About eight months after the coup of 11 September 1973, General Augusto Pinochet gave a speech to what seems to have been the founding gathering of a new state entity, the National Secretariat for Women, established by the new junta and headed by Lucia Hiriart—de Pinochet, the general’s wife.\(^1\) To a highly selective audience, Pinochet proposed to “lay out the thought of the authorities with respect to the role corresponding to women in the plans of the government over which I preside, and the new state that it proposes to install in the future.”\(^2\)

It takes little more than Pinochet’s opening sentence to grasp the raw authoritarianism that characterized the military regime, especially in its early, triumphal, and extremely violent period. People have roles that “correspond” to them; “thought” is in the hands of the authorities, who do not include women; citizenship consists, as Pinochet loved to say, in either ordering or obeying, and only those who do one or the other well are useful to the state. “In Chile,” the speech continues, women have always been “active and effective collaborators in the lives of men”—so Pinochet codes the role that women played in bringing

\(^1\) The coup overthrew the socialist coalition Unidad Popular [Popular unity], headed by President Salvador Allende Gossens. Allende died during the coup.


him to power.3 The women of Chile, he explains (subsuming them all under the category of those who, at different times and for a host of reasons, came to oppose the Unidad Popular government; homogenization is a central authoritarian tactic), “sought the shelter of a strict authority that would reestablish order and public morality in our country” (7). The authority of the authorities, then, includes command over interpretation as well. Women’s desires are defined; their actions are assigned a meaning and even an epistemology: “In her feminine instinct” the Chilean woman “saw clearly that what was being defined in those dramatic days was not simply a game of political parties; it was the life or death of the nation” (7). Pinochet speaks of her “clairvoyance” (clarividencia: the term not by accident recalls Isabel Allende) in seeing past party politics—which the regime has abolished.

Obviously, I am not quoting this rhetoric for its subtlety. The women are told that, following the traditions of “the West” (el occidente), their “mission as women and mothers” has been and remains to defend and transmit spiritual values, serve as a moderating element (against the warlike impulses of men, it seems), educate and instill consciousness and conscience, and serve as repositories of national traditions (8). While acknowledging women’s right to a profession, the general calls for greater recognition of their contribution in the work that “corresponds” to them, which is of course child rearing. Equality of rights and opportunity are undisputed, he says, but woman’s “authentic participation” must “be exercised in relation to her characteristics” (11).

The constant explicit interpellation of women was a hallmark of

3 In the campaign against the Unidad Popular government, right-wing parties and the military sought to mobilize middle- and upper-class women, whose opposition would appear apolitical. Particularly effective were marches of women banging empty pots to protest shortages caused by a CIA-supported truckers’ strike. Even more specifically, a network of highly placed military wives was organized to call for military restoration of order. The coup could then be presented as a response to the demands of a politically disinterested sector.

Mary Louise Pratt is professor of Spanish and Portuguese and of comparative literature at Stanford University. Her most recent book is Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (1992). She is currently coediting the essays of Jean Franco and doing research on culture and neoliberalism.
the Pinochet regime. One of the tragic ironies in Chile, as elsewhere, is that the dictatorship took advantage of the near vacuum in political discourse and party structures as regards women, not because the regime particularly cared about them, but because it saw patriarchal values as the key to the one thing it could not dictate for itself: legitimacy. As Jean Franco has observed, one of the regime's tactics was to mobilize gender ideologies held across society and across the political spectrum.4 The political parties, from right to left, had never put women into the picture; Pinochet rarely left them out—of the picture, that is. We are not talking about real power. But perhaps in a way we are, for in his seventeen years in power Pinochet presided over a social and political mobilization of women that was unprecedented in Chile, and probably in Latin America, and that had everything to do with his eventual demise. At the same time, the patriarchal ideologies he engaged deeply influenced the way women were seen and saw themselves, unconsciously as well as consciously.

The paternalism and authoritarianism heard in the general's pronouncements were by no means reserved for women, however. They characterized his rhetoric across the board. Scholars have repeatedly commented on the homogenizing, monoglossic, prescriptive, and abstract rhetorics of the southern-cone dictatorships.5 They sought not


5 A vast and rich literature exists on the question of culture, authoritarianism, and redemocratization in Chile, on which this essay relies and by which it is framed. In addition to the works cited, see Manuel Antonio Garretón, Saúl Sosnowski, and Bernardo Subercaseaux, eds., Cultura, autoritarismo y redemocratización en Chile (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993); Subercaseaux, Historia, literatura y sociedad (Santiago: Centro de Cultura Económica, 1991); Horacio Riquelme, ed., Era de nieblas: Derechos humanos, terrorismo de estado y salud psicosocial en América Latina (Caracas: Nueva Sociedad, 1990); José Joaquín Brunner, La cultura autoritaria en Chile (Santiago: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 1981); Brunner, Políticas culturales para la democracia (Santiago: Centro de Indagación y Expresión Cultural y Artística, 1985); Hernán Vidal, Cultura nacional chilena: Crítica literaria y derechos humanos (Minneapolis: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literatures, 1985); Vidal, Fascismo y experiencia literaria (Minneapolis: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literatures, 1989); and the magazine Revista de Crítica Cultural, ed., Nelly Richard, particularly the July 1992 special issue "Cultura, política y democracia."
to replace public discourse with an imposed silence but to simulate it with a relentless drone apparently interpellating all citizens yet actively deterritorializing anyone they chose. Like the martial music played on the radio during a coup, the drone did not just dispel but forbade the idea of culture or the social as the site of conflict, heterogeneity, and negotiation of difference. As Priscilla Archibald has observed, the absence of argument or evidence was key. Pinochet’s was a discourse of pure statement, in which the words thus and therefore referred back not to facts or reasons but to essences and eternal laws—despatialized, not spatial, knowledge. Against the drone of abstraction and essentialism, the literary practice of testimonio acquired force as a counterdiscourse. Testimonios lay bare the regime’s practice of concealment, represented what was concealed, and reasserted the languages of evidence, bodily experience, and truth and falsehood, as well as the values of truth and falsehood.

Ten years into the dictatorship, the experimental writer and video artist Diamela Eltit undertook something quite different. She produced, or rather encountered, a remarkable parody of the dictatorship’s monologue, which by then had become “parody-able.” Eltit taped a series of monologues uttered by what would in conventional terms be described as a madman, who lived outdoors in a vacant lot in a Santiago barrio and called himself “El Padre Mío” [My father]. The “complete state of delirium” in which, according to Eltit, El Padre Mío lived only reproduced many dimensions of the reality common to all Chileans: paranoia, uncertainty, a crisis of language in which words seemed unattached to referents, an omnipresent sense of victimization and death. At the same time, his discourse suggests the megalomania and paranoia of the dictatorship itself:

You’re taking me for a ride with this plan. How would I not know that?
I’m the man who is going to give the orders here, me. I am going to

---


7 According to Grinor Rojo, testimonios circulated clandestinely in Chile as early as 1975 and openly after 1981 ("Casi veinte años de literatura chilena [1973–1991]," in Garretón et al.).
give the orders in the country. Because I have no commitments either to them or to King George, who has been giving the orders lately and has that rank. El Padre Mío gives the illegal orders in the country. For many years he has been living off illegal bank deposits, from the money that belongs to the concession of the personnel of the administration. He is the accomplice of El Padre Mío in these matters. I would like to do you a service in exchange for the sale of your rights. Because I was asked to take up these tasks, not El Padre Mío, nor Mr. Colvin, who is Mr. Luengo, who is a congressman and a senator.8

Ironic implications abound. Under the military regime, only the madman in the street can speak, and he does have something to say. Alternatively, the only man in the street who is speaking is mad. El Padre Mío exemplifies Eltit's commitment to marginality as a critical source of insight in any hegemonic structure. El Padre Mío seems to appropriate the disembodied oratory of the dictatorship and reflect it back in a form that the authorities cannot decipher.

El Padre Mío parodies in particular the abstraction of the regime's rhetoric, which created an unbridgeable, tectonic gap between what the regime said and what its citizens experienced. The “plans of the government and the new institutionality it proposes to establish in the future” were under way. The Pinochet regime had, as Giselle Munizaga calls it, a “foundational project.”9 People tend to think that military dictatorships aim simply to impose order, suppress opposition, and uphold established hierarchies, rather than to advance elaborate social and institutional agendas. But Pinochet had no problem at all with “the vision thing,” and devastating the militant Left was only one small part of it (accomplished, as in all these dictatorships, in a matter of weeks). When he spoke, as he did all the time, of “the new institutionality” (la nueva institucionalidad), he meant a wholesale transformation of state and civil society, no fooling.

In terms of political economy, the project was to interrupt the historical trajectory of “development” in Chile by redirecting industrial

---

9 Munizaga, “El sistema comunicativo chileno y los legados de la dictadura,” in Garretón et al. See also Carlos Catalán and Giselle Munizaga, Políticas culturales estatales bajo el autoritarismo en Chile (Santiago: Centro de Indagación y Expresión Cultural y Artística, 1986).
production from national markets, which were driven by rising wages, to the world market, facilitated by substantial wage cuts.\(^{10}\) (Resonances with the U.S. in the 1980s are clear.) As Hernán Vidal succinctly puts it, "Pinochet's job was to offer a cheap workforce to the world."\(^{11}\) By 1975 Chile had 30 percent unemployment, and wages had dropped by 30–50 percent, leaving a huge proportion of the population destitute. Rapid, drastic immiseration mobilized Chilean women, who collectivized domestic life in every way they could. In vast impoverished neighborhoods, shopping, cooking, eating, sewing, child care, medical care, laundry, and artisanal production moved out of private houses into circles, clubs, and cooperatives, with support and help especially from the church, the only oppositional force the regime was obliged to tolerate. In the face of such extreme circumstances, the regime's pious rhetoric about women's roles became an insult.

Economic intervention was accompanied by a complete shutting down of civil society and its interfaces with the state. Political parties were abolished; a press blackout was followed by draconian censorship; curfews were imposed; public assembly was prohibited; universities were purged; presses were shut down; the judiciary was suspended; the opposition was annihilated; and a regime of terror based on torture and disappearance was installed. To understand how drastic this rupture was, one needs to recall the high, indeed acute, politicization of Chilean society at the time of the coup. The dramatic struggle between the Unidad Popular government and its opposition had been played out in huge daily demonstrations in streets and plazas, particularly in the central plaza in front of La Moneda palace, the seat of the presidency.\(^{12}\) The Chilean military shredded the public script in the very staging of the coup: La Moneda, a pivotal site of political expression, was bombed by the air force—an extraordinary self-inflicted wound—


\(^{11}\) Vidal, "La Declaración de Principios de la junta militar chilena como sistema literario: La lucha antifascista y el cuerpo humano," in Larsen, 47. My translation.

\(^{12}\) These events are vividly captured in the documentary *La batalla de Chile*, produced by Patricio Guzmán and directed by Federico Elton in 1973.
and the national soccer stadium, the pivotal site of nonpolitical citizenship, was taken over and transformed into a detention and torture center where, among other horrors, the revered singer-guitarist Victor Jara was displayed, not dead but tortured and beaten, with his fingers cut off. The stadium had been converted into a plaza with walls. It is hard to exaggerate the symbolic and psychic force of the militarization of this canonized arena for the exercise of a secular, civilian, masculine nationality. (It is no accident that when elections were restored, the new president, Patricio Aylwin Azócar, made his acceptance speech there in 1989.)

The figure of the plaza with walls epitomizes the reimagining of the nation itself following the coup. Chile became Fortress Chile, its entrances and exits fiercely guarded, its dissidents expelled, the order of the seen and unseen reconfigured. Hence the powerful impact in film and writing of another experiment in representation, *The Adventure of Miguel Littín in Chile* (1986). Littín, a prominent Left leader under Allende, had been exiled under an absolute prohibition from returning to Chile. In 1985, with a disguise and a false passport—and, of course, the extensive collaboration of the internal opposition—he slipped back in, accompanied by no fewer than three European film crews that traveled with him the length and breadth of Chile, also under false pretenses, filming what became an extraordinary documentary of the country under the dictatorship. A straightforward referential work, almost a travelogue, it represents a literal recovery of place and spatialized knowledge: generous footage of walks through the city streets and of the beloved Chilean landscape, viewed from the windows of moving trains. The film, and García Márquez’s widely read narrative account, dramatize the porosity of Fortress Chile, the ubiquity and effectiveness of the clandestine opposition, and, more important, the fact that the dictatorship, with eyes everywhere, could be made to see without knowing what it was seeing. Time and again Littín directly encounters the police and escapes unrecognized. The film crews, which made no secret of their filming, even penetrated La Mon-

---

13 See Gabriel García Márquez, *La aventura de Miguel Littín, clandestino en Chile: Un reportaje* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1986). The footage was edited into a four-hour TV series and a two-hour film titled *Miguel Littín clandestino en Chile.*
eda. As Eltit later dramatized in *El Padre Mío*, the regime’s claim to interpretive power could be contradicted *openly*. Littín’s heroic infiltration was a seizing of agency that simply refused the culture of fear and appropriated—or intercepted—the tools of secrecy.

Ironically, Littín’s adventure worked uncritically within the gendered construction of power that the dictatorship mobilized in its own acts of penetration, whether nocturnal invasions of homes or sexual tortures or university purges. (Indeed, within a year, opposition movements were crushed again following a failed assassination attempt against Pinochet by the Manuel Rodríguez Front.) Some theorists of democratization have asserted the need to abandon models of resistance based on this heroic model of agency. Abandoned they were, for the most part, at least in practice. By the time Littín slipped inside the fortress walls, other paradigms of resistant agency had been put into play, with great effectiveness, by dozens of oppositional groups overwhelmingly composed of women.¹⁴ These groups likewise intercepted and redeployed the dynamics of the secret and the seen and unseen. The international community became familiar with images of demonstrations of women parading photos of the “disappeared,” who were thus made to reappear. Other startlingly original forms of social drama were staged on national days of protest, which occurred monthly during a period of intense opposition between 1983 and 1986. In a mock election held in Santiago, for instance, ballot boxes mysteriously appeared on street corners, and people were invited to cast votes. In the neighborhoods, the apparently spontaneous banging of pots from inside houses at a certain hour of the day unnervingly recycled a strategy used by middle-class women against the Allende government. Out of nowhere, teams came to paint murals on buildings and then quickly photographed them, knowing they would be gone in hours or days. The literary sphere was sustained, at first clandestinely, by workshops. In her workshops, fiction writer Pia Barros responded to censorship by developing a new form of publication: the “book-object” (*libro-objeto*) disseminated short prose texts in the guise of other consumer objects.

such as boxes of stationery, or concealed in little burlap bags. A marketing tool as well as an open disguise to avoid censors, the book-object pointed a parodic finger both at censorship and at the consumerism that neoliberal economics had brought to Chile.

Such innovations were meant to counteract the authoritarian reorganization of citizenship that the Pinochet regime imposed in the most everyday ways. As the foregoing examples suggest, the rearrangement and resymbolization of public space were among its principal physical and psychic weapons. Two texts exemplify this resymbolization and the response to it. The first is a propaganda pamphlet, translated into English as *Chile Lights the Freedom Torch*, concerning the festivities held on the second anniversary of the coup, on 11 September 1975.

According to the pamphlet, they began in the military garrisons, which the regime defined as the core site of citizenship and where, we read, “solemn religious services were held.” The main event took place in the yard of the country’s principal military academy—another plaza with walls—where the four-man junta, accompanied by “thousands of military and civilian men,” prayed for Chile. At an evening rally held in a large square in Santiago, the junta took its place at a high podium backed by a huge map of Chile. To the light of thousands of torches, “giving to the night an unforgettable appearance,” a gigantic national flag was raised in the center of the square; then, as the translation (hilariously) reads, “President Pinochet addressed to all the Chileans a brief harangue.” Following the speech, “four anonymous civilians representing the women, the youth, the field workers and the city workers” approached the podium and lit four torches. These were handed off to four cadets, representing the four branches of the armed forces, who in turn took them up to the podium and handed them off to the four members of the junta. They together lit an enormous freedom torch that, by the photos, formed a ring the size of a large auditorium. At the end of September, the “month of the fatherland,” this torch was moved “in a somber ceremony” to the hilltop where in 1541 the Spaniard Pedro de Valdivia had founded Santi-

ago de Chile. "There it will remain forever as a symbol to a country that wants to be truthful to its origins."

An intriguing aspect of the ritual is the foursome chosen to represent civilian society, for the list excludes the very sector that, under civilian rule, constitutes the core of the citizenry: the adult men of property, who, in classical state theory, attend the assembly and vote. The youth, the women, and the workers make sense only as a set grouped around this absent center (a slot for teachers or intellectuals, for example, is unimaginable here). Of course, what replaces that center, and that image of citizenship, is the military, whose vertical relations are reproduced as the torches move up the podium. "Enlightenment" here refers to flames in the night.

The second text, Diamela Eltit’s daunting, avant-garde work Lumpérica, published in 1983, is likewise set at night in a Santiago plaza presided over by a figure called “El Luminoso” [The luminous one (masc.)].17 El Luminoso turns out to be a flashing neon sign that projects light and words onto the bodies of those below, a potent image for the authoritarian state: light/power emanating from an unseen source. The protagonist is a woman named “L. Iluminada” [The illuminated one (fern.)] who, defying curfew, spends a long, hallucinated night bathed in the cold light of El Luminoso and engaged in what seems to be an epic struggle to find or achieve a convergence of selfhood, agency, language, and meaning.18 Her quest, expressed in a surreal text virtually indecipherable at first, is for a reterritorialization. Lumpérica was written in the context of two demoralizing events: the 1980 plebiscite, probably rigged, in which Chilean voters approved a constitution legitimizing the Pinochet regime, and a crippling recession that marked a genuine crisis of neoliberal economics and coalesced opposition to the regime. One message of the book is that the

16 Vidal speaks at length of the medieval quality of the Pinochet dictatorship in “La Declaración de Principios de la junta militar chilena,” in Larsen, 43–66.
18 There is an obvious blank in L. Iluminada’s name where the a of the article La should appear. Reminiscent of a neon sign in which one letter has gone out, the absent a perhaps designates what is to be recovered: a marker of gender and also of being—"the-ness"—itself.
new convergence of selfhood and agency must be found (or created) in the cold night of the plaza under the relentless semantic projections of El Luminoso. There is no elsewhere. The process the reader accompanies in the text is arduous and full of agony and desire.

The privileged witnesses and acolytes of L. Iluminada’s struggle are another group that made no appearance at Pinochet’s ceremony, the lumpen of Santiago, referred to in Eltit’s book as “the pale ones” (los pálidos). They are the street people who trickle into the plaza, curfew or not, with nowhere else to go. (Eltit says that the idea for the book came to her late one night when she had permission to be out after curfew and drove past the empty plazas of Santiago, indicators of the interruption of public life that had taken place.) In the opening scene L. Iluminada, lying on her back on the cold cement at the center of the plaza, writhes in pain and desire as El Luminoso baptizes her with “the name of her citizenship” (el nombre de su ciudadania), the label that “corresponds to her” (an echo of Pinochet’s words). It is a “desolate citizenship,” which involves stamping her and the pale ones “like commercial products.” The question then becomes what sorts of agency and consciousness exist for those imprinted. The often indecipherable 150 pages that follow are a physical and imaginary odyssey to find an answer.

After her baptism by El Luminoso, L. Iluminada rebaptizes herself by sticking her hand into the bonfire around which she and the pale ones are sitting. “Just for the sake of giving herself a new identity,” the narrator remarks derisively, “she turns to tradition like a quote” (29). Self-mutilation pays off, however: “New damage has been done, and a new circle opened in literature.” It is hard to miss the scene’s medieval resonance, apparently opposing the medievalism of Pinochet’s rituals with an invocation of the counterculture of witchcraft. The hand in the fire is the test of truth, and the test gives L. Iluminada, as she tells us, the “power to disorganize language” (30). Bringing her burned hand to her mouth, she utters the sentence “I am thirsty” (Tengo sed), ritually “deconstruct[ing] the phrase, word by word, syllable by syllable.” What is deconstructed or reorganized is not only the scene of Christ thirsting on the cross but also, more vividly, the scene of torture, with which the phrase I am thirsty is irrevocably linked in the vocabulary of this period in Chile. Physical pain itself must be
reclaimed; within the national security state, the imagery of masochism can counteract the "secret" of state violence. Indeed, the "I am thirsty" episode is followed immediately by an interrogation, in which the interrogator asks, "What are the uses of a public square?" (37).

L. Iluminada takes the reader through a series of hallucinated and hellish metamorphoses and reconquests first of self, then of writing, in which autoeroticism and masochism remain key routes to the power of the word, to a hell of writing. The journey culminates in fifteen vignettes, called "cuts" (cortes), referring simultaneously to filmic or textual excerpts and to self-inflicted wounds (the section is introduced by a photo of a woman, probably the author, with her arms bound in bandages). The fifteen cuts take L. Iluminada through descending states of madness, from which she emerges, at dawn, lucid, serene, and alone in the light of El Luminoso, who seems now to be transmitting signals only for her. She recognizes herself as irrevocably vulnerable to his messages but able, by moving, to determine which letters strike her body and where. El Luminoso is limited by his "estatismo," a pun on "static-ness" and "statism." As the text draws to a close, L. Iluminada ambiguously recodes her own body. From a paper bag she takes out a mirror, a pair of scissors, and a necklace; then she cuts off all her hair and puts the necklace on over the gray dress that links her with the gray cement of the plaza. The reader is not sure what she has conquered.

In retrospect, L. Iluminada's quest seems to have prophesied a related struggle, five years later, in which mobility was also a weapon against the "estatismo" of the regime. The "Campaign of the No"—the political campaign in the fall of 1988 that won the plebiscite that ended Pinochet's rule—was also a concerted attempt to "open a new circle," not in literature but in politics, public life, and the social imagination of the Chilean citizenry. An electorate as abject as L. Iluminada in the opening scene of Eltit's text had to be given confidence

19 The southern-cone regimes often described their work as that of healing a diseased national body. Communism, for example, was a cancer that had to be removed by self-inflicted surgery. This rhetoric obscured the sadism of state violence, which L. Iluminada's masochism brings to the surface.

20 For the use of television in the campaign, see Melquiádes, ed. La campa del no vista por sus creadores (Santiago: CIS, 1989).
and hope in the possibility of recovering public life and the plazas after a "desolate citizenship" of fifteen years. The points of intersection between the representational strategies of the Campaign of the No (especially its use of TV cuts) and those of neo-avant-garde writers like Eltit constitute a unique and fascinating conjunction of literary, intellectual, and political history. The points of divergence are illuminating as well, for the neo-avant-garde practices backlight, as always, the limits of the possible even as they place at the disposal of the possible a powerful poetics of renewal. Here, then, is a conjuncture at which a literary history of the present opens out on the vital quest for a future.