warmth and spontaneity of human life. Their predicament is especially fatal because they refuse to recognize the deformity and inhumanity of their lives.

Despite the pessimism communicated in his works, Marco Denevi never succumbs to the temptation of bitterness. Although his discussion of the theme of dehumanization often recalls the images and descriptions of Franz Kafka or Fyodor Dostoievsky, Denevi gives his works an ironic twist which prevents them from becoming as pessimistic and depressing as those of his predecessors. Throughout his literary career, he has been able to avoid rancor and denunciation mainly through the use of humor. It is true that the humor takes the form of satire, but it saves his works from the defects of over-exaggeration and over-sentimentality. His mastery of light satire contributes to the total impact of his works by exposing to laughter some of the pomposity and self-importance of mankind and his institutions.

Just as the works of Denevi reflect a balance between humor and pessimism, he succeeds in blending his role as social critic with that of artist. Although the theme of dehumanization of life is of constant importance, he never aspires to the role of philosopher and is content with his status as a storyteller.

Marco Denevi, autor y dramaturgo argentino, ocupa un lugar en una larga lista de escritores cuya tradición se estableció hace muchos años y cuyos orígenes se pierden en la lejanía del tiempo. Por naturaleza y por instinto, Denevi es "narrador."<sup>1</sup>

Denevi's skill as a narrator of fiction places him firmly in the tradition of writers like Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar who are so adept at weaving fantasy into what appears to be a realistic framework. However, like Argentine writers before him, Denevi is dedicated to confronting and analyzing the problems of contemporary life.

Queda bien decir, entonces, que la gran importancia de la obra literaria de este autor yace en la actualidad de sus temas, la experta adaptación de estructura y estilo al texto de la obra, y muy especialmente en la sinceridad con que presenta al hombre como una entidad de dignidad, belleza, sentimientos y esperanza.<sup>2</sup>

Denevi's dedication to humanity and to revealing the dangers which threaten to destroy its best qualities secures his position as a modern humanist.

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<sup>1</sup>Donald A. Yates, "Un acercamiento a Marco Denevi," in El cuento hispanoamericano ante la crítica, ed. Enrique Pupo-Walker (Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 1973), p. 223.

<sup>2</sup>Ivonne Revel Grove, La realidad calidoscópica de la obra de Marco Denevi (Mexico, D.F.: B. Costa-Amic, 1974), pp. 19-20.

## CHAPTER II

### MECHANIZATION OF SOCIETY AND MAN

In Marco Denevi's works, the three primary causes of dehumanization are man's own need for security and acceptance, a growth of bureaucracy, and an overmechanization of contemporary life. Although all three themes coexist throughout the novels, plays, and stories, the most thorough analysis of the impact of mechanization appears in the short stories written between 1960 and 1966. During this six year period, Denevi confronts all aspects of modern society which contribute to extensive mechanization. He defines mechanization as any invention or system which removes man's need to provide or care for himself. Beginning with "La mariposa" in Ceremonia secreta y otros cuentos (1960), he attempts to reveal all the causes and effects of the spread of mechanization. This development reaches a climax in 1966 with many of his best stories published in Falsificaciones.

Denevi's attitude toward the increases in mechanization is very pessimistic, and the sentiment is especially strong when he confronts the rapid development of technology. His principal concern is that modern man is so engrossed in building one invention after another to combat the major threats of war and natural disaster that he is in danger of losing his control over the intricate system of machinery. He fears that mankind is so fascinated with his creations and so enamoured of the idea of progress that he may overestimate his own power to maintain his supremacy. Throughout his works, he repeats the proposition that mankind will lose his hegemony and his independence as the result of a relatively minor decision or the lack of constant vigilance over his technology. Denevi recognizes that the more complex and subtle the machinery, the greater the possibility that someone may carelessly make a choice which will drastically alter the roles of man and machine. As the short anecdote "Sobre las esquinas peligrosas" indicates, the results of such a lapse will be disastrous for humanity.

Tú caminas confiadamente por la calle. Pero aun la calle que más conoces, esa que recorres todos los días y que crees que no guarda secretos para ti, tiene una esquina peligrosa. La doblas, y de pronto te encuentras en otra ciudad. . . . Hay extrañas costumbres, secretas prohibiciones que infringirás con cándida torpeza y atraerás sobre ti la cólera y

la reprobación. . . . Bruscos policías se apoderán  
de ti y te conducirán a la cárcel. . . . Morirás de  
nostalgia, de mudez, de abandono.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the power of modern technology, it will be impossible to recapture man's independence once it is lost. As a result, man will languish in servitude and boredom until he finally disappears altogether. Denevi shows that it is not the major mistakes nor the tremendous destructive forces which will annihilate humanity; rather, mankind faces extinction because of his own arrogance and the overestimation of his ability to maintain control over the institutions which threaten him.

Denevi's works offer a thorough analysis of the causes and the results of the spread of technology. In "La mariposa" and "Fábula" a principal motivation for the growth in the mechanization of life is the commonly expounded belief that an increase in mechanical inventions brings with it a more comfortable and more secure existence for mankind. Nevertheless, as he stresses in "Boroboboo", man's need for challenges and his fascination with the unknown are equally powerful incentives. The desire for activity and accomplishment has sparked many of mankind's greatest achievements as well as some of the greatest man-made tragedies. The growth in mechanization promises to be among the latter.

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Parque de diversiones (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1970), pp. 13-14.

The apparent advantages of mechanization are one of the most important reasons for the rapid acceptance and popularity of technology. Convinced of the contributions in providing food and shelter and of its ability to free mankind from menial tasks, humanity has justified the expansion of technology without examining its harmful side-effects. "La mariposa", "Fábula", and "La hormiga" illustrate what the future holds for humanity by comparing it with a colony of ants. The societies value above all else the development of a secure source of food coupled with a life of comfort and security.

Se dice que a ello [el progreso] contribuyó mucho el descubrimiento del vegetal sintético. . . . Toda una serie de factores antiprogresistas quedó instantáneamente eliminada, las hormigas no dependieron de la voluble naturaleza y, en cambio, como empezaron a decir, se autobastecían.<sup>1</sup>

Amazed by the visible benefits of this discovery, the insects in "La mariposa" quickly fall into the error of equating safety and dependability with independence. They fail to understand that they have only replaced their dependency on nature with a reliance on an artificial substitute. Far from increasing their freedom, they condemn themselves to a cold, sterile life founded on the servitude of some and the total acquiescence of others.

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Ceremonia secreta y otros cuentos (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1961), p. 10.

Hormigas obreras (mudas, ciegas, sordas, estériles, con el cerebro convenientemente lavado) eran sometidas a adiestramientos especiales y luego encerradas en células solitarias y a oscuras: allí regurgitando cierta cocción de larvas nonatas, segregaban una sustancia que poseía el color, el sabor y todas las demás propiedades del vegetal natural.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of their total acceptance of mechanization, the insects construct a parasitic society in which self-reliance and dignity fall victim to security and predictability. For the sake of survival, the colony chooses to sacrifice its best qualities to a corrupt, obscene, suffocating existence.

In addition to the theory that increased technological development brings with it a more secure source of food, Denevi also explores the idea that technology frees humanity from mundane, monotonous chores so that it can devote more time to spiritual and intellectual pursuits. In the story "He aquí a la sierva de los señores" he theorizes that far from stimulating worthwhile pursuits, the complete absence of the need to provide for himself corrupts man by contributing to his idleness and wastefulness. The story describes the effects of a servant on an overly generous and altruistic family. Although she is brought into the home in order to release her from a slavish existence, the servant usurps one task after another until she literally does everything for the family. The initial distress on the part of the mistress of the house is calmed by the younger

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

generations who justify events on the basis of their increased devotion to higher endeavors.

Después de todo, la casa relucía como un espejo; nosotros, sin nada que hacer, nos pasábamos las horas leyendo, conversando o jugando a las cartas, ya no éramos nuestros propios sirvientes, condición que siempre anula la inteligencia.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, it soon becomes clear that the leisure time only fosters a perversion of the characters.

Entonces empecé a notar que en casa ya no escaseaba el dinero. . . . Había algo más: salían sin decirme a donde iban, yo los veía secretar entre ellos, . . . En fin, andaban medio ojerosos y siempre como con sueño.<sup>2</sup>

The old grandmother who narrates the events discovers that her daughters have become prostitutes and her sons alcahuetes, a realization which incites her to murder the servant in order that the family may regain its independence and its altruism. Although the mechanization of life is provided by a human being and not a machine in this story, the result is the same. Denevi equates man's dependence on technology with his earlier reliance upon slaves, and he demonstrates that both systems undermine and debase the human spirit. However, the principal difference between "He aquí a la sierva de los señores" and the stories dealing with technological

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Hierba del cielo (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1974), p. 179.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 180.



inventions is that in the story from Hierba del cielo the servant can be destroyed whereas the machine cannot be eradicated.

A third aspect of the theory that any type of mechanization brings a more comfortable existence for man concerns the profit motive. Although Denevi explores this element in a more restricted manner, he does acknowledge its importance in the increase in technology. The fable "Fragmentos de un diario íntimo" (also published under the title "Las abejas de bronce") offers the best description of this incentive. The story deals with the efforts of a fox to raise his income by replacing his live honeybees with ones made of bronze. Motivated by his desire to escape from poverty, the fox only sees the benefits provided by the mechanical bees.

Me han enviado un prospecto ilustrado ofreciéndome en venta abejas de bronce. Según el prospecto, fabrican la misma miel que las abejas vivas, pero con enormes ventajas: no se mueren, no se fatigan, no se irritan, no clavan el aguijón, no hay reinas ni zánganos, son todas obreras, trabajan las veinticuatro horas del día, etc., etc.<sup>1</sup>

Attracted by the possibility of doubling or tripling his income, the fox ignores or denies any disadvantage in the system. He extols the benefits brought by the machines and is conveniently blind to the destruction caused by them.

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Falsificaciones (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1966), p. 138.

For a time, he even succeeds in turning the harm done by them into a profit.

He visto con mis propios ojos como una abeja de bronce se introducía como un rayo en una azucena, donde un picaflor libaba el néctar. Literalmente lo degolló. La sangre del desdichado tiñó la azucena. Mi abejita, sin atender más que a sus impulsos eléctricos, sorbió sangre y néctar junto. Un rato después la miel de la colmena N° 5 tenía un hermoso color rosa. La venderé como miel especial para niños.<sup>1</sup>

As long as he continues to make money, the fox disregards the signals of impending disaster while the bronze bees lay waste to the environment. However, a facade of self-righteousness and progress cannot postpone the catastrophe for long, and, in the end, the bees destroy all the vegetation of the area while the fox is forced into bankruptcy. Like the selfish human beings whom he represents, the fox is forced to abandon his enterprise and to flee the community. Unfortunately, for the sake of a short-term profit, he leaves behind him irreparable harm.

Although Marco Denevi attributes much of the cause for the spread of mechanization to mankind's desire for security and comfort, he also recognizes the importance of humanity's need for challenge and intellectual stimulation. Mankind is fascinated by the unknown and is attracted by the possibility of exploring and mastering it. Denevi's best

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

analysis of this aspect of the problem of unnecessary mechanization appears in the modern fable "Boroboboo". Although the animals' society is simple and free of corruption, they are just as susceptible to the attraction of the new and unfamiliar as men are. Satisfied with their lives, they are not immune to the exoticism and sophistication of a traveling salesman, portrayed by a smooth-talking monkey, who fascinates them with incomprehensible jargon.

"Amigos míos" dijo. "La Compañía Cibernética Internacional acaba de inventar una máquina que suma, resta, multiplica, y divide; . . . piensa, recuerda, pregunta, contesta; acumula datos sin límites de saturación; no se fatiga, no se revela, es amable, dócil, y de aspecto agradable, se llama EXTbbSHanK0047115EGM, pero, para abreviar, tiene un sobrenombre: Boroboboo."<sup>1</sup>

The animals are enthralled by the monkey's words, and although they do not understand them, the meaninglessness of the machine's name and the animals' ignorance of many of the terms make the apparatus even more impressive. Because of a combination of attraction and bewilderment, the animals ignore an intuitive distrust and dislike of the monkey.

Como en seguida todos lo advirtieron, no olía a mono, olía a lavanda. Su voz era nítida, enérgica, y de un timbre agudo y metálico, como la voz de un fonógrafo al que no se le ha dado demasiada cuerda. . . . Y tendía la mano y miraba en los ojos al animal al que saludaba. Y el animal, quienquiera fuese, se estremecía involuntariamente. . . . porque se hubiera dicho que aquella mirada no hacía ningún caso de uno, lo traspasaba y miraba

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 57-58.

a través, más allá, detrás de uno, y uno se sentía repentinamente translucido como un cristal o, peor aún, inexistente como un fantasma.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the animals' distress and uneasiness in the monkey's presence, they repress their instincts and disregard the danger. The suggestion of such a complicated, advanced apparatus stimulates their imagination and causes them to ignore their common sense. As a result, although it has no need for the invention, the community decides that it must own one.

Pero aquellas palabras, misteriosas como conjuros, les producían a los jóvenes un erizamiento de placer y les hacían poner los ojos en blanco. Los jóvenes alborotaban tanto, que la asamblea terminó por decidir que la máquina fuese adquirida.<sup>2</sup>

As the animals become more and more captivated by the challenge and spell of the unknown, the description of their transformation parallels mankind's response to the developments of science and technology. The very incomprehensibility of such inventions and discoveries casts an intriguing aura about them, and man's curiosity cannot resist the attraction. Unfortunately, as "Boroboboo" illustrates, the fascination eventually leads to the enslavement of the animals and of men by the machine.

It is not an accident that Denevi emphasizes the role of the young in the acceptance of technology, for he realizes that it is a natural desire of the youngest

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 56-57.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

generation to overturn the traditions of its fathers. He recognizes that scorn and impatience with the past coupled with an interest in the new and the unexplored have brought mankind many of its greatest triumphs and most startling artistic developments. However, in Denevi's works, the conflict between old and new leads the protagonists to accept changes which amount to the total annihilation of all the old ways, good and bad. As the anecdote "Sobre el paraíso" demonstrates, the natural curiosity of mankind and its need for change may become its greatest enemies.

Dios se vio obligado a disponer que periódicamente los santos y los bienaventurados abandonen por una temporada el Paraíso, pues de lo contrario no sabían (u olvidaban) que vivían en el Paraíso, empezaban a imaginar otro Paraíso por su cuenta, se volvían melancólicos o coléricos y terminaban por creerse condenados del Infierno.<sup>1</sup>

The common tendency to become bored and dissatisfied results in the desire for change and for new inventions and challenges. Denevi admits that its intellectual curiosity is one of humanity's best qualities, but, more than ever, mankind must exercise restraint when offered the discoveries and possibilities of mechanization. As "Sobre el paraíso" indicates, a failure to consider the ultimate purpose or objective of new marvels may lead to the complete perversion of them and the total destruction of humanity.

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Parque de diversiones, p. 10.

The magical word progress is a final factor which strengthens the increase in mechanization while offering a strong obstacle to humanity's weak efforts to control it. Although the majority of mankind live in total ignorance of the workings and purpose of technology, they are unwilling to admit their bewilderment and to entertain the possibility that such inventions are unnecessary. Fearful of being labeled reactionary or old-fashioned, many silent critics stifle their objections when confronted with the justification of mechanization on the grounds of the advancements and improvements which it gives mankind. Denevi believes that the glories of scientific discoveries have been proclaimed for so long that even the simplest of the species view any criticism as tantamount to treason or heresy. He illustrates that not only are the doubters few in number but they are also immediately crushed beneath a groundswell of popular support for technology. To be among those chosen to participate in the technological experience conveys honor and glory to the technicians of modern life much as learning and ascetism brought honor to the religious men of the past. Denevi makes this clear in the story "Boroboboo".

"Y ahora" dijo el Mono, "deberé elegir a los más inteligentes entre ustedes para enseñarles a manejar la máquina." Instantáneamente todos los animales (todos, hasta la insignificante Aguzanieves y el

estúpido Murciélagos de los pantanos) se sonrojaron y esponjaron de orgullo, seguro de ser elegidos.<sup>1</sup>

The animals are as eager to be part of the new elite of technicians as are modern men. No one wants to be left out, and so the spread in the size and power of technology eventually absorbs all the animals.

El mono explicó que la máquina era tan endemoniadamente compleja que exigía más servidores. De manera que día a día iba aumentando el número de los elegidos y disminuyendo el de los rechazados. Hasta que la cifra de los rechazados fue cero.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than creating and maintaining a hierarchy in society, the machine rapidly erases all differences and, inevitably, extends mediocrity and conformity. In the end, all the animals, and by analogy, all men, are sacrificed to the machine. The tragedy is that this choice is made freely by those convinced that all new inventions represent progress and that progress is always desirable.

Through his use of fables and anecdotes, Denevi provides a thorough analysis of both the causes and effects of mechanization. Since the primary objective of automation and machinery is to simplify and to shorten the time necessary for a variety of tasks, the first step in the process is to eliminate the special or unusual case. Therefore, the

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Falsificaciones, pp. 59-60.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

first sacrifice in the dehumanization of mankind is anything which distinguishes or individualizes.

In the fables "La mariposa", "La hormiga", and "Fábula", the development of an artificial source of food alleviates the need for the ants to leave the colony. However, in order to safeguard the new discoveries, the anthill is closed to outside influences. Beneath the ground, the colony spreads and enlarges until

cruzándose, separándose y volviendo a entrecruzarse, todos los hormigueros terminaron por confundirse en un mismo hormiguero, bajo el gobierno de una sola hormiga, apodada la Gran Hormiga.<sup>1</sup>

This expansion wipes out frontiers, boundaries, and nationalities; therefore, although it brings about eternal peace, it also establishes uniformity and limits the attention and interests of the inhabitants.

Pues la Gran Hormiga, dando muestras de sabiduría y prudencia, ordenó obturar a cal y canto las bocas de salida, . . . Con lo que, al cabo de dos o tres generaciones, las hormigas incurrieron en el error de lógica (por otra parte inevitable) de identificar el vasto Universo con el Gran Hormiguero.<sup>2</sup>

In the effort to extend and to amplify the use of mechanization, individuality is the first victim. Deprived of a variety of interests and stimuli, certain aspects of the character atrophy while others disappear as the result of force. Eventually, there is a total corruption of purpose

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 11.



since the increase of mechanization brings regression and retardation rather than advancement and a broader view of life.

In its efforts to eradicate differences and to mold all individuals into one pattern, mechanization destroys all facets of life which are not considered to be essential to physical survival. As in the story "No le cortéis la cola del pavo real", those aspects which do not contribute directly to the increase in production or the perfection in the performance of a task are considered gratuitous and are destroyed.

He aquí algo escandalosamente gratuito, el símbolo mismo de la gratuidad. Un pavo a secas es un animal útil, sobre todo al horno, y merece mi respeto. Pero un Pavo Real, ¿para qué sirve? Para nada. Y ¿qué es lo que diferencia al Pavo Real del Pavo? La cola. Le cortaré, pues, la cola, y tendré un pavo más. . . .<sup>1</sup>

This utilitarian philosophy attacks those aspects of life which give it beauty and sensitivity. The narrow definition of what is useful and what is not ignores the more intangible, but equally important, contributions of color, artistry, and originality. Not only does it destroy the best elements of life; it also sets free the worst traits and the primitive, violent forces latent in each personality.

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, "No le cortéis la cola al pavo real," Cuadernos, LXXXI (febrero, 1964), 32.

Pero ocurre una cosa: un pavo real sin cola no es un pavo, sino un ave de presa. La cola, con su pesantez, lo mantiene encadenado al suelo, y fomentándole la vanidad, le hace olvidar las garras, lo obliga a no comer carne para cuidar la silueta, lo vuelve amable, estúpido y, en resumidas cuentas, inofensivo. De modo que cuando el Pavo Real se vio sin cola engarabitó las uñas, hizo chasquear la lengua, los ojos se le inyectaron en sangre.<sup>1</sup>

Once the savage is set free, it continues to plague mankind by disrupting civilization and making fear and panic rampant. In the same way, mechanization sets into motion a whole series of dehumanizing elements, and it is conceivable that these factors will lead to the ultimate destruction of humanity. Besides destroying the individuality and independence of mankind, Denevi also points out that the leveling of society and the elimination of the gratuitous threaten to release the primitive, savage elements in the human character. Shorn of the veneer of civility and respect for each individual, deprived of intellectual and spiritual stimuli, mankind faces the prospect of returning to a vicious life in which only the strong survive.

Another result of the mechanization of life is the loss of history and the perversion of language. As the influence of technology expands, the lifestyle and vocabulary of man change drastically. What was once the history of man becomes so fantastic compared to contemporary events and

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

problems that it begins to assume the status of legend and finally of myth.

Pero los viejos murieron, y las nuevas generaciones, que no habían abandonado jamás las dilatadas geografías del Gran Hormiguero, comenzaron a referirse a aquellos relatos como a una epopeya bárbara y remota y de fondo más o menos histórico, luego como a una flor de leyendas fantásticas, y por fin como a un conjunto de estúpidas supersticiones.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, history is completely forgotten or buried in the collective unconscious of the species. This failure to remember or to believe in the facts of past experiences causes the species to repeat the same mistakes.

As history changes and loses its original characteristics, so language develops, is modified and perverted in order to communicate new or alien experiences. Denevi describes this process in "La mariposa", for, once the older generations pass on, there is no one left to interpret or to understand the old ways or the words used to remember them.

Nadie comprendía ya que significaba "lluvia", "verano", o "escarabajo". Una generación más, y las olvidaron totalmente. . . . Y si continuaban empleando algunas palabras del antiguo idioma, era en un sentido puramente metafórico, como cuando decían, por ejemplo, "día" para aludir a cierto<sup>2</sup> grado de intensidad de la luz artificial. . . .

Denevi's stories reveal a great interest in the metamorphosis of language and the effects of new inventions and events upon it. The final result of the disruption of the

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Ceremonia secreta y otros cuentos, pp. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

language is an inability to express or to cope with new sensations. Therefore, when the ant in "La mariposa" escapes from the anthill and confronts a world of new sensations, it is unable to verbalize its reactions.

Lo que vio no podría describirlo jamás. La hormiga ignoraba qué era un jardín, qué era la noche, la luna, el agua, una rosa. Pero vio el jardín, dormido bajo la hipnosis de la luna. . . . Y oyó, sin dar crédito a sus sentidos, el canto de los grillos.<sup>1</sup>

This speechlessness before natural stimuli indicates that instead of representing progress, the supremacy of technology equals a regression on society's part. The overmechanization of life brings with it a repression of natural instincts and of the ability to respond to beauty or artistry. While technology multiplies at an alarming rate, the emotions and creative aspects stagnate or atrophy. As a result, in "La mariposa" the protagonists find themselves in a primitive state, for the development of all elements of their nature, except the small sector devoted to mechanical knowledge, have been retarded. Denevi emphasizes this fact through the use of language.

Pobrecitas, viviendo allá abajo, en aquellas horribles bóvedas subterráneas, alimentándose con una fría papilla envasada. Ella iría a buscarlas, les transmitiría la buena nueva, les describiría todo lo que había visto, y las hormigas saldrían fuera, . . . se quedarían a vivir bajo la Gran Hormiga redonda y blanca que apacentaba sus rebaños en la vasta llanura iluminada.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

Denevi's description of the insulated corridors of the anthill as "bóvedas subterráneas" suggests an existence similar to that of some primitive race of cave dwellers. In addition, the ant's confusion of the moon and stars with a giant ant, a goddess who watches over her flock, evokes an atmosphere of primitivism in which the unknown or the fantastic become the basis for gods and idols. Confined beneath the ground for generations, the ants lose their memory of experiences which brought them to the moment in which they created their subterranean life. Therefore, despite the advances in technology, they find themselves again faced with the necessity of investigating once familiar phenomena. Should the ants be cast out of their insulated home, they would have to retrace the same steps and confront again the same tragedies through which their ancestors passed. For this reason, Denevi suggests that rather than increasing progress and advancing human culture, over-mechanization actually retards it. Like the insects in "La mariposa", mankind's dehumanization represents a decline, not an advancement.

In addition to the destruction of man's personality, history, and language by technology, Denevi also illustrates the desiccation of the environment for the sake of extending mechanization. In "Boroboboo" the eradication of the environment begins once the animal population is totally dependent upon the machine. The animals are completely

under its spell, and after they have cut down the forests and destroyed the water supply, they have sealed their fate.

La tierra bajo el sol ardiente, se resquebrajaba y restallaba como una costra de salitre. Animales habituados a la penumbra del bosque se disecaban en el aire de fuego y en un momento se convertían en sus propias momias. . . . Hasta que llegó el día en que el último árbol del bosque cayó. Ya no hubo bosque, ni arroyo, ni nada sino la llanura amarilla y desnuda como un páramo.<sup>1</sup>

The complete desolation which surrounds them cuts off all means of escape for the animals. Even if they should now attempt to rebel against their master, the machine, they could find nothing to provide sustenance or shelter. They must depend on the technology which has enslaved them, and their choice is one of servitude or death. Denevi makes very clear the parallel between the fate of the animals and that of man, and, in so doing, he depicts one of the most dangerous aspects inherent in the overmechanization of life.

While many of his stories only depict the dehumanization of man or the destruction of the environment, others follow the process to its natural conclusion: the complete disappearance of man and his replacement by machines. Denevi does not foresee cataclysms of war or natural disaster; instead, he prophesizes the gradual decline and slow death of humanity. His stories analyze man's unconscious

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Falsificaciones, p. 62.

capitulation of his self-esteem and self-reliance. As a result, man suffers in despair in his new life of servitude until he eventually disappears before the overwhelming realization that he no longer has a purpose for his existence.

"Apocalipsis" reveals the steps in this process.

Los hombres se extinguirán uno a uno. Los aniquilarán las cosas, la rebelión de las cosas, la resistencia, la desobediencia de las cosas. . . . Las cosas, después de desalojar a los animales y a las plantas e instalarse en todos los sitios y ocupar todo el espacio disponible, comenzarán a mostrarse arrogantes, despóticas, volubles, de humor caprichoso.<sup>1</sup>

Disillusioned and depressed by the realization that it no longer has a place or a role to play in the world, mankind will choose to cease to function. He will succumb because of a lack of will or spirit and because resistance to the machines will no longer be possible. As a result, all that will remain will be the "cosas frías, bruñidas, relucientes, duras, metálicas, sordas, mudas, insensibles, . . . brillando a la luz del sol, a la luz de la luna, por toda la eternidad."<sup>2</sup> Ironically, these technological nightmares, now useless, will stand as a monument to man's ingenuity and to his own self-destruction.

Denevi's attitude toward the rapid increase of mechanization is one of distrust and disapproval. He understands the causes of this proliferation, but he attempts to

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

communicate that humanity must reassert its hegemony and control over machines. He tries to destroy the myths and aura of mystery which surround technology by directly confronting the theory that all new discoveries represent progress and that all progress is admirable. The microcuento "La propaganda" summarizes the dangers inherent in such misconception.

En la corte de Ana de Bretaña no se hablaba sino del unicornio. Todo el mundo sabía que el unicornio no existe, que es un animal quimérico, pero fingían ignorarlo para complacer a la princesa. . . . Tanto hablaron del unicornio, tanto lo imaginaron, lo nombraron y lo representaron, que un día el unicornio apareció. . . . Pero el unicornio, que resultó, no un dulce animal doméstico, sino una fiera salvaje, los mató a todos con su largo cuerno único.<sup>1</sup>

As Marco Denevi illustrates in his analysis of the dehumanization of man by machines and technology, humanity must struggle against all attempts to place limitations on it, for it cannot afford to be bewitched or dazzled by its own achievements. In the same way, mankind must not ignore the potential for harm which mechanization brings with it. Otherwise, in the not too distant future, humanity may lose control of its inventions and be destroyed by them.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 123-124.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE DEHUMANIZING EFFECT OF BUREAUCRACIES

As a former bureaucrat who worked for many years in the Caja Nacional de Ahorro Postal de Buenos Aires, Marco Denevi has experienced firsthand the dehumanizing power of bureaucracies. In his works he captures the sense of demoralization and frustration which assaults bureaucratic functionaries who have lost their dignity and independence while at the same time exposing the indifference and incompetency of bureaucracies which confuse and tyrannize the public. Denevi's works demonstrate that bureaucracies inundate the public with forms and data which obscure the human pain represented by the statistics. Like Dostoievsky and Kafka, he attempts to analyze the characteristics of such institutions while presenting the reasons for their development. His conclusion is that mankind creates the bureaucracy in an effort to bring some efficiency and order to a chaotic world. However, as Denevi points out, man

becomes a servant of the organization and eventually submits to its control.

The primary impetus for the construction of bureaucracies originates in the insecurities and irresponsibility of man. Denevi shows that modern man is too preoccupied with treating reality objectively and pragmatically, and, as a result, man has endowed the bureaucracy with too much power. Because of a lack of self-confidence and an overwhelming need for security, the characters of works like "Fábula", "Janóvice", and El emperador de la China suppress their natural instincts and abdicate their independence. Denevi theorizes that man now prefers a paternalistic authority to watch over and protect humanity regardless of the restrictions which must accompany such a system. Indeed, the size and intransigence of the bureaucracy seem to offer mankind an escape from the disillusionment and insecurity of recent events. Therefore, Denevi depicts mankind as paradoxically seeking retreat and stability in institutions which only increase his dehumanization.

Modern man's lack of trust in his own senses and intuitions is a primary cause of his increasing reliance upon external institutions which deal with life as a series of statistics and data. In "Fábula" Denevi offers the comparison of contemporary society with a barnyard filled with animals which are overly concerned with their apparent

inability to react successfully to new experiences. The rooster explains the problem and confusion of the other animals.

Pero la culpa es suya, Amo, permítame decírselo.  
 En su granja todo el mundo entra y sale y nunca  
 se está seguro de con que personas uno trata.  
 . . . ¿Soy su gallo blanco o el gallo blanco de su  
 primo el gendarme? . . . ¿Tengo alguna señal  
 visible? ¿Me lleva anotado en sus registros?  
 ¿Conoce mi firma? Quédese tranquilo, soy su gallo.  
 Pero podrían haberme cambiado por el gallo de su  
 primo. . . . Con un documento de identidad expedido  
 en debida forma no me habría pasado lo que me pasó  
 con la gallinita rubia y su consorte.<sup>1</sup>

The animals are troubled by the multiplication of new problems, and they seek some simple solution to help them understand events which seem beyond their comprehension. Unfortunately, they discover that the apparent cure is by no means simple and that the resultant organization only augments their problems and the complexity of their lives. By trying to avoid their responsibilities and by seeking protection rather than developing self-reliance, the animals yield too much of their independence and become the victims of an impersonal system.

In "Fábula" the animals look to their master to provide a solution to their difficulties, and he establishes an elaborate bureaucracy. Man's similar need for a paternalistic figure which seems to be concerned with his welfare

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Ceremonia secreta y otros cuentos (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1961), p. 24.

often leads him to bestow a godlike aura on the bureaucracy. As a modern god, the institution is both the bestower of favors and the angry patriarch who punishes insolence or disrespect. "Pero la administración pública es así, como un dios capricioso que nos niega o nos concede favores sin que jamás se sepa por qué."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, despite the ambivalence of their feelings for the bureaucracy, the characters of Denevi's works endow the bureaucratic system with super-human abilities. The author demonstrates this phenomenon in the one act play El emperador de la China in which the figure of the emperor represents the guiding spirit of the vast, bureaucratic government.

Tal vez esas puertas sean como las palabras de una larga metáfora, y la metáfora quiera decirnos que el emperador habita todo el palacio a un mismo tiempo.<sup>2</sup>

The complex ritual and the isolation surrounding the emperor further the impression of his godliness. To reach his presence, one must traverse hundreds of chambers in the palace and only years afterwards ascend the "infinita escalera que se eleva rectamente hacia lo alto. Iluminada cenitalmente por un misterioso claror celeste parece

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Un pequeño café (Buenos Aires: Editorial Calatayud, 1966), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>Marco Denevi, El emperador de la China y otros cuentos (Buenos Aires: Librería Huemul, 1970), p. 15.

suspendida en el aire."<sup>1</sup> Such descriptions recall the nightmarish atmosphere of Kafka's The Trial. Like his predecessor, Denevi realizes that the enormous, labyrinthine structures convey the impression of a temple. Wrapped in mystery and served by dedicated officials, the bureaucracy exudes an air of godlike power, and mankind begins to attribute to it the ability to perform miracles.

Desde todos los confines del imperio llueven rogativas, memoriales, peticiones impacientes. Menoscaban el poder del emperador. Lo confunden con una providencia que tuviese la obligación de mostrarse siempre benévola. Habría que castigar a esos irrespetuosos.<sup>2</sup>

Although frequently frustrated by the intransigence and apparent indifference of bureaucracies, humanity still relies upon them and maintains its hope in their ability to solve the bewildering problems which confront it. Indeed, the size which makes bureaucracies so inefficient also lends them the aura of permanence and tradition which man finds lacking in other aspects of modern life.

Despite the continuing faith in bureaucracies by outsiders, Denevi suggests that the feeling on the inside is quite different. Although bureaucrats relish their small domains and exaggerate their importance, they are unconsciously worried and anxious about their jobs. They seem to sense the meaninglessness of their work, and they are concerned with their purpose and contribution.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

Cinco años han transcurrido desde que me designó ministro, cinco años que habito en su palacio, que cumplo puntualmente mis deberes, que redacto para él, todas las semanas, largos informes donde, por las dudas, no dejo de renovarle mis juramentos de fidelidad ni de añadir un humilde saludo a su persona. Y todavía no he logrado verlo.<sup>1</sup>

The youngest minister in El emperador de la China is bothered by an unanswered question about his function and the ultimate harm or good done by the bureaucracy which he serves. His work has become automatic, and since he is only responsible for one task, he cannot discover exactly where his duties fit in the overall plan. Because of his narrow vision, he is unsure of the underlying purpose of the institution, and, unknowingly, he begins to doubt the existence of a guiding spirit. The same concern appears in other co-workers who pretend to have seen the emperor. On the one hand, their protestations of intimacy are intended to elevate their importance in the eyes of the other ministers, but Denevi indicates that they desperately want to reassure themselves as to the existence of a self-confident leader and a well-defined goal. Therefore, when accused of lying about their interviews with the emperor, they try to convince themselves and others that their fantasies are true.

Ministro 3: Se sabe que, desde hace mucho tiempo,  
el emperador sólo concede audiencia al  
Primer Ministro.

Ministro 4: En público. Pero en privado . . .

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

- Ministro 3: Ni en público ni en privado. El emperador no nos recibe.
- Ministro 4: A ti. Pero a mí, que soy su ministro de confianza. . . .
- Ministro 3: A ninguno de los dos. A ninguno de nosotros.
- Ministro 1: (Desolado) ¿Entonces no lo veis? ¿No lo veis nunca?
- Ministro 4: (Grita) Estuve con el emperador. Lo vi, lo vi como ahora veo esta mano. . . . (Y mira su mano, abierta frente a sus ojos.)<sup>1</sup>

More than pride is involved in the minister's adamancy, for he is trying to retain his own confidence as much as that of the other ministers. To admit the impossibility of an interview would be to capitulate to a secret fear which preoccupies all of the employees and which takes the form of a refrain running throughout the play. "¿Quién vive? El emperador de la China."<sup>2</sup> This litany serves a double purpose; it is part of the elaborate ritual of the court, but it is also a constant reassurance for all the functionaries who have subconscious doubts that the spirit and purpose of the bureaucracy no longer exist.

In his works Denevi leaves no doubt that the principal failing of bureaucracies is that they lose sight of the reason for their creation. The lack of guidance and motivation in bureaucracies causes them to do more damage than good, but because they are more concerned with their self-preservation and their own importance, institutions

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

cease to serve the public. Instead of responding to individual needs, they level differences to fit their own categories. Denevi illustrates that the process starts with the inception of bureaucracies. He shows that from the beginning, bureaucrats are more fascinated with the organization and framework of their departments than with responding to the problems presented to them by the public. The story "Grandezas de Burocracia" examines this characteristic in a short, humorous manner by describing an Arab king's order for the construction of a magnificent palace to commemorate his reign. Angered by the constant delays in the completion of the task, the king finally visits the construction site and is surprised and enchanted by the buildings and gardens which he finds. The chief architect does not have the courage to explain that ". . . lo que estaba viendo eran los palacios y jardines que los artistas habían levantado para sí mismos mientras estudiaban los planos de la futura ciudad."<sup>1</sup> In this short work Denevi captures the essence of the bureaucratic failure by showing that the mind of the bureaucrat is more attuned to procedure and details than to the resolution of human difficulties. As a result, bureaucracies become so concerned with organization and procedures that they never succeed in addressing the needs for which they were created.

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Falsificaciones (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1966), p. 26.



In Los expedientes the absurdity becomes more acute, for Denevi describes a department which has been established to help the victims of a flood and which has never received requests for assistance.

Durante los primeros meses no nos dimos cuenta. ¡Estábamos tan entretenidos organizando la nueva oficina! Pero después empezamos a notar que nos faltaba algo. Claro, nos faltaba público. Quisimos esperar un poco más. . . . Por fin nos rendimos ante la evidencia. Pero ya habían pasado tres años y quién se animaba a decirle al Ministro. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Caught up in the establishment of the bureau and engaged in defining their responsibilities and powers, the bureaucrats immediately lose sight of their original mission. Denevi sardonically notes that they only recognize their error after several months, and by then, they are more concerned with maintaining their position than with serving the public or admitting that they are not needed. In order to disguise their dishonesty and to protect their jobs, they resort to lies and masquerades designed to deceive other bureaucrats. Because of the over-stratification and inertia which afflict large institutions, they are able to carry on their charade without detection.

The problems caused by misplaced priorities in bureaucracies are compounded by their unwieldy size and the autonomy of individual departments. As Denevi demonstrates, such factors increase the bureaucracies' inherent potential

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Los expedientes (Buenos Aires: Editorial Talía, 1957), p. 21.

for intimidating and dehumanizing the public. Once bureaucratic rules and regulations take effect, they assume the status of unchallengeable laws so that each order of business must follow proper channels and appear in the acceptable, clearly defined form. Such a process lends itself to the over-multiplication of reports, data, and forms which further the delay and do nothing to resolve the original request. Such a system is parasitical, for each department feeds upon the initial report without ever arriving at a solution. Los expedientes offers a composite of Denevi's views, for it presents the case of a bureau organized for the relief of flood victims. After years of waiting, the department finally receives one inquiry about aid, and a tremendous burgeoning of meaningless documents results in a multiplication of paperwork which occupies the entire stage.

Crece el monstruo, ¿eh? Crece, crece. Vea, ya no hay sitio donde ponerlos. No se puede dar un paso sin tropezarse con un expediente. A veces, cuando ustedes se van y esto queda silencioso, me parece oírlos proliferar, por allí, por los rincones. Me parece oír un gorgoteo, un hervor, y pienso: son mis expedientes, son mis expedientes que se multiplican, que pululan como un cardumen vivo.<sup>1</sup>

The files and documents continue to grow as if they were alive until they replace both public and employees. Denevi points out that the individual has no control of the process and that once the cycle begins, it is impossible to stop or to reverse it.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

Because bureaucracies are more concerned with procedure than with final results, any attempt to correct original data or to deviate from customary ritual, regardless of individual, extenuating circumstances, is heretical and only causes further delay. The consequences of such a system are often fatal as in the microcuento "Mensajero mendaz". Despite the urgency of the request for military reinforcements, the bureaucrats in the story refuse to act before the message is correctly edited and presented.

Pero el mensaje estaba redactado en un estilo deplorable, no observaba las fórmulas que prescribe el ceremonial, olvidaba darle a Sui-Ko sus sesenta y siete nombres públicos (y en cambio la llamaba por su único nombre secreto). Hubo que rehacerlo todo, palabra por palabra, hasta volverlo digno de las orejas de la emperatriz.<sup>1</sup>

In this case, the procrastination does not affect the outcome of the battle, but it does deform the truth and causes the death of the innocent messenger. "Etonces Sui-Ko ordenó que el mensajero fuese decapitado. 'En castigo . . . por difundir mentiras y falsas alarmas.'" As the story shows, the ceremony and ritual of bureaucracies do more to thwart than to expedite the action; thus, the individual suffers, and the truth is distorted.

Denevi's works illustrate that bureaucracies bend and shape facts in order to fit procedure. In the process,

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, "El mensajero mendaz," Cuadernos, LXXV (agosto, 1963), 63.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

they destroy language by stripping it of original human elements and replacing it with abbreviations and meaningless pomp.

Escriba. Pase a la sección contable para que  
 establezca la imputación presupuestaria . . .  
 agréguese el examen radiológico del recurrente  
 . . . la imputación presupuestaria del gasto que  
 demande . . . el examen radiológico y análisis de  
 sangre. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Thus, once man places his problem before the appropriate bureau, the individual ceases to be of importance, for the forms and shorthand exclude and eliminate the human element. The system is set into motion, and all attempts to accelerate or to reverse its actions are futile.

Although he recognizes the potential danger of such events, Denevi is not oblivious to the absurdity which also accompanies such action. In "Un fanático de etiqueta" he imagines the extreme occasion in which lives are completely controlled by regulations and forms. In the story the entire life of the emperor of Byzantium is recorded in a book of etiquette; however, one detail has been overlooked, the date of his death. Therefore, the emperor grows older and older until

los dientes y los cabellos se le cayeron uno a uno.  
 Las arrugas le tatuaron la piel como las nervaduras  
 de una hoja seca. Los ojos parecían dos perlas  
 turbias en sus conchas muertas. . . . Su rostro,

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Los expedientes, p. 23.

entre las arracadas de pedrerías, dejó adivinar la forma de la calavera.<sup>1</sup>

The government and bureaucracy come to a standstill, undermined by their own over-regulation. Nothing can be done until someone finally discovers the oversight, and, upon entering the date of the emperor's death, "inmediatamente, Constantino VIII cayó muerto en su trono."<sup>2</sup> Thus, through understatement and a satiric tone Denevi deftly undercuts the pomposity of bureaucracies by ridiculing the extensive inflexibility of such institutions.

Despite his recognition of the humor inherent in the over-elaboration of bureaucratic systems, Denevi demonstrates a constant concern for the harm which such institutions bring. He illustrates that bureaucracies attack the individuality and dignity of employees while reducing the public to the ignominy of case numbers. Indeed, Denevi examines the power of such organizations to mold individual problems to fit bureaucratic procedures. The inevitable result is that bureaucrats come to regard the forms and data as more important than the people whom they represent.

Treinta noches en vela, descifrando estos mensajes.  
Un jinete moribundo los depositó hace un año a las  
puertas del palacio y en seguida expiró. Los  
mensajes hablaban de no sé qué catástrofes que

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, "Un fanático de etiqueta," Cuadernos, LXXV (agosto, 1963), 62..

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

habrían ocurrido en una provincia, ya no recuerdo cuál, e imploraban el urgente socorro del emperador. Pero el estilo era deplorable. . . . He tenido que rehacerlo todo, palabra por palabra. . . .<sup>1</sup>

As the minister in El emperador de la China reveals, the bureaucratic functionary is so distant from the public that its problems are seen only in the abstract. Thus removed from the pain and suffering of reality, the bureaucrat concentrates on form and style, completely disregarding what they represent. The last step in this process is the complete transposition of the form for the individual, for the statistics and data, not the human being, are important.

Recuerde que un expediente es un objeto poco menos que sagrado en la administración pública. Perder uno es malo. Pero quemarlo es todavía peor. Perder un expediente deja dudas en el aire. Pero quemarlo es como matar a un hombre: el cadáver está allí, acusándonos, señalándonos con el dedo, arrastrándonos a la perdición.<sup>2</sup>

For the bureaucrat, individual human beings are difficult; they must be treated as equals, to be listened to and respected. However, once the official can equate the individual with the information or numbers of his or her case, it is possible to think of it as an object to be altered, edited, ignored, or resolved as the bureaucrat wishes. Denevi understands exactly how such a process dehumanizes

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, El emperador de la China y otros cuentos, pp. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup>Marco Denevi, Un pequeño café, p. 9.

by reducing the public to a series of numbers and by encouraging the inhumanity of officials.

Although it is often the bureaucrat who thinks of the public as a series of ciphers and forms, Denevi shows that the employees also sacrifice their importance and individuality to their work. He demonstrates that once the organization and rules take charge, human beings cease to be of value, for the system enters a state of perpetual motion in which man has almost no impact. Indeed, Denevi maintains that the ideal of the bureaucracy is to function as a separate entity, entirely self-sufficient without any reliance upon human personnel. In "Historia del emperador Wu Ti y su primer ministro Wang Mang", the emperor dies, and the prime minister rules for a year without making the death public. Since the bureaucratic organization is so complex, Wang Mang has no difficulty keeping the secret. When he does reveal the truth and asks to be made emperor on the basis of his successful performance, the people reward him with the title and promptly kill him, "para que fuese tan perfecto como su antecesor, y la prosperidad del imperio continuase."<sup>1</sup> As the story shows, Wang Mang made the mistake of considering himself indispensable to the successful operation of the

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, "Historia del emperador Wu Ti y su primer ministro Wang Mang," Cuadernos, LXXV (agosto, 1963), 63.

system. He failed to realize that it was autonomous and no longer required individual human beings.

Despite Wang Mang's quest for authority and control in "Historia del emperador Wu Ti y su primer ministro Wang Mang", most of the bureaucrats in Denevi's works attempt to avoid responsibility. They enjoy the sense of power, no matter how limited, but they fear the idea of accepting the consequences of their actions.

Cuando pensase que todo dependiera de mí, y que un olvido o un error podrían hacer morir injustamente a un hombre o desatar una guerra, me quedaría alelado y con la boca muda, y no me atrevería ni a pestañear, por miedo a que interpretasen equivocadamente cualquiera de mis gestos.<sup>1</sup>

Such a fear of responsibility is endemic in bureaucracies, and Denevi attributes many of the failings of such institutions to the problem. He understands that the size of organizations and the limited authority of each functionary make rapid action an impossibility. However, when the unwieldiness of the structure is coupled with each bureaucrat's reluctance to make decisions, the inefficiency and intransigence are multiplied. Therefore, the bureaucrats in his works subconsciously encourage the self-sufficiency of bureaucracies and hope for an establishment in which they can act without facing the consequences.

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, El emperador de la China y otros cuentos, p. 11.



Si no fuese por ti, muchacho, nadie sabría que, durante un año, el trono del imperio sostuvo la sombra traslúcida de un fantasma . . . nosotros podríamos mandar y decidir sin la carga de sentirnos responsables, porque solo de él serían la responsabilidad y la autoridad . . . y el emperador de la China, eterno y perfecto, seguiría siendo la máscara de todos nuestros rostros.<sup>1</sup>

As this one act play illustrates, it is the dream of the bureaucrat to find a system in which no one must answer for his actions. The ability to act capriciously, although with limited authority, and to be absolved of the results gives them a sense of importance which feeds an otherwise weak ego.

Whereas the ritual and monotony associated with bureaucracies exert the most powerful effect in the process of dehumanization, Denevi does not fail to recognize the importance of the bureaucratic environment. The bureaucrats in his works are often condemned to offices in the subterranean part of the building, and for most of their lives these officials must exist in an artificially lighted and ventilated space below ground. The description of the office recalls the plastic societies in fables like "La mariposa".

No hay luz natural, la ventilación es pésima, la humedad se filtra a través de las paredes. Por la noche, millares de cucarachas crepitan entre los expedientes archivados. . . . Los ascensores no llegan hasta ese ominoso subterráneo. Es necesario descender por una escalera en caracol.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>2</sup>Marco Denevi, Un pequeño café, p. 11.

Such descriptions recall Kafka's The Trial and Dostoievsky's Notes from Underground. At the same time, they evoke Kierkegaard's analogy of the man who chooses to develop only one aspect of his life just as one might decide to use only the cellar of a house.

In case one were to think of a house consisting of a cellar, ground floor and premier étage, so tenanted, or rather so arranged, that it was planned for a distinction of rank between the dwellers on the several floors; and in case one were to make a comparison between such a house and what it is to be a man--then unfortunately this is the sorry and ludicrous condition of the majority of men, that in their own house they prefer to live in the cellar.<sup>1</sup>

In Denevi's works, such passages reinforce the impression that serving in the bureaucracy is similar to submitting to a form of death, vividly suggested by Denevi's use of "cajón", "sepulto", or "catacombas". Although he associates these ideas with rooms below ground, the corridors and bureaus above them are also oppressive.

Es que el Archivo, siempre siniestro e intimidario con sus largos pasillos alumbrados por luces mortecinas y las estanterías repletas de papeles, lo parecía aún más, aquella tarde, sepulto, como estaba, en su silencio submarino. Solo se oía, de vez en cuando, la leve crepitación de las cucarachas, como el aviso de un inminente desmoronamiento que reducirá todo a ruinas.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling and the Sickness Unto Death, trans. and notes Walter Lowrie (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1954), p. 176.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

As a result, the monotony and coldness of bureaucratic office buildings heightens the alienation and dehumanization of the employees. Even in El emperador de la China the magnificent luxury of the emperor's palace only increases the confusion and mechanization of the employees. Therefore, when the Vendedor de Pájaros comes bearing the news of the emperor's death, the chill and inaccessibility of the palace depress him and kill all of his birds.

Entré. ¡Qué oscuridad! ¡Qué silencio! Los pájaros, que me habían seguido, cuando penetré en aquellos corredores cesaron de aletear y de piar y se posaron sobre mis hombros, sobre mi cabeza, como si fuese de noche. Me interné en el palacio. . . . Pero entretanto mis pájaros se me han ido muriendo, un día uno, otro día otro, uno en un patio, otro en una escalera. . . . Era como si yo llevase un gran ramo de flores y las flores se me hubiesen ido deshojando una a una, pétalo por pétalo, hasta que no me quedó nada. . . . Hace demasiado frío en este palacio. Y es demasiado oscuro.<sup>1</sup>

Through the use of the images of the birds and flowers, Denevi shows that the more deeply one is immersed in the bureaucracy, the more one loses. Little by Little, man's best qualities, his imagination, spontaneity, and free will, all fall away, destroyed by the sepulchral atmosphere.

In Denevi's works bureaucratic institutions have a dehumanizing effect upon their employees, but they also have a very detrimental influence upon the public. The story

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, El emperador de la China y otros cuentos, p. 24.

"Fábula" illustrates the consequences of bureaucracies' power and their ability to force conformity. The animals in the story are disturbed by the rapid changes in their lives and their apparent inability to make correct decisions to determine the character of their fellow animals. Because of their distrust of their own instincts, they request a system of documentation to make their lives simpler and more peaceful; however, Denevi outlines the harm and absurdity in such a system. First of all, the identity cards are misused by the animals themselves, for they maintain that they bestow respectability and the right to life.

De hoy en adelante-decía el Buey con su voz pausada y bien alto, a fin de que todos lo oyesen-de hoy en adelante no pienso dirigirle la palabra a ningún animal que previamente no me exhiba su documento de identidad. En cuanto a mí--añadía el Gallo Blanco . . . a alguien que no lleve su tarjeta, lo denuncio al Amo para que lo expulse. . . . Sí-sentenció la Vaca-El que no tenga tarjeta será como si no existiese.<sup>1</sup>

This first step already demonstrates the possibilities for abuse although at this point the animals only foresee the personal benefits which may come through the use of their cards. Nevertheless, they soon discover that such a system can also be turned against them, for the proof of their identity becomes so complex that their lives depend upon it. Before they are fed, they must submit to a long examination which results in delay and confusion.

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Ceremonia secreta y otros cuentos, p. 25.

Cuando el Hombre llamaba a los animales a comer, los obligaba a ponerse en fila y a presentar sus documentos. . . . Y con todo el tiempo pasaba, los últimos de la fila rabiaban de hambre, y cuando les llegaba el turno ya no había más comida. Al día siguiente todos se disputaban los primeros puestos. . . . Amigos de toda la vida de pronto se enemistaban.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the seriousness of this inefficiency and frustration, the animals learn that there are other much more frightening possibilities. They realize that through the documents the master can keep an account of their age and productivity so that rather than increasing their security, the identity cards add to the precariousness of the animals' lives. In addition, they discover that the master is capable of removing the documents for an insignificant inspection, and, due to absent-mindedness or a more sinister motive, he may forget to return the cards to the correct animals. Any creature who cannot present his documents is immediately removed and slaughtered. Thus, as "Fábula" demonstrates, once the members of a society become dependent upon bureaucracies and bureaucrats, they expose themselves to the possible corruption and abuse of power. Although Denevi deals with the broader issue of the suppression of the human spirit rather than specific, totalitarian governments, the political implications of such a system are evident.

While "Fábula" exposes the dangers of a perversion of bureaucratic authority, it also examines the even more

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 26-27.

serious consequences of the bureaucracy's control over humanity. In the story the system accumulates so much influence that it eventually gains control over the essence of each animal's personality. When the animals finally make a desperate attempt to revolt and to break the hold of the institution by switching their identity cards, they find that the documents now govern their physical and mental compositions.

Y cuando la Vaca se colocó la tarjeta del Gato y él la tarjeta de la Vaca, ocurrió una cosa increíble, una cosa a la que nadie, ni entonces ni después, pudo hallarle explicación. Ocurrió que la Vaca comenzó a enflaquecer, a desinflarse, a empequeñecer cada vez más, hasta no ser más alta que un gato, y el Gato a volverse grande como un perro, y después alto como un asno, y después corpulento como una vaca.<sup>1</sup>

In the story, the power of the institution has become so strong that it forces the animals to conform to the bureaucratic data. As the fable indicates, Denevi fears that the continued growth of bureaucracies will dehumanize mankind to such an extent that man will also lose control over his choices and his future.

The power of bureaucracies is especially virulent in Denevi's works because he recognizes that such institutions attract certain character types which are willing, even anxious to sublimate their personalities to their work. In the play El emperador de la China, he underlines the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 30-31.

anonymity of the functionaries by referring to them only by their titles: ministro, primer ministro, jefe de guardias, vendedor de pájaros, and emperador. This technique shows the close association of the characters with their roles; in this case, the bureaucracy has developed to such a point that one individual is no different from the others, and the titles or positions govern the personalities. The mechanical aspect of bureaucrats is further emphasized in Los expedientes, a play in which a large switchboard with numbers represents the various employees who remain behind the scene.

¿Eh? No. Gómez es uno . . . ¿Rubio? No. Es más bien. . . . Me parece que es. . . . ¡Qué extraño! No recuerdo. . . . Ni Gómez ni ninguno de los otros. ¡Hace tanto tiempo que no salgo ahí afuera! Para mí son esto: lamparitas. Lamparitas eléctricas que se encienden, se apagan, vuelven a encenderse. Y de tanto en tanto una mano que me alcanza un papel . . . una voz que me dice: sí, doctor, no doctor. . . . Pero el rostro . . . el carácter . . . no, ya no me acuerdo.<sup>1</sup>

The characters in Los expedientes have effaced themselves for such a long time that they have lost all the idiosyncrasies and individual traits which once distinguished them. Denevi depicts them as ciphers, nameless, faceless drones which serve the organization and are completely expendable within it. His descriptions recall the writings of other authors who have been at least superficially influenced by existentialism.

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Los expedientes, p. 29.

But the worst and final form of alienation, toward which indeed the others tend, is man's alienation from his own self. In a society that requires of man only that he perform competently his own particular social function, man becomes identified with this function, and the rest of his being is allowed to subsist as best it can usually to be dropped <sup>1</sup> below the surface of consciousness and forgotten.

Denevi's bureaucrats choose to allow themselves to be swallowed by the organization, and, as a result, they exhibit all of the characteristics of men and women alienated from their spiritual nature.

In Denevi's works the functionaries offer very little resistance to the idea of merging their personalities with the institution. Their anonymity and total identification with one department or bureau seems to add to their warped definition of self-esteem. "Siempre decía así: yo. Yo significaba: Archivo. Quería tanto mis expedientes, me sentía tan identificado con ellos, que ésa era mi expresión habitual. . . ." <sup>2</sup> The officials suffer from strong feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, and by submerging themselves in the bureaucracy, they can exaggerate their importance. At the same time, they do provide the stability and routine which allow the institutions to function. Although they do not attain fame or make major decisions, they, like Adalberto Pascumo in Un pequeño café, consider themselves

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<sup>1</sup>William Barrett, Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1958), p. 31.

<sup>2</sup>Marco Denevi, Un pequeño café, p. 17.



una raíz encerrada en el suelo para que pudieran florear, allá arriba, las flores de los jefes, para que un poco más abajo verdeciera el follaje inútil de los auxiliares que se pasaban el día rascándose.<sup>1</sup>

This belief in their importance is the only stimulus which Denevi's bureaucrats receive for their weak egos. As a result, in order to achieve a small measure of escape from their inferiority and introversion, they submit to the insults and abuse of their chiefs and the organization.

The lack of will and the desire for retreat contribute to the total assimilation of the individual by the bureaucracy. Once the bureaucrat becomes a part of the institution, the routine and monotony of the work are so powerful that they quickly eradicate any remaining traces of independence and self-determination. In the microcuento "Alegoría de los destinos y los honores", individual workers are no longer distinguishable, for they are completely integrated into the tasks which they perform. Separated into specific sectors and jobs, they assume the role imposed upon them by their positions.

Les bastaba equivocarse de puerta, aventurarse por un corredor desconocido y ya no sabían como regresar, el soldado dejaba de ser soldado para convertirse en cocinero, el cocinero se transformaba en ministro, el ministro pasaba a ser soldado, según el sitio donde cada uno había ido a dar.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Marco Denevi, "Alegoría de los destinos y los honores," Cuadernos, LXXXI (febrero, 1964), 136.

As the story suggests, the character of the bureaucrat is too weak and the power of the bureaucracy too strong, and, as a result, the institution is capable of molding the worker to fit any position. In such an atmosphere, the functionaries find little opportunity to develop their total personality, for they are quickly and efficiently absorbed by their job.

In "El primer cuento de Kafka: el juez" Denevi analyzes the various phases in the process of the dehumanization of the employee by the institution. The story concerns a young man who is called to testify on an unspecified legal matter. Because the bureaucratic machinery moves so slowly, the witness begins to assist the judge's secretary with routine documents.

Después me aburrí y, tanto como para distraerme, comencé a ayudar al joven de chaqueta de lustrina. Al poco tiempo ya sabía distinguir los expedientes, que en un principio me habían parecido idénticos unos a otros.<sup>1</sup>

The protagonist had already noted the similarities among the employees, and as he begins to move through the ranks, he exhibits the same characteristics as his peers. Finally, he becomes a judge, and the title and position change his personality and physical appearance.

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Falsificaciones, p. 14.

Algún tiempo después este hombre melancólico murió, creo (o, simplemente, desapareció), y yo le reemplacé. Desde entonces soy el juez. He adquirido prestigio y cultura. . . . He engordado: la vida sedentaria. Veo poco: la luz artificial, día y noche, fatiga la vista. . . . A veces añoro mi casa, mi familia. En ciertas oportunidades (por ejemplo en Navidad) no resulta agradable permanecer dentro del Palacio. Pero, ¿qué be de hacerle? Soy el juez.<sup>1</sup>

The trappings of his office are so stifling and inhibiting that the man is swallowed by them, and he no longer controls his destiny, actions, or words. As a result, although he has a position of authority, he is a prisoner, for the process is so powerful that it makes a new person of him, one which is only weakly linked to his original personality.

Ayer, mi secretario (un joven muy meritorio) . . . me hizo firmar una sentencia . . . donde condeno a un testigo renitente. La condena, in absentia, incluye una multa e inhabilitación para servir de testigo de cargo o de descargo. El nombre me parece vagamente conocido. ¿No será el mío? Pero ahora yo soy el juez y firmo las sentencias.<sup>2</sup>

The story illustrates the extreme dehumanizing influence of the bureaucracy which can so mold and shape a personality that it deforms it and eradicates all facets separate from the role of the bureaucrat.

While "El primer cuento de Kafka: el juez" gives some insight into the assimilation of the bureaucrat by the institution, "Janóvice" describes the results of a lifetime of dedication and service to the bureaucracy. The story

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 14-15.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

deals with an elderly official who has spent forty years in the "Grandes Depósitos del Estado". Faced with retirement, Janóvice cannot force himself to return to private life because he has submerged himself in the bureaucracy for so long that he no longer has a life separate from it. In addition, the routine of the department has insulated him from so many vital, real experiences that he is overcome with fear at the prospect of sudden independence. Because he does not have the strength to free himself from his addiction to his job, he continues to go to the office and to try to take part in the daily routine, despite his formal retirement.

Volvía al día siguiente, se ubicó en un rincón y desde allí, sin mover más que los ojos, sin pronunciar una palabra, observaba a sus compañeros.<sup>1</sup> De vez en cuando suspiraba. A ratos lloriqueaba.<sup>1</sup>

Janóvice's extreme dependency upon the ritual and repeated patterns of his former position causes him to accept humiliation and insult for the sake of being able to remain in his office. As a result, the other employees begin to consider him a pariah, a disconcerting premonition of their own futures. Driven from office to office, he creates so much confusion and hysteria that the police are called to evict him, but, at that point, he goes into hiding. Although no one ever sees him again, his spirit continues to haunt the building.

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, El emperador de la China y otros cuentos, p. 55.

El señor Janóvice, a fuerza de recorrer el edificio, conocía todos sus recovecos y había logrado eludir a sus persiguidores. Pero pronto hubo pruebas de que seguía allí y, lo que es peor, de que ahora vivía en los Grandes Depósitos. . . . Pero el señor Janóvice no se muere. Los nuevos oficinistas, que no lo conocieron, piensan que el señor Janóvice jamás existió. Y atribuyen las misteriosas alteraciones introducidas durante la noche . . . a un fenómeno al que designan con el nombre del señor Janóvice. . . . Sí, porque ellos prefieren llamarlo simplemente janóvice.<sup>1</sup>

Janóvice is the quintessential example of the organization man, the faceless bureaucrat who serves the bureaucracy to the detriment of his own life and who is finally completely absorbed by the institution.

Although the protagonists in Un pequeño café, "El cuento de Kafka: el juez", and "Janóvice" are relatively powerless, lower echelon bureaucrats, Denevi does not endow their superiors with more independence or dignity. Indeed, they have worked their way through the tangle of bureaucratic politics for so long that they have sacrificed their humanity for the sake of titles and miniscule advancements. Despite their exalted positions, they also resent the frustration and restrictions of the ceremony imposed upon them. They tire of the ritual which surrounds them and want to again experience human warmth and friendship like the Emperor in El emperador de la China. "Nada de genuflexiones . . . Continúa tratándose como hasta ahora. Y hasta me

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 58-59.

gustaría, sí, me gustaría que me tutease."<sup>1</sup> The Emperor and other important administrators sense the loss of their humanity; they know that the long years of service drain them of compassion and life. Denevi depicts them as having the same blind stare of a robot programmed to perform certain functions but oblivious to their surroundings.

. . . el Ministro me impresionó como siempre me han impresionado los pocos, los poquísimos grandes jerarcas del poder público que he logrado conocer en mi vida. . . . Bloqueados en el punto de intersección afectan estrecharnos la mano, hablarnos, oírnos. Pero Vd. mírelos bien. . . . No nos escuchan: la cabeza ladeada, tratan de percibir un eco, una voz, no sé que llamado que les ordenará ponerse nuevamente en marcha con todo su cortejo. . . . Nos miró a cada uno en los ojos, apenas un instante, levemente estupefacto, como si alguien le hubiese dicho: Señor, existen. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Denevi makes it clear that the effect of bureaucracies upon such officials is so powerful that they become machines, responsive to bureaucratic jargon and hierarchical priorities but unconcerned with human relations. They have attained success and privilege at the expense of decency and compassion, and they, like the jefe in Los expedientes, are willing to sacrifice their employees for a small promotion.

Secretaria: ¿Pero no lo viste? Un viejo lúbrico  
del que se cuentan horrores. . . .  
. . . . .

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>Marco Denevi, Un pequeño café, pp. 98-99.

Jefe de Personal: . . . Vengo a notificarle su ascenso. El señor Ministro, conforme a lo conversado con usted hace unos instantes, acaba de ascenderlo de jefe de décimo-séptima categoría, sub-rubro cuatro, a jefe de décimo-séptima categoría, sub-rubro cinco.<sup>1</sup>

For the sake of a fractional increase in bureaucratic prestige and a salary increase of twenty-four pesos a month, the chief condemns his innocent, young secretary to a degrading life as his superior's mistress. The crime is more heinous because the chief and secretary have been close and shared a warm relationship. Despite these personal and human notes, the jefe has been conditioned by the grinding monotony and misplaced priorities of the system which he serves. He and the other officials in Denevi's works are submissive and uncomplaining before the dehumanizing effect of bureaucracies.

Denevi's discussion of the dehumanizing effects of bureaucracies shows the clear influence of writers such as Kafka and Dostoievsky. His descriptions of the impersonality and mystery of the higher echelons of the bureaucratic institution recall the nightmarish courts in Kafka's The Trial. At the same time, the warped personalities of Janóvice and Adalberto Pascumo reflect the impression of Dostoievsky's Notes from Underground. Nevertheless, although his ideas

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Los expedientes, pp. 36-37.

and portrayal follow a tradition established over a century ago, Denevi's personal attitude differs in many ways.

Despite his years of frustration within the bureaucracy, he addresses the problems and threats posed by institutions without bitterness. His writing exposes the indifference and inhumanity of such organizations while caricaturing the pomposity and absurd self-importance of bureaucrats and their rules and procedures. Denevi understands that man has built bureaucracies in an effort to bring order and stability to modern life, but he realizes that mankind is slowly being submerged in the resulting mass of forms. As a result of the constant onslaught of dehumanizing elements, man's life is becoming more abstract, and his spirit is gradually atrophying.



## CHAPTER IV

### MAN'S CONTRIBUTION TO HIS DEHUMANIZATION

Although Marco Denevi recognizes the extent of dehumanization caused by bureaucracies and technology, he attributes the major influence to humanity's own insecurities. Despite the creative and intellectual achievements of mankind, he realizes that the basic instincts of man have often encouraged him to limit his endeavors and to avoid danger. Such characteristics are becoming more dominant in a contemporary world in which the threats to man's survival multiply daily. As a result, Denevi fears that humanity is shrinking from its responsibilities and is searching for an authority which will care for and protect it. Therefore, mankind is repressing the very qualities which might create solutions without destroying his independence and individuality. Timidity, fear of the unknown, a lack of direction, and a need for acceptance are paralyzing man's ability to initiate events and to react to them. The consequences are dependency and irresponsibility, for instead of challenging

its capabilities, humanity is accepting conformity and mediocrity. The microcuento "Otra versión" suggests the misfortune which can result from a philosophy of retreat and pessimism. In the story, the author presents the hypothesis that Judas betrayed Christ because he was afraid that Christ's individuality and independence might cause him to be severely punished.

Pero ahí estaba precisamente la mácula de su amor: en la falta de vuelo. Lo amaba con amor burgués, doméstico, de rienda corta. Nada de aventuras, nada de peligro, nada de correr riesgos inútiles. Judás privado de corraje o quizá de imaginación, habría<sup>1</sup> preferido un Jesús que se dedicase a carpintería.

"Otra versión" demonstrates Denevi's concern that by pursuing a similar self-limitation, humanity only heightens its decline and increases the likelihood of its ultimate extinction.

Denevi's works indicate that he attributes the major cause of man's dehumanization to the current increase in his fear of the unknown. Because of recent severe disillusionment about man's ability to control his adventures and his relationships, man has tempered his enthusiasm and restricted his imagination. Although the author criticizes an unquestioning faith in technological experimentation, he does not advocate the abandonment of man's search for knowledge and his efforts to expand his experiences, and his

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Falsificaciones (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1966), p. 97.

writing shows the destructive consequences of mankind's capitulation to irrational fears. The story "Decadencia y caída" symbolizes the paralysis and decay which can result when man ceases to confront challenges and withdraws in panic. It concerns a wealthy Buenos Aires family driven from its home when its garden is invaded by an unidentifiable animal.

El motivo por el cual esa familia . . . debió abandonar la mansión . . . y desperdigarse por departamentos, hoteles y hasta pensiones . . . la razón que les indujo a ese desbande, . . . a llevar un estilo de vida que no coincide con sus antecedentes . . . la culpa . . . la tuvo el pelidonte.<sup>1</sup>

Since neither the family nor its servants can identify the creature with any certainty, it begins to assume fantastic proportions and characteristics. Although its presence is made manifest by the damage done to the garden, the aristocratic matriarch refuses to acknowledge its existence because she has never seen it. However, other members of the household begin to succumb to an unreasonable terror as the reputation of the animal becomes exaggerated.

Entre tanto el pelidonte . . . seguía haciendo de las suyas. Hasta las hojas de los árboles había empezado a devorar. Y como nadie se atrevía a ir al jardín, se envalentonó y se paseaba a la luz del día por entre los matarroles. Las mujeres, aterradas, no querían salir ni al patio.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Hierba del cielo (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1974), p. 127.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 132-133.

The family first tries to ignore it, but when the animal's activities increase, they realize that some action must be initiated. Nevertheless, the decadence of their life, coupled with their inexplicable fear, prevent the various family members from undertaking the challenge, and the pelidonte multiplies. Despite the apparent passivity and shyness of the creature, no one can summon the courage to confront and identify the invader.

No ataca al hombre ni en defensa propia. Quizá, si uno se acostumbra, sea hermoso, fácil de domesticar, y hasta comestible. Pero lo que para nosotros lo volvía terrorífico es que no se supiese como era, que no se lo pudiese identificar con ninguna bestia conocida y que las descripciones difiriesen. Esa incógnita nos quitaba el sueño y alimentaba la imaginación y el espanto.<sup>1</sup>

The creature symbolizes all of the unsubstantiated fears which plague mankind, and, as the story demonstrates, once humanity permits the destruction of its independence and imagination, such terrors grow in importance. The decay spreads until the family actually flees in panic.

Mientras tanto los pelidontes son los dueños del palacio. . . . Toda la mansión será su guarida. Depositarán sus repulsivos excrementos en aquellas salas ahora vacías y que alguna vez encerraron tantas riquezas traídas de Europa. Y seguirán reproduciéndose. Que calamidad.<sup>2</sup>

Accustomed to a restricted, nonproductive existence, the family has lost their ancestors' flexibility and determination, and they now nourish their fears and respond

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 135-136.

hysterically to every threat. As Denevi indicates, man is in danger of repeating the same mistake and of capitulating in panic before the problems, real and imagined, which confront him.

A corollary of mankind's fear of the unknown is his insecurity and timidity, and Denevi creates characters who are almost incapacitated by their shyness in order to illustrate the damage done to their personalities. The condition is so extreme that they are unable to assert themselves or to maintain their independence and dignity. The protagonists of Denevi's works practice self-effacement and are inhibited to such an extent that they seem to try to disappear in order to protect themselves from the world. Leonides Arrufat, the heroine of "Ceremonia secreta", reveals her introversion simply in her way of walking.

La señorita Leonides caminó pegada a las paredes, los ojos bajos, el cuerpo tieso, el paso energético y casi marcial, como conviene que camine a esas horas una mujer sola si además es honesta y por añadidura soltera, aunque tiene cincuenta y ocho años.<sup>1</sup>

By remaining close to the wall, with eyes lowered, Leonides communicates her timidity and her withdrawal from life; she reveals her secret fears and her desire to escape the necessity of inter-reacting with other human beings. Denevi describes the protagonist of Rosaura a las diez, Camilo

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Ceremonia secreta y otros cuentos (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1961), p. 34.

Canegato, a classic example of the introvert. In a similar way, Canegato's timidity is so extreme that he has great difficulty even carrying on a simple conversation, and his shyness makes him a victim of the cruelty and insensitivity of others.

A la mesa quedábase quieticito . . . (y había que ver como empezaron a burlarse de él aquellos desalmados, en cuanto cayeron en la cuenta de su timidez) le hacían la comedia de tratarlo con toda cortesía, . . . Pues si alguien le dirigía la palabra, repito, se apresuraba a contestar con tanto afán que se aguantaba y tosía, mientras hacía reverencias sobre la silla y se le encendían los tornasoles de la cara.<sup>1</sup>

Because of his introversion, Canegato allows everyone to take advantage of him and to consider him as an object without feelings. He never has the courage to express his emotions or to assert his opinions; consequently, he forfeits his independence and individuality to those who are less inhibited. As Denevi's works indicate, timidity in the extreme undermines man's human dignity while simultaneously converting him to a perpetual victim subject to the control of others.

Denevi's characters' timidity prevents them from sharing their lives with others, for they feel as if they are condemned to a life isolated from other people. They experience an internal struggle between their shyness and their desire to participate in human relationships. In his

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Rosaura a las diez (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1966), p. 15.

description of Camilo Canegato, Denevi chooses the name Canegato (a composite of can and gato) which communicates the character's inner turmoil and his longing for acceptance frustrated by his inability to express his feelings. These two needs struggle within Camilo's personality much as the proverbial dog and cat, and they depress him so much that he resorts to a desperate plan which hopefully will allow him to expose his innermost sentiments and to arouse the interest and concern of others. He invents a young woman with whom he pretends to be romantically involved, and, in order to make his fellow boarders aware of his clandestine affair, he sends himself perfumed, rose-colored letters.

El mito de Rosaura tuvo, en fin, un propósito práctico. . . . Adquirir, delante de los otros, una personalidad que no poseía. . . . Lo que quiso fue descubrir, ante los demás, todos aquellos sentimientos, aquella pureza . . . que no había podido, hasta entonces, manifestarse.<sup>1</sup>

Canegato longs to be the center of attention and to feel himself accepted by others who display an interest in his thoughts and emotions. He is always cognizant of his isolation and the rejection of his fellow human beings, but he never ceases to hope that he may eventually escape his loneliness.

En aquel salón . . . en medio de aquellos grupos que fumaban y conversaban y se llamaban y reían y jugaban, yo me sentía tan solo y tan triste.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 182.

. . . ¡Me hubiera gustado tanto que alguien apareciese en la puerta del bar, me saludase desde lejos, cruzara entre las mesas y viniera a sentarse frente a mí!<sup>1</sup>

Such intense emotion inflicts Canegato with physical suffering, and his desperation encourages him to seek an escape in illusions and lies.

Canegato is an example of man's dependence upon illusion and disguise, and he indicates Denevi's concern that man's fanatic search for approval and acceptance can prove dangerous and destructive. As in "La cicatriz" he shows that such devices may succeed temporarily but that discovery and humiliation are inevitable.

Giambattista Crispi permaneció largo rato inmóvil en su escondite. Pensaba en Bernard y en su cicatriz. Una cicatriz como aquella aseguraba (o al menos prometía) el temeroso respeto de los demás, la impunidad y la fama. . . . Desapareció de su casa y de Alba durante algún tiempo. Cuando volvió, una cicatriz idéntica a la de Bernard Laroque . . . le pintarrajeaba la cara, lo precedía y lo seguía como un aullido. Las gentes, sus escasas amistades, la miraron con asombro.<sup>2</sup>

By taking refuge behind the scar, the weak boy convinces others of his ferocity and courage, and the wound inspires him to act out his fantasies. However, the charade lasts only until Giambattista once again encounters Bernard Laroque, for confronted with the man whom he is emulating, his pretense collapses.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>Marco Denevi, "La cicatriz," Cuadernos, LXXXI (febrero, 1964), p. 35.



Cicatrices idénticas refulgían en sus rostros. Pero Bernard debió de comprender en seguida que aquellas dos cicatrices idénticas no podían ser reales, que una tenía que ser falsa, la copia de la verdadera. O habrá sido el Accomplito [Giambattista Crispi] el que sintió la vergüenza de esa confrontación, el que entendió que su valor, como su cicatriz, podía engañar a los demás pero no podía engañar a Bernard Laroque.<sup>1</sup>

"La cicatriz" exposes the danger of man's dependency upon disguise and untruths by illustrating that humanity's reliance upon such fantasies not only constitutes a misuse of its creative powers but also increases mankind's insecurity by encouraging him to depend upon artificial devices which must fail.

By accepting false identities in an effort to achieve approval and to conceal his weaknesses, mankind pursues the same foolish behavior as the porcupine in Denevi's fable "La inmolación por la belleza". The pathetic creature is enthralled by the praise and admiration of those who have decorated it with tinsel and glitter.

El erizo escuchaba las voces, las exclamaciones, los aplausos, y lloraba de felicidad. Pero no se atrevía a moverse por temor de que se le desprendiera aquel ropaje miliunanochesco. Así permaneció durante todo el verano. Cuando llegaron los primeros fríos había muerto de hambre y de sed. Pero seguía hermoso.<sup>2</sup>

Denevi understands that mankind's commitment to disguise for the sake of acceptance by others is suicidal, for such

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 35-36.

<sup>2</sup>Marco Denevi, El emperador de China y otros cuentos (Buenos Aires: Librería Huemul, 1970), p. 78.

behavior encourages man to conform and to engage in duplicity while he gradually loses his independence and individuality. In the end, although he may not face physical death, his best spiritual qualities disappear, and he exists only as a shadow or puppet; he becomes the warped mirror image of the role which he tries to play.

Because of his timidity and need for approval, mankind has difficulty in discovering a direction for his activities. Denevi captures the aimlessness of modern man who senses his weakness and dissatisfaction but confuses action with purpose. In "Los viajeros" the search for meaning takes the form of perpetual traveling as a couple from Buenos Aires circles the world in quest of a nebulous goal. The husband and wife make the error of equating the accumulation of data, mementos, and mileage with a meaningful life.

Regresaron con montañas de souvenirs, a tal punto que se mudaron a una casa más grande para poder ubicarlos, pues ahora los souvenirs incluían relojes, cuadros, alfombras, espejos, tibores, cráteres, tápices, estatuas de tamaño natural, un trozo de columna del Partenón, mosaicos robados de la villa de Adriano en Tivoli y los inevitables ceniceros.<sup>1</sup>

Their movement is so kinetic and their desperation so powerful that they do not analyze the meaning and relationships among their experiences. All distinctions of quality and broader patterns which bring order to life are lost in the

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Parque de diversiones (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1970), p. 75.

blur of revolving, changing action. As a result, their lives are carried out on a superficial plane, and they remain oblivious to the variety and difference in importance which the events of their lives have. Because they clutter their world without attempting to assimilate or to organize the stimuli and their responses, their sense of rootlessness increases. They can quote statistics and data, but they are unaware of human emotions or values. "La gente es la misma en todas partes. . . . En cambio, qué edificación. Tre-cientas cincuenta y cuatro iglesias, cinco museos, un cementerio de veinte hectares."<sup>1</sup> Denevi points out through this couple that humanity is too preoccupied with numbers and accumulating information in its efforts to establish some stability and direction in modern life. Mankind senses the enormity of the problems which confront him, but by confusing motion and quantity with purpose and accomplishment, humanity only complicates the difficulty. "Los viajeros" indicates that as long as mankind refuses to confront the situation and to try to analyze his deficiencies and his abilities, continuous, frenetic activity will only augment his rootlessness. Eventually, humanity will be as confused and lost as the travelers in the story.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

Han olvidado quienes son. El otro día los vi. Entraban en el Museo de Bellas Artes con sus cachorros a cuestas. Me acerqué, los llamé. "Señora Poncevoy, señor Poncevoy." La mujer frunció el entrecejo y miró al marido.

"¿Poncevoy? ¿Poncevoy?"

-¿Ya no te souviens pas? Una isla del Caribe.

-You are wrong, como siempre. Una aldea del Kurdistán.

-Estuvimos allí en 1958. ¿Ja?

-Mio caro, en 1965.<sup>1</sup>

The couple in "Los viajeros" has accelerated their activities to such a pace that everything is a blur. Instead of defining their purpose and establishing a solid foundation for their lives, they have succeeded in erasing their origins and increasing the fragmentation of their personalities. "Los viajeros" emphasizes the error of mankind's current fascination with speed and number rather than thoughtfulness and quality.

In addition to satirizing man's frantic quest of purpose, Denevi also points out the foolishness of mankind's attempt to take refuge in one illusion after another in the hope of recovering his justification for existing. In "Viaje a Puerto Aventura" he again analyzes the travels of a Buenos Aires couple attempting to escape a mundane existence by means of an elaborate charade. The husband and wife assume that the movement and pace of other people's lives indicate an underlying direction and plan. This misconception leads the protagonists to imitate their neighbors

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 76-77.

by pretending to make a trip to the mythical Puerto Aventura. They commit the compound error of confusing motion with purpose and emulating others without first trying to establish their own identities. They assume that only they have lost the meaning and direction needed to justify their existence.

Se pasean con el único y exclusivo propósito de que los pobres peatones agobiados por el sol y la lluvia los miremos como los perros miran pasar los trenes en el campo y pensemos con toda la bilis revuelta: qué suerte tienen, quién sabe a donde irán, irán a alguna fiesta o a las playas del sur mientras nosotros seguimos aquí bajo la lluvia.<sup>1</sup>

The wife, Carolina Mercedes, suffers because of her belief that everyone has a goal and that they flaunt their security and satisfaction. Because of her dissatisfaction and emptiness, she forces her husband into pretending that they too are making a trip. In order to make her fantasy seem more real, she even invents a scenario and destination which they can pursue in their imaginations.

Salir sin una meta fija podría enfriarnos el entusiasmo. Pero si nos figuramos ir a un sitio determinado el viaje se hará mucho más interesante. Y si ese sitio tiene un nombre tan sugestivo y exótico como Puerto Aventura, se nos redoblará la felicidad de viajar.<sup>2</sup>

Carolina Mercedes believes that by disguising her dissatisfaction and insecurity, she can ignore the void in her life. Once the pantomime begins, she quickly discovers her mistake

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Hierba del cielo, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

and soon starts to envy those people who live quietly and tranquilly in their homes. However, her childish actions condemn both her and her husband to a new life which is more difficult and leaves no time for dreaming.

Habíamos llegado a una callecita estrecha que serpenteaba como un camino de montaña. Otras callejuelas la atravesaban en cualquier forma. Y ni una luz en las azarosas esquinas, ninguna luz por ninguna parte. Aquello era un ghetto, los bajos fondos de un Buenos Aires de pesadilla.<sup>1</sup>

Carolina Mercedes and her husband are confronted with a new, more demanding life in which they find direction and purpose in the daily effort of surviving. By refusing to accept reality and to make the best of their lives in an honest, determined fashion, the couple regresses to a stage devoid of all but the basic, physical necessities.

Así, nuestro imaginario viaje a Puerto Aventura terminó en esta villa que por irónica paradoja se llama Puerto Miseria. . . . me parece que es una lección que nos disparó el destino.<sup>2</sup>

Denevi realizes that contemporary man is in danger of a similar regression if he does not cease to avoid his responsibilities and continues to allow his independence and individuality to be sacrificed to illusion and conformity.

Although he explores man's complicity in his own dehumanization in several stories as well as Rosaura a las diez, Un pequeño café (1967) represents Denevi's most complete examination of a human personality dehumanized by

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

its own insecurities and illusions. Adalberto Pascumo, the protagonist, is a minor bureaucrat who spends his life in a basement office, a cellar café, and an apartment filled with mementos of the past. Despite his longing to participate in human relationships and to experience life in all of its facets, Pascumo is too frightened to abandon his semi-secure, deadening routine. The rapidity and coldness of the modern world terrify him so that he takes refuge in his memories and dreams of a gentler era, symbolized by the small, subterranean café.

Es realmente pequeño, minúsculo, una cajita de música. Ubicado un metro más abajo que el nivel de la calle. . . . Las paredes están revestidas de madera y adornadas de caza y siluetas de viejas ciudades medievales. . . . La luz de estos veladorcitos, más la de una lámpara colocada sobre el mostrador, es la única que ilumina el salón y lo sumerge, sobre todo en la alta noche, en una penumbra acuática.<sup>1</sup>

Because of his fears and weakness, Pascumo withdraws to an underground, mummified existence. He hides the lifelessness of his condition under a mask of self-righteousness and pretended urbanity, but he realizes that it all reflects the insignificance and monotony of a wasted, dehumanized life.

Although Pascumo tries to convince himself that his visits to the café bring some purpose and solace to his pathetic existence, he feels his loneliness very strongly.

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Un pequeño café (Buenos Aires: Editorial Calatayud, 1966), p. 27.

He realizes that since his childhood, he has led a solitary life, devoid of human warmth and relations.

Todos muertos, menos yo. Todos muertos. Y yo el único sobreviviente, como el niño que no comió los hongos venenosos que comió la familia entera, durante una fiesta campestre, hace muchos años.<sup>1</sup>

Having suffered the trauma of the death of his family and close relations, he felt abandoned in a hostile world. Pascumo has never had the courage to initiate new friendships which could again bring him pain, and he has chosen to isolate himself in a state which resembles death more than life. He has mastered his withdrawal so that there are few fissures in his frozen mask. He even acknowledges his ability to manipulate his weaknesses and his deficiencies, for his bitterness and loneliness have caused him to perfect certain aspects of his character which increase his defenses and his dehumanization. Therefore, he admits that he is an expert in duplicity who easily adapts to a number of disguises.

Era capaz de improvisar una mentira tras otra con el automatismo con que una lombriz se encoge en cuanto siente un roce extraño. . . . Porque la gente bien instalada en su realidad en cuanto quiere salirse de ella y fabricarse una realidad imaginaria, está como perdida, balbucea, a la legua se le nota que miente. Pero yo no, señor. Yo, habituado a plegarme a la realidad de los demás, podía, como un actor, mejor que un actor, representar cualquier papel, el que los otros me reservaban o el que yo, para pasar desapercibido, me elegía a mí mismo.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 8.



Pascumo cultivates his ability to assume a role and to deceive others, and he fancies that it provides him with some control. However Denevi makes it clear that such actions really indicate the complete dependency and weakness of the protagonist, for he never asserts his own personality or develops his own ideas. Instead, he changes in order to reflect the opinions and desires of those around him.

Una veleta eso es lo que soy. Una veleta nuevecita, aceitada, de latón, liviana, casi etérea, toda pintada de colores, erguida en la punta de una aguja: uno la ve e immediataments experimenta la tentación de soplar, y sopla aunque no tenga ganas de hacerlo, sopla nada más que para verla girar . . . yo soy una veleta con rebeliones interiores, ¿y para qué sirven a una veleta las rebeliones interiores? Para nada.<sup>1</sup>

Pascumo himself acknowledges his vulnerability and is ashamed of his lack of strength, but he does not have the ability to correct his deficiencies. Thus, he succumbs to the temptation of ignoring them and permitting them to increase, until a crisis and a crushing humiliation force him to summon the determination to change his life.

Denevi places Pascumo in a position in which he must choose between asserting his independence and capitulating completely to a totally subservient, dehumanized existence. The author increases the protagonist's isolation and insecurity by forcing Pascumo to assume three different identities at the same time. Pascumo tries to convince his

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

future father-in-law that he is a supervisor in the bureaucracy. As a result, when the employees go on strike, he must pretend to remain loyal to the administration; therefore, while attempting to maintain his charade as an administrator, he finds himself alienated from his fellow workers without being able to share the sympathies of the real supervisors with whom he must spend his time. His isolation is made complete when the strikers approach him and force him to keep them informed of the plans and strategy of the employers. The added strain mounts as Pascumo's nerves weaken and he realizes that he is totally alone. He can no longer conceal from himself his loneliness and dissatisfaction, and because of the constant stress and growing confusion, he eventually must admit the ineffectiveness of his disguise. He is exposed and rejected by his future relatives, the administration, and his co-workers who treat him as a pariah regardless of the fact that they once exploited his weakness. Having been cast out, Pascumo cannot avoid facing a decision about his future; he must choose between burying himself more deeply in an artificial, dehumanized existence or accepting the challenges and responsibilities of a real life. He resolves to change and to leave behind his underground, insulated way of life.

Basta de hojear viejos álbumes desvanecidos. Basta de fabricarme, con palabritas en francés, la nacionalidad del apátrida. . . . me iré con los

hombres de carne y hueso. Pero con los que sean, a mí entender, buenos.<sup>1</sup>

Pascumo recognizes the inauthenticity and dehumanization of his previous life, and he decides to abandon it despite the inherent dangers which accompany an existence lived in the present with plans for the future. He puts away his masks and buries the past with all of its memories.

Me despido de Ein Kleines Kaffe. Otros lugares me aguardan, lugares donde la gente ríe, habla en alta voz, se pelea, hace, bien o mal, su propia historia. En una palabra, vive. . . . ¿Quién es ése? Ah, el muchacho de las flores. Comprendo. Comprendo. Ha venido a traer flores a estos cadáveres. Y después que les dejó a cada uno un ramito, se vuelve junto a los vivos. . . . Ese sí que mira de frente la realidad. . . . Me voy con él.<sup>2</sup>

Denevi takes Pascumo to the final step in a dehumanized life; he forces him to choose between the new, exciting, possibly dangerous challenges of a complete personality and a totally artificial existence in which he would compound his isolation and timidity with bitterness and cruelty. In this 1967 novel, the protagonist recognizes the errors of his past and escapes the deadening future which awaits him.

Although Denevi does not take Adalberto Pascumo through the final phase of dehumanization, he describes in Los asesinos de los días de fiesta the kind of life that Pascumo might easily have had. In his latest novel, he analyzes characters who are dependent, withdrawn, insecure,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 123-124.

and evil. When confronted with the truth about themselves, they reject it and retreat further into their insulated, mummified way of life. The six main characters are brothers and sisters, completely dependent upon each other. Their six personalities intertwine to form one conscience and one voice so that the entire novel is narrated from the first person plural. Individually and collectively, the group lacks warmth, compassion, and joy, and, although they give the impression of being alive, they recall the descriptions of the ants in "La mariposa" and "La hormiga" or the stuffed animals in the house in which they come to live. It is difficult to believe that blood still flows in them.

Lalanne no embalsamó a los animales para convertirlos en atroces cadáveres incorruptos. Más bien los ha fijado, como en una instantánea, en pleno movimiento. . . . Lo más asombroso es que los animales hayan sido momificados en posturas tan naturales y a menudo violentas: uno se obstina en maliciar que se han inmovilizado para cumplir con aquella orden, pero que su inmovilidad no puede prolongarse. . . . Hasta le parece que . . . han desviado imperceptiblemente los ojos o desplazado una pata. . . . Pero basta tender una mano y tocarlos, para que su dureza de roca disipe la ilusión de la vida.<sup>1</sup>

The six brothers and sisters exist as if they too were drained of their emotions and warmth. They hide behind masks of self-righteousness and proclaim their superiority and their pride in being oblivious to the emotional and

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Los asesinos de los días de fiesta (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1972), p. 103.

physical needs which demean others. In reality, they fear human relationships and commitments and prefer a lifeless, artificial existence.

Los asesinos de los días de fiesta deals with a short period in the lives of the six brothers and sisters when they take possession of the home of an elderly hermit, Claudio Aquiles Lelanne. They discover that his love for his younger wife was so intense that at her death, he embalmed her and created a tomb for her in the attic of his house. The protagonists attempt to take advantage of this secret, and the younger sister, Lucrezia, is chosen to play the role of Lelanne's dead wife in order to gain control of the inheritance. The deviation from routine and the opportunity to immerse herself in the personality of someone else inspire Lucrezia to develop aspects of her character which were previously dormant.

En el sueño yo sabía que la mansión era de otro, pero también sabía que por algún misterioso motivo nadie iba a venir a expulsarme. . . . Dentro de aquella casa soñada yo me convertía poco a poco en otra mujer, en una mujer inventada por mí misma. Tenía otra cara, otro nombre.<sup>1</sup>

Lucrezia develops some independence from her relatives, and her personality begins to expand and to attain new dimensions as the result of her experiences. Because of this change, she glimpses the possibility of a life entirely

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 94-95

different from anything she has ever known. She matures and discovers that she cannot return to the restrictions and suffocation of her dehumanized brothers and sisters; therefore, in order to escape completely, she commits suicide.

Me enamoré perdidamente de Caceres [el abogado de Esmée Roth]. Y ahora sé que enamorarse es como desnudarse. Es ser uno mismo sin ningún engaño ni disfraz. Pero yo no puedo ser Lucrezia, ni puedo seguir siendo Esmée. . . . Así que no quiero ser ninguna de las dos.<sup>1</sup>

Lucrezia realizes that her life could be full and complete, but fearful of returning to the old ways, she breaks down and chooses to escape. Even so, her suicide is in a sense a triumph over the cold, indifferent life of her brothers and sisters who never come to understand the change in Lucrezia nor the reasons for her death. They do not comprehend that they also wear masks and that behind their disguises they conceal cruel, bitter natures.

Los corazones privados de amor se vuelven crueles, codiciosos y feroces como guerreros extranjeros en una ciudad vencida. Se entregan al pillaje y a la matanza de los demás corazones, y convierten los días de fiesta en noches de duelo. ¿Y eso qué tiene que ver con nosotros?<sup>2</sup>

Lucrezia's brothers and sisters refuse to consider the possibility of their sterility and lifelessness, and, as a result, they represent the most completely dehumanized characters in Denevi's works.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 213.

Denevi realizes that the protagonists of Los asesinos de los días de fiesta are not isolated examples of a dehumanized mankind. His fiction expresses his concern for the increase and spread of the influence of such individuals, for he understands that their proliferation has a detrimental effect upon other men who have not yet succumbed. As "La mal corre" shows, he fears that by association and for self-defense, more human beings may resort to artificial, restricted lives.

Aparentemente sin ninguna razón (salvo la cadena al cuello durante todo el día y uno que otro latigazo) una noche el Perro dijo: " Se acabó!" Y se metamorfoseó en Lobo. Al ver a un animal salvaje entre sus tiernas flores, el jardín, contagiado, o quizá para defenderse del Lobo, se transformó en una selva. El Lobo, relamiéndose, pensaba: -Ahora verá ese déspota. . . . Lo esperaré aquí y en cuanto se asome la clavaré los dientes. Al amanecer oyó pasos y se preparó para el ataque. Pero quien apareció fue el Orangután.<sup>1</sup>

Denevi understands that the increased number of deformed and deficient people augments the possibility that in the future they will be the majority. As a result, the minority which rejects the sterile, cruel, artificial life offered to them will be destroyed or will simply become extinct like the most beautiful creatures in "Los animales en el Arca".

La proximidad de las eternas víctimas y los eternos victimarios, ¿no desataría más de un

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, El emperador de la China y otros cuentos, p. 76.

crimen? . . . ¿Y quiénes serían los más indefensos, sino los más hermosos? Porque los hermosos no tienen otra protección que su belleza.<sup>1</sup>

"Los animales en el arca" exposes the dangers of man's continued dehumanization. Not only must modern man question the proliferation of bureaucracies and machines, but he must also be alert to his own tendency to flee from responsibility and to capitulate to his unconscious fears. Like the animals in "El cuento de hadas", humanity can no longer afford to ignore the possibility of its complete dehumanization. "Los bípedes implumes no existen. Hablemos de la realidad. Hablemos de nosotros! . . . Y a lo lejos ya asomaba la escopeta del cazador."<sup>2</sup> Unless man is constantly vigilant and overcomes his self-centered view of life, he faces the extinction of his best characteristics. Denevi attempts to make clear that the danger of such an event is more imminent because mankind shows a greater willingness to accept security and mediocrity at the expense of independence and individuality. By presenting characters who have contributed to their own dehumanization because of their fears, timidity, and search for approval, Denevi gives emphasis to the major threat. A chronological analysis of his works indicates that his concern has deepened between the

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Falsificaciones, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup>Marco Denevi, El emperador de la China y otros cuentos, p. 75.



appearance of Rosaura a las diez, with the characterization of the unwilling victim, Camilo Canegato, and Los asesinos de los días de fiesta, with the six protagonists who represent the most completely dehumanized characters in all of his writings.

## CHAPTER V

### TIME AND THE EFFECTS OF DEHUMANIZATION

Marco Denevi is a member of an artistic generation which underwent its formation during "la segunda posguerra, bajo el influjo de Sartre y el existencialismo."<sup>1</sup> Consequently, his analysis of the causes of man's dehumanization reflects the impression of the works of existential writers and philosophers who attribute the destruction of the human spirit to man's own fears and insecurities, the power of bureaucracies, and the force of mechanization. At the same time, his expression of man's relationship to time is a simplified summary of the thoughts of Heidegger.

A Subject is that which exists for itself as possibility, an infinite possibilities, as a realized selection from particular possibilities in the past, and a realizable selection of particular possibilities in the future.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Angela B. Dillepiane, "La novela argentina desde 1950 a 1965," Revista Iberoamericana, XXXIV (julio-diciembre, 1968), p. 241.

<sup>2</sup>James Brown, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Buber & Barth (New York: Collier Books, 1955), p. 82.

In order to avoid dehumanization and self-destruction, man must be able to assimilate his past while looking ahead and planning for the future. Failure to accomplish this balance cuts man off from the opportunity of developing all his potential.

None of Denevi's characters demonstrates an ability to confront and to assimilate his past while also giving sufficient attention to his future. On the one hand, Camilo Canegato, Adalberto Pascumo, and Leonides Arrufat all err by preferring or having to dwell on past memories and by seeking security in the present through a strict adherence to routine. Unable to make peace with past tragedies, they are beset by fears which encourage them to hide behind masks and illusions. As a result, they are prevented from taking advantage of the present and projecting plans for the future. Conversely, the protagonists of such works as "Los viajeros" and "Viaje a Puerto Aventura" are constantly fleeing the past and present in hopes that the future may be better. Such an attitude only increases the rootlessness and incoherence of their existence, for the accelerated pace levels the differences in experiences while increasing the instability and chaos of their lives. Denevi's works suggest that man must concern himself with the future and with new possibilities but not without understanding and accepting the choices made in the past. A failure to place the proper

perspective on his relations with and in time adds to man's dehumanization by robbing him of the opportunity to develop his potential.

The characters in such stories as "Los viajeros" and "Viaje a Puerto Aventura" are victims of the increased pace of modern life. Haunted by the knowledge of their own transience and aided by the ease and speed of contemporary communications and travel, they attempt to race against their own mortality by constantly projecting themselves into the future and ignoring the events of the past and present. As a result, they are unable to discriminate between important and meaningless events, and all of their experiences become superficial and chaotic. Like the protagonist of "Efímera, el peligro amarillo", they are so obsessed with a fear of becoming bored or trapped by routine that they accelerate life to a point at which it has little resemblance to human existence.

Porque yo soy como las efímeras. Vivo en un tiempo más acelerado que el resto de los mortales. . . . Quizá muera centenaria y todos me creerán en la flor de la edad. Pero es necesario que entiendan una cosa: habré vivido una larga vida, solo a un ritmo más rápido que el común de la gente.<sup>1</sup>

Efímera fanatically rejects every activity which attempts to hold or imprison her in any way. She constantly looks toward a new experience and never enjoys or explores the

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Hierba del cielo (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1974), p. 51.

many opportunities offered in the present. As a consequence, she confuses a perpetually changing life with a full and meaningful existence, but her flight from the past and present and her constant pursuit of the future only increase her alienation from herself and others.

Because Efímera always lives with the future in mind, she never attempts to assimilate her past or to enjoy the present; therefore, her life lacks solidness and order. She escapes the tyranny of artificial measurements of time and develops her own concept of her relation to time. Nevertheless, her frenetic pace prevents her from establishing a purpose or direction for herself. Consequently, she becomes more shallow and desperate. Her obsessive fear of routines and schedules forces her to always search for new adventures so that she never realizes the multifaceted nature of many activities and relationships. Her husband describes their life together as "la carrera de dos fugitivos que pierden todos los trenes, llegan tarde a todas partes, huyen de un enemigo que los persigue."<sup>1</sup> The image of a fugitive expresses the panic and desperation of Efímera's headlong, aimless flight, for her air of being pursued drives her from one meaningless experience to another and never allows her to examine her life closely or to place events in their proper perspective. Rather than escaping the rule of time,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

she becomes an unconscious slave, bound to one way of life and deprived of the opportunity to investigate and to experiment with other elements and possibilities. For this reason, she displays a definite lack of self-knowledge and an incoherent view of her life. "Human existence is not only that which exists but which is conscious of itself as existence, as existing."<sup>1</sup> Efímera is too preoccupied with a quest of the new and the different to create a coherent pattern. She forgets her past and only acknowledges the present as a means of reaching an unobtainable future; she never allows time to confront her existence and therefore is never really cognizant of it.

The title "Efímera, el peligro amarillo" reveals Denevi's concern that Efímera's way of life threatens to destroy mankind in the same way a disease attacks and kills. As a result of the frantic pace of her life, Efímera places all activities and experiences on one superficial level; she ignores differences in quality and value and cannot appreciate multifaceted relationships.

En fin: aquella gesticulación de picada por la tarántula, aquel continuo ir, venir, levantarse, mariposear . . . aquel permanente trino agudo . . . terminaron con hartarme. . . . Añoré morosidades, pausas, silencios, cadencias, repasos, gustaciones, perezas, regodeos, Deseé mirar hacia atrás siquiera una vez, mirar dentro

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<sup>1</sup>James Brown, Kierkegaard, Hiedegger, Buber & Barth, p. 82.

de mí. Sentía unas ganas locas de tenderme  
(al sol, sí, al sol, como un cocodrilo).<sup>1</sup>

In addition, her indiscriminate rejection of activities requiring patience and in-depth analysis condemns many of the elements which give life interest, variety, and meaning.

Lo sé: si todos fuésemos efímeras el tiempo se habría unificado. . . . Pero ¿qué sería entonces de Beethoven o de Dostoievski? Tal vez los desarticularían en cada una de sus notas, en cada una de sus palabras, y cada nota y cada palabra la saborearían como una sinfonía entera, como todo un libro. . . . Porque lo más probable es que las efímeras del futuro ya no oigan esos sonidos de frecuencia demasiado baja, ya no descifren sino el veloz idioma de las computadores.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than adding purpose and value to her life, her accelerated pace contributes to Efímera's dehumanization, for it prevents her from developing all the potential of her existence. Denevi demonstrates that such a misconception is becoming more widespread, for more and more modern men are confusing a large quantity of experiences with a meaningful life. Such a distortion and misuse of time contributes to man's rootlessness and bewilderment.

Just as the increased speed of life can cause man to overlook or to forget many important traits or experiences, an over-dedication to schedules and routine also distorts and deforms man's perspective. Denevi seems to reflect Bergson's ideas that the individual time and life of a person exist

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Hierba del cielo, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

as a continuous flow and that artificial measurements and the intellect tend to fix and divide them into nonexistent stages.

According to Bergson and his school, the intellect is an instrument forged by evolution to render action in a world of continual flux possible. It congeals the living flow of reality into a congeries of discontinuous acts, or hypostatizes it into forms and concepts. The natural bent of our mentality tries to derive movement from a primary stasis, whereas movement is original and fixed states are secondary abstractions derived from it.<sup>1</sup>

By restricting himself too closely with clocks and schedules, man alienates himself from his past and fails to act with the future in mind. The danger is that by taking refuge in the order of routine, man may come to equate life with such narrow visions and ignore the fluidity of his existence.

Ya verme ahí, en la calle, a esa hora, que durante veinte años había sido mi obsesión (las doce, llegar antes de las doce, las doce como una guillotina que caía desde lo alto y le seccionaba la cabeza al que en ese instante pasaba por la puerta del Ministerio. Cuántas veces he corrido como un loco para que esa cuchilla no me decapitase. Cuántas otras he gastado en un taxímetro los últimos pesos que me quedaban. Hasta he soñado con esa hora fatídica . . .).<sup>2</sup>

Pascumo in Un pequeño café reveals the extreme inhibition which can result from a rigid adherence to routine. Not only does the monotony of such an existence deaden Pascumo's

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<sup>1</sup>A. A. Mendilow, Time and the Novel (London: Peter Nevill Ltd., 1952), p. 149.

<sup>2</sup>Marco Denevi, Un pequeño café (Buenos Aires: Editorial Calatayud, 1966), p. 72.



independence and spontaneity, but it also deforms his view of life and what is important and valid. Pascumo's nightmare exposes his servitude and subservience as well as his extreme fear of rebelling against the tyranny of the clock. At the same time, the use of the guillotine suggests an instrument which neatly severs one part from another. Such an image evokes a picture of artificial time cleanly dividing one episode from another and undermining the flow of cause and effect which characterizes human existence. It shows the incoherence caused by the rule of artificial measurements of time which prevent the individual from attaining a concept of the fluidity of his life.

While Denevi only touches briefly upon the role of time and routine in his longer works like Un pequeño café, in two of his microcuentos, "La muerte repetida de María Estuarda" and "Napoleón en Santa Helena", he presents in more detail the extreme deformation caused by a reliance upon schedules. "Napoleón en Santa Helena" concerns the final exile of the defeated emperor whose condition is termed terminal by his British doctor. The commandant is so enraged at the injustice of Napoleon's imminent, though final, release from prison that he decides to make the brief incarceration seem longer by "alargar artificialmente el tiempo

de su cautiverio."<sup>1</sup> To this end, he decrees that every effort be made to make each day seem exactly like the one before.

A éste se le permitió que diese un paseo (por las galerías interiores . . . .) y en esos paseos Napoleón veía siempre las mismas caras, oía las mismas voces, recibía los mismos saludos. Por la tarde escribía sus memorias. Que escribiese todo lo que quisiera. A la tarde siguiente encontraría sólo papeles en blanco. O que leyese. En la biblioteca había un solo libro.<sup>2</sup>

The plan is so successful that time seems to stand still and all the inhabitants of the prison appear to exist in suspended animation. Because each action is proscribed and set forth in an elaborate routine, the commandant completely deprives the characters of a present and future. Napoleon and his captors are trapped in a perpetual past in which every movement is known beforehand and no opportunity exists for choice or for experiment. As a result, their lives become so monotonous and mechanized that they are more like robots than human beings whose condition calls for constant decisions and choices. "Choice, not chance, is king in this world of shadows. We make (or we do not make) ourselves in the interval before we are again unmade, this time for good."<sup>3</sup> Because his ability to choose and to make his life

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Parque de diversiones (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1970), p. 156.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>James Brown, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Buber & Barth, pp. 87-88.

is withdrawn, Napoleon experiences the strange feeling of watching his own actions as a spectator might watch a film. Such a phenomenon suggests an extreme form of dehumanization as the subject becomes completely unconscious of itself.

Mary, Queen of Scots undergoes an experience similar to Napoleon's in Denevi's version of her death, "La muerte repetida de María Estuarda". Because she expects her execution each morning for one hundred and fifty-five days, she is forced to imagine all the details again and again until time and repetition rob the event of its importance and its terror.

Cuando por fin el sheriff la condujo hasta el patíbulo, morir, para María Estuardo, era una rutina que ya no le provocaba ningún terror, ningún estremecimiento. Morir, para ella, era como dormirse, soñar que se moría, despertar al día siguiente. . . . Por débil que sea, el espíritu se vuelve insensible ante la repetición de la muerte.<sup>1</sup>

Like Napoleon, the Scottish Queen seems to withdraw to stand passively as a body resembling hers performs the necessary tasks. Such descriptions recall the comments of the protagonist of Borges' story "El jardín de los dos senderos que se bifurcan" when he theorizes that man can adjust to all unpleasantness if he first lives it in his mind. In this way, the action assumes an air of inevitability and naturalness. However, Denevi takes the position that such routine contributes to the dehumanization of man so that he fails to

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Parque de diversiones, p. 155.

realize the significance of certain actions, even his own death. By succumbing to the tyranny of schedules and routine, man represses his ability to develop and to evolve, and each hour spent in such a state reaffirms his dependency. If the time comes when the spirit can no longer withstand such strain, man will be unprepared to reassert himself, and, like Napoleon, he will be destroyed by the shock of being thrust from his protective environment.

Irrumpió en las habitaciones de Napoleón y empecé a gritar, a pronunciar frases que nunca había dicho en presencia del prisionero. Inmediatamente Napoleón se desplomó y una hora después moría, víctima de cáncer del píloro.<sup>1</sup>

After existing under such rigid restrictions, the newness of unfamiliar sensations and stimuli will be too intense, and man will collapse under the assault of strange words and actions.

"La muerte repetida de María Estuarda" and "Napoleón en Santa Helena" demonstrate the power of routine to overwhelm man and to obscure the passing of his life; indeed, they indicate that it so deadens man's sensitivities that even death no longer holds any terror. In a similar way, Denevi uses the figure of Don Juan to symbolize the effect of monotonous repetition on sensual pleasure. Like others before him, he depicts Don Juan as the epitome of a hedonist who has devoted his entire life to the pursuit of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

physical gratification and the art of seduction. However, the protagonist of El segundo círculo represents a tired lover, wearied and bored by the lack of novelty in his life.

Fatigado no es la palabra. Mis energías, felizmente, no me traicionan. Más bien, hartó. Estoy hartó de que todas las noches se repite la misma historia. . . . Las he agotado todas (las variaciones). Todas menos una: dormir solo.<sup>1</sup>

Denevi uses Don Juan to illustrate how a man can entrap himself and form his own Hell by choosing to allow to atrophy other possibilities while pursuing only one dimension of life. The adventurer is a victim of his own insecurities and the public opinion which he helps to create. Even when he tires of his shallow existence and seeks to establish a new beginning, he fears that his decision will be construed as a physical weakness by others. He cannot bring himself to admit publicly that his life disgusts him and that he wishes to change it.

In the majority of human relationships men are not authentic selves or individuals. They are the reflection of unreflective attitudes, the subjective facets of mass opinion and emotions.<sup>2</sup>

Don Juan stands as a martyr to his own emotional immaturity and his childish dread of adverse publicity. As a result, he condemns himself to a Hell of constantly repeated, identical liaisons in which he functions more as a robot than

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>2</sup>James Brown, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Buber & Barth, pp. 85-86.

as a man. "¿Ochenta y dos en un solo día, en una sola noche? ¿Qué suponen que soy? ¿Una máquina? ¿Han tomado al pie de la letra todos los cuentos que publican las revistas?"<sup>1</sup> Denevi uses the dashing figure as an illustration of humanity's mistake in placing too much faith and attention on only one aspect of life. As the character demonstrates, even the most exciting and sensuous activities can become boring and routine through constant repetition.

Whereas Don Juan exposes the error of concentrating on physical development at the expense of other elements, Denevi uses Faust to demonstrate the dangers of overemphasizing the intellectual and permitting other possibilities to die. Dr. Faustus in "El festival de Stendhal, 1965: La tragedia del doctor Fausto" represents one of the major mistakes of mankind: the overdevelopment of science and abstract thought to the detriment of the spiritual and emotional. However, Denevi adds a new twist to the familiar story, for although the doctor makes a pact with Mephistopheles to exchange his soul for a youthful body, the devil's representative explains that only the external traits change, not the personality. "Un trueque. El alma del viejo doctor Fausto en el cuerpo de un joven y el alma de ese joven en el

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Parque de diversiones, p. 47.

cuerpo del doctor Fausto."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, despite his desire to begin anew and to explore different possibilities, Faust cannot escape the character which his past choices and background have formed. In spite of the transfer of bodies, he retains the characteristics of the dedicated scholar, and the training and interests of a lifetime prevent him from enjoying a new future.

Al pasar delante de los anaqueles colmados de libros se detiene, los mira, toma un libro, lo hojea, lo coloca en su sitio, se encamina hacia la salida, se para, piensa, vuelve sobre sus pasos, coge otro libro, da vuelta las páginas, lee, con el libro entre las manos, avanza hacia el proscenio, levanta la cabeza. . . . Pero se sienta a la mesa y lee el libro.<sup>2</sup>

As Denevi points out in his whimsical reversal of the Faust legend, once man adopts a particular mode of behavior, time and tradition tend to keep him bound to the same direction. Man conditions himself to pursue one goal, and, consequently, he tends to neglect other elements. Each day that passes reinforces his captivity until, like Don Juan and Faust, he cannot escape the future which he has created for himself.

While Faust and Don Juan represent the error of placing too much faith in the development of the intellectual and physical, respectively, the figures of the star-crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet, depict the calamity which can

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Falsificaciones (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1966), p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

result from a childish, impulsive commitment. Denevi presents the two lovers as the victims of their own thoughtless suicides and the weight of time and tradition which prevents the alteration of the fatal outcome. In "Fatalidad de Romeo y Julieta" he creates a stage director who decides to avert the tragedy of the lovers' deaths by releasing the actors from the need to complete the last act. He encourages the characters to flee the stage and the scene of their inevitable demise.

Dios mío, a la media hora ya estaban otra vez allí, sobre el escenario. . . . Entraron separados, como perdidos. Y de pronto corrieron el uno hacia el otro y se abrazaron estrechamente como para defenderse de un grave peligro. . . . Entonces se besaron y en seguida, como obedeciendo las órdenes de un invisible director de escena, Julieta se dirigió hacia el fondo y se tendió en el suelo, como muerta. Romeo salió y volvió a entrar.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their desire to live, it is impossible for Romeo and Juliet to change a pattern of events which has been repeated for centuries. They cannot escape the destiny which time and their past actions have imposed upon them. As Romeo discovers in "Romeo frente al cadáver de Julieta", the two young people are condemned to their tragic course by the mere fact of being Romeo and Juliet.

Nací amante, no héroe. Soy un hombre normal, no un maniático suicida. Pero tú (Julieta), con tu famosa muerte, te encaramaste de golpe a una altura

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<sup>1</sup>Marco Denevi, Parque de diversiones, p. 160.



sobrehumana hasta la que ahora debo empinarme para  
no ser menos que tú, para ser digno de tu amor,  
para no dejar de ser Romeo debo dejar de ser Romeo.<sup>1</sup>

The lovers are bound to a pattern of life created by their own rash impulsiveness and strengthened by repetition. By analogy, Denevi suggests that the passage of time is committing humanity to a similar tragic destiny as it cuts off its choices and inhibits its potential.

Although his works often reflect the ideas of Bergson and Heidegger, Denevi never fully develops such philosophical ideas. In the microcuentos he reflects a variety of influences, but the basic pattern shows the primary imprint of existentialism. Denevi exposes the role of time in man's dehumanization by showing characters cut off from their past or their future. Only by recognizing the fluidity and individuality of each man's relationship to time can man overcome his alienation from himself and others. Each man is a sum of his past choices and his desires for the future, and any attempt to exist without assimilating both periods is doomed to failure. Furthermore, the continuance of man's dehumanization makes time the definite ally of the destruction of the human spirit and the drastic mutation of the human species.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Marco Denevi is an intellectual descendant of a line of artists and philosophers who have recognized the increasing erosion of the human spirit. Like Dostoievsky and Kafka, he confronts the figure of the lone man overwhelmed by his own fears and the nightmarish power of bureaucracies and technology. Furthermore, he attributes the primary cause of man's decline to his own desire for security and protection and thus establishes his debt to the philosophy of Kierkegaard.

Despairing narrowness consists in the lack of primitiveness, or of the fact one has deprived oneself of one's primitiveness; it consists in having emasculated oneself, in a spiritual sense . . . such a man forgets himself, forgets what his name is (in the divine understanding of it), does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier and safer to be like the others, to become an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling and the Sickness Unto Death, trans. and notes Walter Lowrie (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1954), pp. 166-167.

As seen in Denevi's works, this tendency of man to reject his responsibilities and to seek protection behind masks and illusion is the source of his dehumanization. Therefore, from humanity's own insecurities and fears spring inventions and institutions which only further the destruction of its best and greatest qualities. Like Adalberto Pascumo in Un pequeño café or Leonides Arrufat in Ceremonia secreta, each man must choose to reassert his will and to confront the challenges of his own mortality and the contingency of his life if he wishes to prevent the destruction of his spirit. A continuance of the turning inward of the personality only contributes to the further rootlessness and alienation of man.

Two institutions which once seemed to offer man solace and protection appear as primary sources of man's dehumanization in the works of Denevi. Bureaucracies and technology once appeared to offer all the solutions to man's problems, but as Los expedientes, "Boroboboo", and "La mariposa" indicate, rather than a panacea, these inventions have only compounded the threat. By endowing the institutions with a godlike aura, the protagonists of Denevi's stories and plays encourage their own destruction, for they create an artificial, sterile replacement for their natural environment and self-reliance. As a result, they condemn themselves to a very restricted society reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984 or Kurt Vonnegut's Player Piano. As the

animals in "Fábula" discover, once such a system begins to take control, mankind accepts imprisonment and is forced to suppress his spontaneity and individuality.

Denevi attributes partial responsibility for the dehumanization of man to the impact of time and its ability to increase the effect of bureaucracies and mechanization. Stories such as "Efímera, el peligro amarillo" and "Napoleón en Santa Helena" demonstrate that man faces a double menace, for by accelerating the pace of his life, man risks reducing all experiences to a superficial level. On the other hand, if he attempts to seek shelter in routine and repetition, then man buries himself in monotony. Both possibilities are equally dangerous and threaten to deaden man's sensibilities, for as "Romeo frente al cadáver de Julieta" illustrates, each moment of continued dehumanization increases the impossibility of man's rebellion and reassertion of his will.

Despite the existential overtones of his works, Denevi never reflects the despair which permeates many of the works of Dostoievsky and Kafka. One reason that he has not become bitter is that he still admires and understands the human spirit and detects dignity, beauty, and hope in many men. His works often show his bemused and disbelieving attitude when confronted with the absurd and dangerous activities which man frequently undertakes. Therefore, in spite of his frank appraisal of mankind's future, he retains a certain degree of confidence in humanity's ability to

reassert itself. This lingering faith prevents his works from being completely negative, and he succeeds in giving his criticism a light irony which exposes the foolishness of man.

La sátira permea todas estas narraciones, que ponen de manifiesto los peligros que encierra para el hombre el constante avance tecnológico. Esta crítica está hecha con derroche de ingenio y buen humor, mediante la utilización de un lenguaje directo y económico, tendiente a la captación inmediata de lo que se cuestiona.<sup>1</sup>

By keeping a balanced perspective on the problem, Denevi is able to express clearly his opinions on the theme of dehumanization. Because he never succumbs to the temptation of impassioned harangues to change society, he achieves a successful combination of the roles of artist and social critic.

Denevi is essentially a gentle satirist. His tools are humor and understatement. There is not a harsh declaration nor a hammered-down moral to be found in his pages.<sup>2</sup>

Although his works reveal a sense of sadness and nostalgia for man's losses, Denevi never allows his personal feelings to take control of his writing. As a result, he communicates clearly and concisely his analysis of the theme of dehumanization without resorting to emotion or oratory.

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<sup>1</sup>José M. Carranza, "La crítica social en las fábulas de Marco Denevi," Revista Iberoamericana, XXXVIII (julio-diciembre, 1972), 479-480.

<sup>2</sup>Donald A. Yates, "Marco Denevi: An Argentine Anomaly," Kentucky Foreign Language Quarterly, IX (1962), 233.

Denevi's works are continually evolving and entering new phases so that his discussion of dehumanization constantly deepens and acquires new dimension. His first works suggest the inherent dangers of man's alienation from himself and his willingness to ignore his potential while turning inward and constructing a shell of timidity and introversion. In the plays and stories of the sixties, he concentrates on the narrower role of the bureaucracy and mechanization.

Como autor de extravagancias lacónicas y extrañas no tiene parangón en la lengua española hoy día. Pero se puede muy bien expresar la reserva de que este subgénero en miniatura no es por su naturaleza vital ni transcendente.<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing the limitations of the microcuento and falsificación, Denevi has recently returned to a style and point of view similar to that of his first works. Los asesinos de los días de fiesta and the stories in Hierba del cielo are more thorough and explore with greater depth Denevi's ideas on dehumanization than did the brief, anecdotal stories in Falsificaciones and Parque de diversiones. At the same time, they open new areas in Denevi's literary production with the realistic descriptions of Buenos Aires' street life and the analysis of the role of the artist. In stories such as "Charlie" and "Carta a Gianfranco" he experiments with the

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<sup>1</sup>Donald A. Yates, "Un acercamiento a Marco Denevi," El cuento hispanoamericano ante la crítica, ed. Enrique Pupo-Walker (Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 1973), p. 223.

definition of literature and the creative process. In these stories he demonstrates the need for the reader's active participation in the creation of a work of literature. Like Julio Cortázar, he tries to break down the boundaries between reader and author and forces the reader to draw his own conclusions about the outcome of the stories.

The evolving nature of Denevi's works reaffirms his own belief that man, especially the artist, must accept and cultivate the continually changing aspect of human life. Like other writers influenced by existentialism, he places the emphasis and value upon evolving rather than actually arriving at a fixed point.

In seeking for security we seek to give our existence the self-contained being of a thing. The For-itself struggles to become the In-itself, to attain the rocklike and unshakable solidity of a thing. But this it can never do so long as it is conscious and alive. Man is doomed to the radical insecurity and contingency of his being; for without it he would not be a man but merely a thing and would not have the human capacity for transcendence of his given situation.<sup>1</sup>

Barrett's general observation on existentialism is a concise expression of Marco Denevi's own ideas regarding the dehumanization of man. His works constantly exalt the spirit of man and expose the vital threat which confronts him, for he knows that man's quest for a fixed existence can only result

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<sup>1</sup>William Barrett, Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1958), p. 219.

in the destruction of humanity. Denevi realizes that mankind is so concerned with achieving some stability and certainty for himself that he is too willing to sacrifice his freedom and individuality for what appears to be security. However, as his works indicate, once man gives up these assets, he commits himself to a dehumanized, artificial existence and becomes only a shadow of a complete, mature human being. Aware of the future which awaits mankind, Denevi has devoted himself and his writing to the revelation of the choices which now face humanity. Dedicated to this philosophy, he willingly explores and experiments with his own style and technique so that they never become static or repetitious. In the final analysis, his exaltation of the human spirit and his own endeavors to cultivate all facets of his own work give his literary production its value.



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