

BEYOND THE SHADOWS OF SOLITUDE:  
SELF, DESIRE, AND (DIS)EMBODIMENT IN  
ANA CLAVEL'S *LOS DESEOS Y SU SOMBRA*

Mexican writer Ana Clavel, born in 1961, is a relatively unknown author whose work has thus far received scant critical attention.<sup>1</sup> The focus of this article is Clavel's novel *Los deseos y su sombra* (1999), a highly sophisticated piece of narrative fiction reminiscent of the novels of the Boom in its use of techniques such as plot fragmentation, shifting perspectives, and stream of consciousness, inviting the reader's active participation in disentangling its complexities.<sup>2</sup> Clavel also uses magical realism, thus conforming to the central 'illusion-breaking' orientation of postmodernist fiction as identified by Brian McHale.<sup>3</sup> *Los deseos* is equally notable for its concern with social, historical, and political issues narrated from the margins by giving voice to the voiceless other. Clavel's interest in women's socio-historical marginalization, the female body, and sexuality puts her work in direct line with contemporary Spanish-American female writers such as Susana Págado and Isabel Allende, among others. Until recently, the Spanish-American, and specifically the Mexican, literary establishments have rejected much of women's writing for its 'lightness', and therefore considered it unworthy of critical attention.<sup>4</sup> Despite the gradual acceptance of women writers and the increased critical attention devoted to their works, much of women's writing in Latin America continues to be perceived as lightweight.

My exploration of *Los deseos* from two distinct but interrelated angles, the historical and the psychoanalytical, will aim to establish Clavel as a serious writer whose text is socially engaged and concerned with questions of gender within a broad socio-political context. For reasons of space, it will primarily focus on Clavel's treatment of her female character within a psychoanalytical framework, although brief treatment of the socio-historical and political perspective is deemed necessary as it is intimately intertwined with the development of the character as a subject in the process of becoming. This article sets out to provide a psychoanalytical reading of *Los deseos* by examining Clavel's exploration of the female subject, in the context of Kristeva's theories of subjectivity in relation to the *sujet en procès* and the abject applied specifically to the mother-daughter relationship, desire and (dis)embodiment, the role of the mirror in the construction of subjectivity, and the idea of the alter ego or double.

Set between the 1950s and mid-1980s, *Los deseos* traces the life of Soledad García, an introverted young woman struggling to define her own sense of identity in a socially repressive society. At the start of the novel, Soledad goes to Chapultepec Castle, where she observes Mexico City from a vantage-point overlooking the city and contemplates the possibility of her own suicide. She

<sup>1</sup> See Emily Hind, *Entrevistas con quince autoras mexicanas* (Madrid: Verlag, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Citations and references given within the text are to Ana Clavel, *Los deseos y su sombra* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 221.

<sup>4</sup> As discussed by Nuala Finnegan in '“Light” Women/“Light” Literature: Women and Popular Fiction in Mexico since 1980', *Donaire*, 15 (2000), 18–22.

embarks upon a journey of self-discovery, exploring the uncharted territory of the dark side of desire and a magical Mexico City, where she encounters larger-than-life historical and fictional characters. Clavel focuses on those radical elements which the hegemonic power chooses to silence or ignore but which threaten to upset the status quo. The city's liminal voices form part of what Edward Said terms 'the ignored group', encompassing 'the hidden or suppressed accounts of numerous groups—women, minorities, disadvantaged or dispossessed groups, refugees, exiles, etc.'. Even here the etcetera points to the plight of the subaltern; it refers to what Said designates 'gaps, absences, lapses, ellipses'.<sup>5</sup> De Certeau depicts these sectors as 'unassigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized [. . .] a silent majority' where society's conventions prescribe 'not reading and not seeing' these individuals.<sup>6</sup> This is powerfully portrayed through the female protagonist Soledad, who becomes both literally and metaphorically disembodied, a ghost who meanders silently through the labyrinthine streets of Mexico City, unseen and unheard.

Clavel's account of the city's underworld and its inhabitants is linked to socio-historical and political criticism. Although there are various references to the historical realities of Mexico, the text focuses almost entirely on the invented world of the imaginary character Soledad and on the impossibility of unravelling the 'truth' about this character, whose life is shrouded in mystery. The unknowability of her truth becomes inextricably interconnected with the text's comments on historic reality, symbolically illustrating that what we might perceive as reality or 'truth' is ultimately an imaginative construct. Even though historical realities are subordinated to social and psychological issues, the physical violence suffered by Soledad and various other characters reflects the experiences of silenced Mexicans under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI: Partido Revolucionario Institucional) between the 1950s and 1980s. Mexico City after the 1960s was far from being a homogeneous space, where the 'coherence' of the alleged miracle of *desarrollismo* (Mexico's process of modernization between 1940 and 1968) became increasingly questioned by the silenced sectors of society.<sup>7</sup> Mexico's empty discourse of modernization, social justice, national unity, and economic plenty was undermined by destructive socio-political realities and an authoritarian rule which monopolized political power. Mexicans' questioning of *desarrollismo* and the state's undemocratic system came to a head during the 1968 Tlatelolco riots, an event to which Clavel makes reference in her text (p. 60). The insurgence resulted in the massacre of many innocent civilians by the army under orders from the ruthless PRI government. Their 'disappearance' is metaphorically signalled by Soledad's

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, 'Foreword', in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. v–vi, vii.

<sup>6</sup> Michael de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven F. Randall (Berkeley: California University Press, 1984), p. xvii. See also *The Contemporary Mexican Chronicle: Theoretical Perspectives on the Liminal Genre*, ed. by Ignacio Corona and Beth E. Jörgensen, Suny Series in Latin American and Iberian Thought and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 223–24.

<sup>7</sup> Juan G. Gelpí, 'Walking in the Modern City: Subjectivity and Cultural Contacts in the Urban Crónicas of Salvador Novo and Carlos Monsiváis', in *The Contemporary Mexican Chronicle*, ed. by Corona and Jörgensen, pp. 201–20 (pp. 213–14).

own invisibility. Soledad documents the event, but her friend Rosa belies the whole incident by claiming that it never actually took place and that Soledad has invented the whole thing:

Tus cuentos no sirven para nada. Aquí la gente no hizo nada después del 2 de octubre, [. . .] ni clamó por la verdad [. . .] Es más: aquí no hubo muertos ni heridos. [. . .] nunca he tenido un hermano llamado Miguel. Yo no estoy aquí y tampoco te conozco. Es más: no te veo. (p. 64)

Through Rosa's attempt at silencing Soledad, the writer ironizes the corrupt and repressive PRI. The writer uses Rosa's words to represent the official discourse which served to mask the truth behind the uprising and its aftermath. Clavel also draws attention to the enormous power exercised by the PRI over the Mexican media, and the official party's ability to silence a national event of the scale of Tlatelolco.<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that when Soledad documents the event, she assumes the identity of an English journalist called Soledad Fryer (p. 62). The image of the English journalist painstakingly recording the testimonies of those caught up in the upheaval in her quest for truth (pp. 62–63) might be seen as an attempt by the author to ironize the British press's own distortion of truth following the massacre.<sup>9</sup> Soledad's account of the Tlatelolco uprising problematizes the concept of truth on various levels. The journalistic article she purports to write sways somewhat ambivalently between what would appear to be objective narration and imaginative reconstruction. The journalistic quality is reinforced by references to historical events such as the bombing of the Ciudad de los Palacios by the North Americans (p. 61), specific geographical locations such as the Palacio Nacional (p. 63), and precise time-frames such as 'el 2 de octubre de 1968' (p. 60). But the reliability of Soledad's account is questionable: first, because she fakes her real identity by assuming that of an English journalist; and second, because she has inserted into her objective narration imaginary characters such as her alter ego Lucía (p. 63) and Miguel Blanco, the brother whose existence is disputed by Rosa (p. 64). The blurring of fact and fiction highlights the relative nature of truth, and the unreliability of language to convey monological truth, through various discourses—journalistic, political, historical—thus representing alternative visions to a single historical 'truth'. Thus Clavel's emphasis on the imaginative aspect of her novel points to the literary foundation of the text, which may give an impression of historical veracity but ultimately boasts no greater claim to representing historical 'truth' than fiction itself. Ultimately, *Los deseos* serves to challenge the official (patriarchal) version of the events surrounding the Tlatelolco massacre by presenting a 'counter-discourse' to contradict the dominant discourse of the Mexican government. *Los deseos* plays out compellingly the clash between Soledad's efforts to recount the truth, echoing the desire of many Mexicans affected by these events but whose voices were often silenced, and the Mexican elite's stance on the event voiced through Rosa ('aquí no hubo muertos ni heridos').

<sup>8</sup> In *Postdata*, Octavio Paz remarks: '¿Cuántos murieron? En México ningún periódico se ha atrevido a publicar cifras' (*El laberinto de la soledad, Postdata y Vuelta a El laberinto de la soledad*, 2nd edn (Mexico City: Colección Popular, 1992), pp. 269–83 (p. 281).

<sup>9</sup> Paz, *Postdata*, p. 281.

In an attempt to reconstruct an alternative conception of national identity which is heterogeneous and divided, so too is Clavel creating a non-patriarchal conception of female subjectivity by exploring the inner workings of the protagonist, who is presented as fragmented, complex, and contradictory. Soledad's journey of self-discovery and remapping of her own body in the megalopolis feminizes the traditional male quest in the Mexican urban novel. The notion of the city as a whore, which provides the space for male journeys over what is depicted as prostrate female terrain, continues to hold sway in Mexico's masculine literary (postcolonial) imagination.<sup>10</sup>

In rather ambiguous fashion, Clavel both challenges and reinstates this view of the city. She alludes to its violent origins, and the link between men conquering and mapping the city and the vicious raping-mapping of the female body is powerfully depicted (p. 255). The foundation of the city is intimately connected to the cartography of male desire, where man writes the body of the other (woman) and brutally inscribes upon it his own history. Yet the female city/body is also portrayed as eluding the male gaze and desire: 'la tomaban una y otra vez pero ella no despertaba del sueño y ellos en realidad no la poseían' (p. 255). This elusiveness may thus represent hope for a city/nation which has been ruled by a history of violence. The city as whore is symbolically portrayed also in Soledad, who prostitutes her body in an abandoned building where she is subjected to extreme sexual violence by the 'Desconocido' (p. 33). She vacillates between negative and positive representations of selfhood, frequently portrayed in terms of female submission and the objectification of the male gaze, on the one hand, and alternative representations which go beyond the confining male constructions of gender, on the other.

The construction of the self as posited in *Los deseos* can be placed alongside contemporary notions of subjectivity and consciousness, which undermine the traditional view of the unitary self in favour of one which is inchoate and multiple. Soledad appears not as a defined being, but rather as a Kristevan *sujet en procès*, in continual flux, embodying opposing impulses and 'no-deseos'. For Kristeva the subject is constituted in language, and results from the contradictions between the semiotic—which refers to the drives of the body, the unconscious, the intuitive, the non-sense—and the symbolic order—that is, the language, the Law, and the Order of the Father.<sup>11</sup> The semiotic constantly seeks to disrupt the symbolic, resulting in the destabilization of meaning and ultimately of the self. The self, which is divided between these two opposing forces, must seek a balance. For Kristeva, *jouissance* (joy of living)—which is 'sexual, physical, conceptual at one and the same time'—follows from the challenge of this fundamental struggle.<sup>12</sup> Soledad is torn between her private world of dreams, desires, and fears and the public sphere which is dominated by men and rhetoric. Soledad's mother, her lover Péter Nágy, and her male colleagues

<sup>10</sup> Cynthia Steele, *Politics, Gender and the Mexican Novel, 1968–1988: Beyond the Pyramid* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora and others (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). See also Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1989), p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 16.

represent the values of *desarrollismo*, Mexican bureaucracy, *charrismo sindical*, and patriarchal power structure.<sup>13</sup> The private world of Soledad, represented by the 'Chinese vase of her own', signifies the place of imagination, magic, desire, dark nightmares, and the unconscious. The text constantly vacillates between these two spaces, as will be examined.

Clavel's exploration of the mother–daughter relationship becomes a defining aspect in Soledad's process of becoming. The protagonist's search for identity and independence has been hampered by her family's traditional values and lifestyle, associated with the symbolic. Soledad's mother, Carmen, is a staunch defender of the patriarchal system, whose 'rules' relating to gender demand that both women and men alike conform to traditional gender stereotypes (p. 22). Carmen hinders Soledad's development by imposing her own expectations on her daughter, presenting her with 'perfect' models that all women should follow: 'las niñas no hablan cuando están entre mayores, quietecita como una muñeca de porcelana: si se mueve se rompe' (p. 21), thus reflecting the *machista* conservatism which assigns the female subject to the role of silent and passive object.

In many ways Carmen is representative of the Kristevan notion of the abject, that dangerous border 'where meaning collapses'.<sup>14</sup> Kristeva discusses the way in which the abject element in humanity is controlled by society, with rituals such as the revulsion of disease, disfigurement, and the maternal. These rituals strive to maintain the boundaries between what is abject and what is not. The mother in this regard becomes the perfect representative of the abject. In psychoanalytic theory, for the subject-child to become a subject it must go through a series of stages to acquire a sense of self as differentiated from the other, including the need to go beyond the pre-Oedipal phase and ultimately to move away from being a part of its mother so that it is then able to enter into the symbolic order.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the main threat to the child is its dependence upon the maternal presence, and it must abject the maternal as a way of achieving a boundary between self and m(other). According to Kristeva, the subject's initial move towards the abjection of the m(other) is consolidated during the Mirror Stage, where the subject will acquire a sense of self, when it sees an image of its own body either through the gaze of others or reflected in a mirror, leading to the subject's identification with that image. The image creates a sense of wholeness as well as separateness of the self.<sup>16</sup> In *Los deseos* the process of abjection of the mother is connected to the symbol of the mirror, which is a recurring leitmotif throughout Clavel's text, suggesting some positive although mainly negative connotations in the construction of self. There is a curious

<sup>13</sup> *Charrismo sindical* refers to Mexico's tradition of political coercion prevalent in many trade unions, whose government-appointed leaders, or *charros*, exploit their political power to amass personal fortunes. Clavel explores union cronyism by referring to the Bellas Artes Museum workers who strike against the rigging of votes in the election of a new Bellas Artes union leader (p. 191).

<sup>14</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977). Lacan views the Mirror Stage as the first step towards the acquisition of language and participation in the patriarchal symbolic order (pp. 1–7).

<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); see also Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.

ambivalence in one passage, where Soledad is standing in front of a mirror looking at herself. On the one hand, the passage suggests female narcissism and resistance to the m(other) who must be abjected; on the other, it also suggests female disempowerment, whereby the subject is engulfed by the mother. As Soledad looks into the mirror, her body becomes an object of desire for herself:

Sola [. . .] veía sus [. . .] labios carnosos que se parecían a los de su padre [. . .] A Soledad le gustaba tanto sus labios que [. . .] con la lengua [. . .] les dejaba un brillo de ciruela recién mordida [. . .] la imagen reflejada le fascinaba y [. . .] poco faltó para que la cubriera de besos, para que comiera aquella fruta carnosa y se consagrara en el culto de los que son fieles a sí mismos. (pp. 79–80)

The association of lips with a plum has clear sexual connotations, where the glistening, fleshy fruit suggests female genitalia. Female narcissism and the autoerotic also become disturbingly suggestive of incestuous desire. As Soledad is looking at herself in the mirror, she conjures up the image of her dead father's lips in her reflection, signalling her identification with and desire for him. Soledad's narcissistic identification with the image of the body represents an important step in her psychic process as it allows her to acquire a sense of her own bodily boundaries and a sense of a stable identity. But her admiration and desire for her own body are disturbed when her mother 'la sorprendió en el asombro y la seducción de contemplarse frente al espejo' (p. 79). Soledad's body now becomes the locus of shame and disgust (p. 80). Here she has lost the power of her own gaze and Carmen has seized power of representation, threatening to obliterate the borders between self and m(other). The mother inscribes in her daughter a negative image of her body as she makes her feel inadequate, rotten, and Soledad becomes a projected image moulded by her mother's own cultural values. Carmen has internalized society's repudiation of the female body and female sexual desire, transmitting these misogynistic attitudes to her daughter. Carmen perpetuates the myth of female genitalia as a shameful bodily organ which must be covered up: the daughter's fleshy, wet lips, which resemble female labia, must be suppressed. Soledad feels compelled to mimic her mother—'una Soledad nueva la contempló con la boca empequeñecida' (p. 80)—suggesting the daughter's recognition of her resemblance to her mother and, ultimately, Soledad's acknowledgement of both her own and woman's innate devalued and abject position in patriarchal society. Soledad is thus reduced to taking on an image which fragments rather than unifies her. The body she now sees reflected back towards her is grotesquely distorted: 'una línea por boca, sin labios. La boca de un simio o un pez' (p. 80). Yet Soledad, finally, rejects the image she sees of her own body through the gaze of her mother: 'Claro que el labio no se le corrigió nunca porque se le cansaba y entonces se le levantaba más inflamado [. . .] y tal vez por eso no se volvió fantasma del todo' (p. 80). Soledad resists being engulfed by her mother's gaze, thus creating a sense of separateness of the self from the abject (m)other.<sup>17</sup>

Elsewhere in the text, Kristeva's notion of matricide—that is, the abjection

<sup>17</sup> The contradictory representation of Carmen as abject and as embodying patriarchal values at the same time points to the paradoxical nature of the argument on abjection, whereby the symbolic order both denies and needs the abject as a way of establishing the very order which seeks to eliminate the abject. Kristeva argues that although the mother must be abjected, she

of the maternal presence<sup>18</sup>—is further suggested through the verbal and textual expulsion of Carmen from the text. In her desire to break away from Carmen's stifling authoritarianism which thwarts her self-realization, Soledad leaves the family home and engages in an affair with Péter Nagy, a Hungarian photographer with whom 'casi no le hablaba de su madre' (p. 109). These words, which imply a rejection of her mother, act not only as a verbal expulsion of Carmen from Soledad's life but also as a textual expulsion of the castrating mother. From this point onwards, references to Soledad's mother are virtually absent from the text. Soledad's clear articulation of her desires and assertion of her identity hold the key to her power over herself and her mother. By engaging in an affair with Péter, Soledad is asserting her belief that her identity depends on her own desires and on fulfilling these, rather than on her place in a strictly controlled hierarchy. The encounter between Péter and Soledad and the ensuing expulsion of the mother figure from the text may appear to encourage an Oedipal reading of *Los deseos*. Indeed, the arrival of Péter (the 'father') and his sexual intercourse with Soledad seem effectively to contribute to Soledad's splitting up of the dyadic mother-child relationship. In line with Freudian Oedipal theory, Péter, who is described as having a 'mirada en el centro del universo', represents the Law of the Father, reducing Soledad into absence and repressing her (primal) desires.<sup>19</sup> He thus continues the ritual initiated by Soledad's mother of splintering her daughter's self, since he threatens to annihilate her being into an unfeeling nothingness.

It would appear, however, that *Los deseos* resists a traditional Oedipal interpretation. Despite Soledad's apparent outright rejection of her overbearing mother, direct or indirect textual references to the mother figure throughout the text, though scarce, suggest Soledad's inability to abject the mother entirely from her life. Although Soledad sees her mother as symbolizing all the values and traditions she refuses to adopt, paradoxically she also appears to identify with her mother elsewhere. In one passage, the horrific images Soledad conjures up in her mind as a young child of a cannibalistic dragon furiously devouring her alter ego Lucía, and Soledad desperately trying to escape the dragon's fangs (p. 50), become confused and enmeshed with images of Soledad's mother screaming wrathfully at her daughter:

El dragón se enfureció: rugía y exhalaba un humo negro que lo confundía todo. Soledad sintió miedo y trató de alcanzar los gritos de su madre [. . .] hasta que su madre, amorosa, suplicó un 'despierta mi niña' [. . .] Carmen abrazaba a una muñeca del tamaño de Soledad. (p. 39)

This passage is rather ambivalent, as it suggests, on the one hand, Soledad's de-

too provides her infant with regulation that sets up paternal law, thus ensuring the child's entry into the symbolic order: *The Kristeva Critical Reader*, ed. by John Lechte and Mary Zournazi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Péter's photography is driven by a desire to express 'una poética de las sombras', thus Soledad/Sombra becomes his ideal object of artistic inspiration (p. 91). Soledad's image and desirability become a function of Péter's photographic practices of imaging, such as framing, camera movement, angle, and lighting, thus denying Soledad's status as a desiring or speaking subject in her own right (pp. 75–76).

sire for unity with her mother, while, on the other, the dragon-mother threatens symbolically to engulf Soledad, thus posing a threat of psychic obliteration. While psychoanalytical theory states that the mother needs to be abjected so that the child can separate itself from her, maternal cannibalism inverts this relationship.<sup>20</sup> Carmen is the devouring mother who refuses Soledad's borders, and thus her own existence, infecting her daughter with her own abjection. Yet Soledad's desire for unity with her mother suggests that she is unable entirely to abject Carmen while ultimately identifying with her as a woman. Soledad's inability to abject Carmen highlights the protagonist's struggle to enter into the symbolic realm where woman, from a Lacanian perspective, is perceived as a permanent outsider, as absence, as abject.<sup>21</sup> Soledad's identification with and rejection of her mother also suggests that the abject both repels and attracts because, ultimately, the borders between what is abject and what is not become blurred.<sup>22</sup>

Soledad, whose physical borders become blurred, comes to embody the abject itself, oscillating ambiguously between life and death, disease and cleanliness, visibility and invisibility, between the fully and partially formed subject, the semiotic and symbolic. As a subject in a continual state of becoming, Soledad's fragmented sense of (non-)self is connected to the idea of the ghostly, to invisibility, and to notions of (dis)embodiment. Magical realism is used to question the traditional barriers of fact and fiction, the possibility of a stable personal identity and of a unified reality or historical truth, reflecting the text's own structure, which similarly precludes closure and where there can be no end to the search for meanings. Magical realism has a dislocating effect on the reader, who is 'disconcerted not by the intrusion of the extraordinary into an otherwise normal world but rather by the blurring of boundaries between realities which he has been accustomed to keep apart'.<sup>23</sup> These slippages between fantasy and reality, which inform the magical realism of Soledad's half-human, half-phantasmagoric existence, mislead the reader, who is constantly confronted with (threatened by?) the question as to whether or not Soledad has committed suicide, whether she is alive or may in fact be a ghost. Even Soledad, who understands that identity is in permanent flux, is unable to ascertain whether she is alive or dead: 'Ser y no estar ¿era esto la muerte, seguir mirando como si estuviéramos vivos?' (p. 298).

The uncertainty of Soledad's existence is further complicated as she engages in dialogue with dead historical figures, and thus the proximity of life and death creates a dialogue between them, recalling Juan Rulfo's notion of 'diálogo de muertos' in *Pedro Páramo* (1955), whereby the barriers between life and death become indistinguishable. Like the abject, Soledad's ghostliness threatens the

<sup>20</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Kristeva challenges Lacan, who views women as lacking, and instead celebrates the possibilities latent in nothingness, thus offering woman an opportunity to become herself on her own terms.

<sup>22</sup> The abject is 'the space of struggle against the mother, at the same time it is a desperate attempt to be her, to blur the divisions between the child's identity and the mother's' (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, p. 78).

<sup>23</sup> Lloyd Hughes Davies, *Allende: 'La casa de los espíritus'*, Critical Guides to Spanish Texts, 66 (London: Grant and Cutler, 2000), p. 61.

borders between life and death by destabilizing the fixed boundaries which exist between the human and non-human. According to Kristeva, the most horrific example of the abject is the corpse, which is almost universally overcome by taboos and rituals which prevent it from threatening life: 'a border that has encroached upon everything. [. . .] The corpse seen without God, and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject.'<sup>24</sup> Soledad's spectre and her deathliness become an intolerable 'presence' which remains 'outside of science', invoking not the miracles of science but more the possibilities of magic. Like the corpse, ghostliness provokes cultural, collective, and individual revulsion and fear, indicative of what Elizabeth Grosz sees as the 'cultural inability to accept the body's materiality, its limit [. . .] its mortality'.<sup>25</sup> Soledad's ghostliness/deathliness threatens to infect life and must be ultimately suppressed, as suggested in one humorous passage in which Clavel describes two government soldiers smoking marijuana while on duty (p. 17). Invisible to both men, Soledad decides to play a prank on them by making coughing sounds and by placing her hand on one of the men's shoulders. The soldier is visibly frightened by the inexplicable occurrences, but dismisses the whole thing by finding a 'logical' explanation in the hallucinogenic effect the drug is having on them: 'debo andar muy loco [. . .] porque ya estoy imaginando que me acaricia una morra' (p. 18). The soldiers' flippant attitude towards their duty might be seen as Clavel's gentle mockery of the general incompetence of the PRI and its official institutions such as the military. More pertinently, through the soldier's dismissive reaction to the supernatural, Clavel attempts to verbalize the 'unsaid' of rationalism, which traditionally seeks to establish borders between the rational and irrational, life and death, the abject and non-abject, the symbolic and the semiotic. Clavel challenges patriarchal order and logic, which seeks to establish a kind of mental dictatorship as a way of banishing the deathly, the abject, the mad, and the other. Elsewhere Soledad is cast into the figure of a *loca* ('te digo que está loca, se cree un fantasma' (p. 190)) and by being thus labelled, the abject element she comes to represent can be suppressed and ignored, adding further complexity to Soledad's already fraught process of self-definition.

Invisibility has a dual function in the construction of the self in process. Soledad's invisibility is celebrated as it offers her freedom from the strictures and conventions of patriarchal society, allowing her to construct a self-defined image of self. Invisibility is also associated with the semiotic, creativity, the magical, the intuitive, and the repressed. Paradoxically that same trope of invisibility is exploited by Clavel to show how in the world of the living Soledad is defined symbolically as a *sombra*, as abjection and lack from a symbolic perspective. This oscillating perspective may be best understood by exploring the link between the body, the self, and desire. Clavel recognizes the body/self as a site fraught with complexities where the body is perceived as a subjective process which ultimately brings about a sense of self. The extensive references to body parts which pepper the text, such as 'manos fuertes' (p. 105) and skin

<sup>24</sup> Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 91.

(pp. 111, 70, 116), reinforce the view that the self is not perceived as a whole but rather as inchoate, relentlessly under threat of total annihilation.

Soledad's inability to recognize herself as a whole is particularly reinforced in the way Clavel resorts to metaphors of the female body as abject, disfigured, and grotesque to construct Soledad's identity/body, drawing attention to the female character's spiritual and psychological predicament. While working as an assistant photographer to Péter she inadvertently spills a chemical on her hands, resulting in multiple burns. Following this incident, Soledad has a nightmare in which she visualizes herself as disfigured: 'en vez de manos, encontraba un hueco, una lepra blanca que se iba comiendo sus brazos y seguía [. . .] por su cuerpo' (p. 123). The skin is slowly peeling off her hands and she starts to wear white gloves to 'protect' them (p. 73). The polarities of dirt/disease (Soledad's hands) and cleanliness (white gloves) function as markers of cultural order and disorder in a way that again links Soledad to the Kristevan concept of the abject.<sup>26</sup> Kristeva's view of the female body as the site of pollution in opposition to the notion of a clean and proper body can be linked to Soledad's body as a site of shame and disfigurement. The gloves Soledad wears are linked to the notion of respectability, the colour white suggesting virginal purity and social propriety as well as signifying the subservient, self-conscious values of the feminine sphere. The pristine gloves are closely linked to the idea of containing threat and embarrassment: the overspilling of Soledad's bodily boundaries leads to a process of concealment designed to curtail her (women's/the abject's) threatening excesses.

Unable to resolve her separation from her mother and traumatized by the death of her father and sexual abuse, Soledad constantly experiences her identity in terms of lack, and a desire to fulfil this lack by seeking completion in others. Soledad is unable to recognize herself as a whole being, for her existence is defined by the look and desires of others. Clavel is seeking to create a non-patriarchal conception of female subjectivity and 'another frame of reference, and another measure of desire'.<sup>27</sup> Such an endeavour reveals, however, a dilemma in the female subject, who finds herself caught between a Lacanian 'desire to desire' and a 'desire to be desired', frequently unable to acquire a desire of her own. On the one hand, Soledad strives to take control of her own life and actions and to desire on her own terms. On the other hand, she is controlled by her 'no-deseos', her need to be desired by others, threatening to reduce her into non-being. Soledad's body is frequently depicted as the (willing) construction of morbid male desire. When she prostitutes her body to the 'Desconocido', the nameless man fetishizes Soledad's body by subjecting her to extreme sexual violence, thus fragmenting her body into unfeeling pieces. Despite Soledad's harrowing experience, Clavel does not portray her as a passive victim of sexual abuse. She freely accepts the sexual contract, which involves a commercial exchange conducted between her and the anonymous man: 'las

<sup>26</sup> See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, and Nuala Finnegan, *Monstrous Projections of Femininity in the Fiction of Mexican Writer Rosario Castellanos*, *Hispanic Literature*, 54 (Lewiston: Mellen, 2000), p. 102.

<sup>27</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 68.

monedas en mis manos son parte de un trato' (p. 33). Although fetishization of the female body is linked to the notion of female disempowerment, Clavel also suggests that it empowers the female subject in that the process of 'othering' brings about a re-evaluation of Soledad's sense of self, allowing her to experience desire for herself: '¿Quién no es juguete del deseo de los otros? Y sobre todo ¿quién no goza siéndolo?' (p. 31).

Elsewhere Soledad is portrayed as the object of male desire while also willingly playing to the 'rules of the game'. By agreeing to Péter's suggestion that she dress as a titillating nurse to look after his ailing friend Montero (p. 113), Soledad is conforming to male expectations by voluntarily objectifying herself in order to please men and make them desire her. Thus outfitted, Soledad provides sexual joy to both the ailing Montero and Péter Nagy (p. 115), while also providing herself with a sense of identity and purpose, despite the insidious effect on her: 'en una complicidad que la hacía sentir privilegiada [. . .] haciendo gala de esta identidad en préstamo' (p. 114). Yet Soledad's sartorial extravagance suggests her own fragile subjectivity, desperate to achieve a sense of completion by giving herself to others. Role-playing pushes Soledad to sexual excess, as she becomes part of a sordid orgy with Péter and Montero: 'Soledad se dejaba hacer. En una ocasión, mientras abrazaba a Péter, Montero la tomó por detrás [. . .] Y Péter la miraba como si estuviera haciendo el amor con aquella sombra' (p. 116). Here Péter's fantasizing male gaze reduces 'Sola'/Soledad's being to a 'sombra' and ultimately becomes a site of lack.<sup>28</sup>

In her process of self-definition, Soledad yearns for the ideal unity of self (pp. 135–36). In her desire to complete her body/self, which she experiences as unfinished, she seeks to complement her lack with the other's completeness. On one occasion she observes Péter in the bedroom getting ready in front of a mirror (p. 127). Peter's image, which literally engulfs the entire mirror ('su presencia plena que llenaba el espejo se le volvió insoportable'), suggests the Lacanian view that the mirror reflects men's world-view and women as other.<sup>29</sup> As the mirror relegates women/Soledad to absence, so too it denies Soledad's/women's identity, rendering them unable to appropriate their own image. Soledad is suddenly overcome by a jealousy and hatred towards the 'completed' and 'unified' other (Péter). The protagonist's ability to recognize her own lack ('sin el cual ella no concebía ninguna clase de sobrevivencia') appears to be the initial step towards her ability to differentiate herself from the other, and ultimately to move towards freedom of the self. But in a moment of frenzied unthinking, she violently assails Péter (p. 127). Her fierce outburst could be seen as her attempt to subvert the opposition between her fragmented self/body and the unified body of the male other. But their relationship ends with violent abruptness, thus putting an end to the possibility of Soledad's reliance on her lover for self-definition. It is only later in the novel that she recognizes and comes to accept that the self is a 'specular' construction where the idea of a unitary self is based on imaginary relations (p. 197). This recognition of

<sup>28</sup> Soledad's names (Soledad, Sombra) act as a site of ambiguity, as they suggest anonymity and lack as well as the failure of names to signify, to convey a unitary self. They suggest her elusive identity which resists appropriation by others.

<sup>29</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 1–7.

the specular self is what ultimately allows Soledad to go 'beyond the mirror' where her image is no longer a 'reflection' of the masculine psyche but shaped by her own experiences and desires.<sup>30</sup>

The process of self-definition, which is determined by the contradictions inherent in the divided self between the semiotic and symbolic forces, is perhaps best illustrated in *Los deseos* in the symbol of the vase and in the construction of the self/double duality. Soledad's repressive family environment, and the death of her father in particular, lead to her physical and psychic retreat into the somewhat indeterminately designated 'interior' spaces. Throughout the text there are references to a Chinese vase, which comes to symbolize the female character's psychological 'vase of one's own' of thoughts, memories, and fantasies. The vase, associated with the semiotic, becomes a site of pre-Oedipal *jouissance* where Soledad's irrational emotions, sexual desires, and subconscious thought-processes are played out. The vase is associated with dark nightmares: 'el oleaje de un mar comenzó a golpear las paredes del jarrón. Fuerte, cada vez más fuerte, mientras Soledad seguía los pasos de Lucía' (p. 83). Here, the image of the sea threatening to engulf the vase suggests Soledad's subconscious fears of not being able to achieve unity of self with the other. The vase, where Soledad feels deeply shielded from the real world, also becomes associated with the maternal when Clavel refers to the 'interior del vientre del jarrón', suggesting Soledad's repressed need for the archaic mother. Yet the womb-vase becomes an intra-uterine paradise and hell at the same time, where, as noted earlier, the mother/dragon is capable of devouring her own daughter by wielding total power over her life, as if she were still in her womb. The polarities which we encounter throughout the text (dark/light, Soledad/Lucía, self/other, man/woman, death/life) are continued through the metaphor of the vase. The vase figuratively is a space for liberation and creativity and a place of entrapment (pp. 26–27). There, Soledad seeks refuge in a world of fantasy where she makes up magical stories of mythic creatures and heroes in which she frequently appears as one of the characters (pp. 203, 275). Stories not only engender creativity but also freedom to express one's desires: 'Soledad se topó con historias y mitos [. . .] en todos ellos [. . .] palpitaban los deseos' (p. 22).

It is in the vase that Soledad creates her imaginary alter ego, Lucía. Soledad is held hostage by her fear of stepping into the real world, associated with the patriarchal, and living her life according to others' desires rather than her own. She finds, therefore, a sense of reprieve in sharing her afflictions with her stronger double. While Soledad can appear to be emotional and passive—attributes stereotypically associated with the feminine—Lucía emerges as an aggressive, rational, and dominant character, attributes stereotypically associated with the male. Yet when Clavel describes Soledad as being androgynous in appearance (p. 47), the opposition between male and female becomes blurred, thus suggesting Clavel's defiance of such rigid classification associated with patriarchal logic. Lucía represents both Soledad's opposite and her complement, metaphorically depicted in terms of light and dark. Whereas Soledad's various names denote loneliness (Soledad, Sola) and darkness/lack (Sombra), Lucía's name has posi-

<sup>30</sup> The notion of the 'specular' is explored by Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 77.

tive associations: light (*luz*), lucidity (*lucidez*), to flaunt (*lucir*). Metaphors of darkness are associated with the semiotic, signalling Soledad's labyrinthine unconscious thought-processes—'sombra de los subterráneos'—and terrifying dreams, which reveal her anxieties and wishes. Paradoxically, metaphors of darkness also come to represent the symbolic repression of Soledad's desires as well as her lack. Soledad is the epitome of the passive woman who depends on others for her own fulfilment, and therefore the recurrent metaphors of darkness come to symbolize the anguish which she experiences at such dependence on others to give meaning to her existence.

Through the metaphors of darkness, Clavel weaves into the plot a subtle critique of the symbolic function, which excludes whatever it perceives as improper and insane, and therefore everything else stereotypically associated with the 'feminine' (intuition, sexual excess, nature, body). Lucía is a manifestation of primary drives, enacting Soledad's 'improper' unconscious desires and fantasies, which Soledad fears and desperately wants to repress. Lucía also embodies dark desires, even murderous instincts, pressing Soledad to fulfil her 'no-deseos' and uninhibited sexual drives. She tells her: 'pide un deseo, que tu tía se caiga de las escaleras o que le sangre la nariz hasta que se vacíe y se muera [. . .] Pero a Soledad sus deseos comenzaban a darle miedo' (p. 57). Once, Soledad and her childhood friend Rosa are bathing together when Rosa's brother Miguel enters the bathroom. There, he physically assaults Soledad, who becomes threatened by his sexually predatory demeanour. Soledad is paradoxically torn between a longing to give in to Miguel's desires and to reject him outright: 'no podía evitar sentir esa emoción que se desbordaba en cada uno de sus poros, que la ponía al borde de su cuerpo y que amenazaba con indudarla' (p. 49). Her confused feelings soon turn into a somewhat desultory defiance. Lucía reprimands Soledad for not having given in to Miguel's desires: 'Al bajar las escaleras Lucía y Soledad iban tomadas de la mano. De pronto Lucía la soltó y le dijo: Debiste haberme dejado a mí' (p. 49). Soledad's double prompts her to escape the imposition of the social and symbolic order by letting her imagination break through the dominant signifying practice. Through her engagement with a world of fantasy and the irrational, Soledad learns to reject the language of logic and sanity: 'si aquello no era la locura —andar sin que los demás la vieran, escuchar a un hombre muerto erigido en héroe—, si aquello no era la locura entonces se le parecía de manera extraordinaria' (p. 202). Soledad listens to her bodily rhythms by immersing herself in a pre-Oedipal *jouissance*: 'ahora soy yo la imagen del espejo que remueve en ondas de placer acuoso [. . .] me apresuro a tocarlo. Sus palmas extendidas y mis manos, su boca y mis labios, su lengua y mi saliva, sus senos en mi pecho' (p. 82).

Soledad's expression of repressed sexual desire, which threatens to destabilize the symbolic order, is also linked to textual practice, where textual fragmentation and linguistic incoherence in *Los deseos* threaten the controlled narrative elsewhere, reflecting Elizabeth Grosz's contention that

like the repressed, the semiotic can return in/as irruptions within the symbolic. It manifests itself as an interruption, a dissonance, a rhythm unsumable in the text's

rational logic or controlled narrative. The semiotic is thus both the precondition of symbolic conditioning and its uncontrollable excess.<sup>31</sup>

In the fantastical world which Soledad inhabits, meaning is exploded—'las palabras chocaban unas con otras y le decían mensajes confusos' (p. 25)—by a 'non-sense', rhythmical, sexual language, incomprehensible to the symbolic world:

Sol se sumergió en el diccionario buscando posibles significados de 'ideático', preguntándose si sería primo de 'maniático' y en consecuencia medio-hermano de 'sexual'; o si partiendo de los lunáticos, vivían en el ático de la luna, entonces los ideáticos podrían vivir en el armario de las ideas, un lugar donde [. . .] Lucía era más bien de la familia de las dragonáticas. (p. 39)

In her process of becoming, Soledad is torn between the alternative imperatives of rejecting Lucía and fusing with her so as to integrate her opposing selves: 'Antes con Lucía, viví algo semejante, cuando nos internábamos en el laberinto del jarrón [. . .] Sólo esa sensación tranquilizadora de perderse, de no estar más separadamente. De fundirse' (p. 226). The fusion of the two selves is implied in the text's use of words and phrases which fuse opposites of dark and light, suggesting the blurring of consciousness and unconsciousness, life and death, desire and repression, self and other: 'su dualidad de luz y sombras le hablaba oscuramente de un tejido interno, la textura de un instante vivo detenido en un palpitar de muerte [. . .] algo que ya había percibido en el interior del vientre del jarrón' (p. 85). Despite the internal conflict Soledad's split selves bring about, Soledad and Lucía mirror each other in many other respects. Clavel offers the reader barely any physical descriptions of both, thus frequently making them almost impossible to tell apart. Soledad frequently confuses her own voice (p. 57) and image with that of Lucía: 'Lucía sonrió adentro del jarrón. Era tan frecuente que las confundieron. Soledad también sonrió' (p. 107). Towards the end of the novel, Soledad is faced with the choice of either rejecting her alter ego or fusing with Lucía while also accepting the other's difference. In order to exist, Soledad must bridge the gaps between the contrasting semiotic/symbolic forces. *Jouissance* allows her to recognize both these unresolved divisions and her own provisional nature. The end suggests that Soledad has come to terms with her fragmented sense of selves and that her split selves become reconciled: 'por fin parecían caminar juntas: como si su sombra y ella se dirigían hacia un mismo lugar' (p. 239). This fusion of selves towards the end of the novel suggests that Clavel's female character has been given the chance to go through a transforming experience that helps her regain a unique sense of identity. She is given the opportunity to enter the symbolic on her own terms, by coming to self-consciousness through a distinguishing of the self from others, but also the ability to go beyond the symbolic.

The end of the novel sheds a rather ambiguous light on Soledad's 'existence'. The epilogue suggests that Soledad chooses an existence as a (ghostly?) 'sombra'. Yet her literal and figural disembodiment is seen as representing potential for positive change, both at an individual level, pointing towards new spaces

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 147–87 (p. 152).

for Soledad's (women's) identity and expression, and at a national level.<sup>32</sup> The epilogue's final words ('Su cuerpo no la contiene') suggest that Soledad chooses to discard her old existence, associated with a staid social power structure and traditional familial values and lifestyle, in favour of living a life associated with Mexico's City's underground existence. The trope of invisibility reflects non-representation of women and women writers such as Clavel, while paradoxically also signalling hope for women's sexual, intellectual, and literary emancipation beyond male-dominated society. Clavel seems torn between a desire to remove all physical traces of femaleness through Soledad's invisibility and an attempt to inscribe the physical aspects of the corporeal (pp. 99, 240).<sup>33</sup> Soledad's phantasmagoric state violates the integrity of the body, and therefore the potential for danger is unleashed: 'cuando Soledad salió del jarrón y descubrió que nadie podía verla, se le ocurrieron ideas disparatadas' (p. 13). Here, the female body is conceived as an obstacle to creativity, and thus by discarding its limitations Soledad is able to occupy an 'other' space where she is able to use her imagination. Clavel often emphasizes the importance of voice over the corporeal: 'por la voz se conoce a la gente. Podrás [. . .] cambiarte la ropa y la cara, pero la voz surge de dentro, atraviesa esa máscara que nos hemos fabricado [. . .] Si hay algo de auténtico en el hombre es su voz' (p. 272). Soledad's search for a voice of her own reflects Clavel's own search for recognition when, at an early point in her career, she is struggling to establish her voice in the Mexican literary establishment, which has until very recently rejected Mexican women's writing for its 'lightness'.

Clavel's attempt to remove all physical traces of femaleness underlines the inversion of Cixous's call to 'write the body'.<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere there is the suggestion that she is alluding to *écriture féminine* (p. 283), thus emphasizing the importance of the female body. The self-conscious aspect of *Los deseos* is strongly suggested since Soledad's fragmented identity/body becomes a symbol of the fragmented text itself.<sup>35</sup> The materialization of Soledad's new inchoate self/body (pp. 280–82) coincides with the materialization and completion of the book, but its own open-endedness precludes closure. Soledad's self-assertion, independent of patriarchal notions of feminine identity, coincides with Clavel's

<sup>32</sup> Soledad's status as 'desaparecida' in June 1985, as advertised on the posters her mother has put up throughout Mexico City displaying Soledad's photograph and personal details, becomes a metaphor for Mexico's socio-political disasters and violence, all consequences of the rhetoric of *desarrollismo*. Her disappearance foreshadows the terrible events of the 1985 earthquake, in which thousands of Mexicans died or were not accounted for. Clavel is pointing beyond the immediate problem of political injustice towards the social movements which followed the earthquake, movements representing the nation's refusal to continue participating in a corrupt system and its desire to reaffirm its integrity and social responsibility.

<sup>33</sup> See Finnegan, *Monstrous Projections of Femininity*, p. 25.

<sup>34</sup> See Finnegan, *Monstrous Projections of Femininity*, p. 65.

<sup>35</sup> As Soledad unendingly eludes signification, so too the text renews itself through its chaotic proliferation of narratives and thus avoids classification. Throughout *Los deseos* there are many references to the human body and to human skin. Clavel's explicit reference to text(ure) of the skin emerges when Péter describes to Soledad how photographic paper bears comparison to human skin (p. 125). The porous, perspiring 'piel' of the paper recalls the skin of the body—a connection which Barthes makes when he compares the text to corporeal tissue, which 'se fait, se travaille à travers un entrelacs perpétuel' (Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du Texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), p. 101).

affirmation of her creative voice. This twofold process is suggested in the way that Soledad's voice becomes merged with that of Clavel's, as implied in the following quotation, strongly intimating the inextricable link which exists between writing, self-expression, and desire:

El cuerpo [. . .] había empezado a iluminarse. Los labios hablaron su lengua de piel e instinto, y yo me quedé sin tinta para escribir estas líneas. La piel y el cuerpo se desataron y dejaron de obedecerme. Me convertí en una letra que estallaba, un signo que por fin encontraba su sentido. (pp. 281–83)

To conclude, then, Clavel's *Los deseos* is an outstanding first novel, notable for its dialogical richness, interweaving the historical, the fictional, and the fantastic. Although Clavel places historical realities in second place to social and psychological issues, her text is motivated by a desire to challenge monological versions of historical truth. Clavel's endeavour to reconstruct an alternative conception of national identity that is heterogeneous is linked to the creation of a non-patriarchal conception of female subjectivity by exploring the inner workings of a protagonist who is psychologically intricate. *Los deseos* is motivated, above all, to speak of the silenced experiences and voices of women in the tradition of contemporary Latin American women's writing. Despite Ana Clavel's relative obscurity in literary circles, the aim of this article has been to attest to her particular contribution to Mexican letters, which arguably is as significant as that of more established contemporary Mexican women writers such as Ángeles Mastretta and Brianda Domecq. It may therefore be considered as a call to critics to give Clavel the necessary and urgent critical attention she deserves.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

JANE ELIZABETH LAVERY

Modern Humanities Research Association