Pamela Bacarisse *The Necessary Dream*

'The Kiss of Death'
El beso de la mujer arana (1976)

El hilo que une la arana a su tela es un lazo mortifero y vital a la vez ...
The thread that joins the spider to the web is a bond that is at the same time lethal and vital ...
(Annie Perrin and Francoise Zmantar Pez, *'La telarana')*

Ei beso de la mujer arana' has attracted more critical attention than any other Puig novel. Its reception has been, and continues to be, such that 1976 - the year of its publication - might well be judged the key moment in the author's career. It was then that his place in contemporary Latin-American literature was irrefutably established and universally recognized. The book impressed everybody, even those who had not been his most fervent admirers up to that date.

There is no way in which concrete evidence can be adduced to show just why this fourth novel is so successful. One can only say that the pace is right, even if some critics have found the footnotes that constitute eleven per cent of the text somewhat distracting the narrative line holds the interest - indeed, is gripping; the characters, though extreme, are credible, and they actually develop and mature as the story progresses; furthermore, there is a splendid narrative surprise half-way through the book. The six recounted film plots themselves hold the reader's attention.

In spite of this basic ambiguity, the storyline is quite simple. Molina (he is always referred to by his surname) has been sentenced to eight years imprisonment for corruption of minors, and is now sharing a cell in the Villa Devoto penitentiary in Buenos Aires with a young Marxist activist, Valentin Arregui Paz. In order to while away the long hours of inactivity, the thirty-seven-year-old homosexual tells the younger man (Valentin is only twenty-six) the stories of films he has seen and enjoyed. The age gap is obviously important, and in the theatrical version Puig places even more emphasis on it by increasing Molina's age to forty-one. In this way, as Maryse Vich-Campos has noted, all the films that are referred to are not only part of a culture that would be totally alien to the upper-class intellectual Valentin, but are also from an epoch that he could not possibly remember.

Once again we have a novel with sixteen chapters. This time it is divided into two parts, with the plot laid out so that in the first seven chapters, in addition to hearing - for again it is spoken language that is reproduced - Molina's version of the 1942 film *Cat People,* an invented Nazi propaganda film and his recollection of *The Enchanted Collage* (1945), we get to know the two protagonists and witness the gradual breakdown of Valentin's reserve. From total incompatibility, symbolized in the play by an opening scene in which the two men are looking away from each other, a friendship gradually develops. Molina is kind to Valentin, panders to his narrative taste (p. 1 18), and even cares for him physically, performing the most degrading tasks when he is suffering from food poisoning and is helpless and incontinent. He shares his provisions with him, and is patient and seemingly altruistic. Valentfn becomes more human, even affectionate, as he becomes weaker, and with physical debility comes the diminution of his resolve and even of his courage. It is only when the reader, too, has been lulled into an attitude of complaisant indulgence that the bombshell is dropped. In the strategically-placed Chapter Eight, we discover that Molina had in fact been planted in Cell 7 in the previous April (the action begins in Septerriber) to try to get information from his companion about his fellow

urban terrorists. The stakes' are as high as they could be: Molina is playing for his freedom and, too, his peace of mind and happiness, for if he serves out his full sentence, it is almost certain that he will never, again see his old and infirm mother. This revelation obliges the reader to reconsider, if not re-read , everything that has gone before it, and this has the same effect as a second readingof a mystery story, when the criminal's identity is known.

In the first seven chapters Molina has come across as a spontaneous and attractively naive character, in strong contrast to Valentin' sceptical worldliness and demystifying cynicism. He is gentle and tolerant beside Valentin's rigid self-discipline and cod intellectualism, and flexible and receptive where Valentin is firm, dogmatic and even fanatical - however much justice and right may be on his side. There is no doubt that Valentin sees himself as superior to Molina if only because the cause he represents, and is prepared to give his life for is sublime. Both characters are in gaol for what is most distinctive about them,, as Milagros Ezquerro has pointed out, both of them are victims of some form of oppression - governmental in the case of Valentin and even religious where Molina is concerned social and even religious %where Molina is concerned – and it is perhaps surprising that it should be Molina who originally wins more sympathy from most readers. Yet he is appealing: he is not without humour (p.35, for exaniple), he is unaware that he is the butt of Valentin's scornful comments (p. 13), he is full of genuine remorse for the suffering he has caused his mother. Perhaps this devotion should not be judged a virtue, since his love for his mother is excessive, but he nevertheless seems to be generous and affectionate by nature. And he apparently does not deceive himself: when he speaks of his se4xual orientation and his position vis-a-vis society, it is difficult not to feel for him. His most disarming trait is his total lack of self-,righteousness and this goes hand in hand with an unwillingness to in a capacity for self-mockery. How disconcerting, disclosed that fill this forms part of a calculated plan of deception.

Nevertheless, we soon have to reconsider the siituation yet again, for in Part Two we find that Molina gives away nothing at all to the authorities. So it is that the text continues to hold our attention: we, too, have been trapped by a Spider woman. And there arc many questions left unanswered as the narrative progresses and Molina breaks down Valentin’s reserve completely, seducing him physically as well as metaphorically, and at the same time playing cat and mouse with the authorities. When, ultimately, he is released and tries to make contact with Valentin's revolutionary comrades, he dies a melodramatic death at the hands of those he is ostensibly aiding. Even after the final section Valentin's delirious stream-of-consciousness dream after being tortured - there is no way of knowing exactly what has happened or, more important, why. Some of the unresolved puzzles are relatively unimportant, some vital to the interpretation of the novel, but all of them point to the fact that Puig is asking the reader to make an effort, to contribute his own ideas towards the formulation of a question,.even if, as always, there is no easy answer. In spite of all appearances, the narrator is not actually absent; as Yves Macchi has noted, here as in all Puig's novels, 'le narrateur devient le dieu cache.

To deal with the minor questions first: one that has not, as far as I know, been discussed by critics is why Molina should have indulged in 'corruption of minors' in the first place. Since he sees himself as a woman, says that he wants to be one (p.25), and admires what he sees as feminine sensibility, it is strange that he should be attracted to a very young boy. After all, he always identifies with screen heroines, not heroes, he rushes to the defence of women's attitudes (p. 35) and he uses feminine adjectives to describe himself and his loca friends (pp. 68, 133, 138) - something, incidentally, that irritates Valentfn (p.65). He is really called Carmen, he says, as in Bizet's opera (p. 72), and when he is released we find that his companions use

names taken from female film stars, including Manuel Puig's great favourite, Hedy Lamarr (a name the Secret Police agents, who are tailing him and bugging his telephone, fail to recognize, p.272). Most revealing of all is the conversation between the two prisoners in which Molina explains his particular situation. He finds no comfort in his *loca* friends, he says, but longs as they all do - for a real man. Although there are homosexuals who fall in love with each other, he admits that he does not belong to this group: 'Yo y mis amigas somos mu-jer', he says ('My friends and I are actually women'), and 'Nosotras somos mujeres normales que nos acostamos con hombres' ('We are normal women who sleep with men'). But, of course, this can never be, 'porque un hombre . . . lo que quiere es una mujer' ('because what a man wants is a woman ') (p.207). 'No me siento hombre', he had said earlier on ('I don't feel like a man') (P. 60), and half jokingly, he had admitted that men 'son unos brutos pero me gustan' ('are swines, but I love them') (p.35). All this points to the need for a virile, domineering, macho man - indeed, the current object of his affections, we discover, is a heterosexual waiter, an'hombre normalisimo' ('a completely normal man') (p. 72), who is an ex-professional footl)aiier, married, and as handsome as a film star. The offence Molina was charged with seems much more appropriate for the 'niale' partner of a homosexual relationship; why this seeming inconsistency? One obvious reason for Puig's inclusion of this particular offence is its function as a narrative device: he has to find a way of putting his homosexual protagonist behind bars *without his moralworth beingl'mpugned, otherthan byhissexualorientati'on.* Andjust being a homosexual is not a criminal offence. Then, perhaps more important, his incarceration with Valentin, a much younger man, leads to a variation of the corruption of minors theme. We shall return to this.

Another problem is that there is no way of knowing if Valentin dies at the end of the novel. The play is slightly less equivocal, but even there it is difficult to be sure. In the play, when Valentin has disclosed the telephone number of his political contacts, Molina begins to pack his few belongings; then, in the background, the recorded voices of both men are heard. First, Molina asks Valentin what actually happened to him - Molina, that is - after his release, and he is told about his own death. Molina, in his turn, says that Valentin was horribly tortured and that his wounds became infected. Strangely, he then recounts Valentin's last dream *to Valentin himself,* and when asked what the outcome was, his reply is somewhat ambiguous. These are the last few lines of dialogue:

VOZ DE VALENTIN: Y al final me salvo de la policfa, o me volvieron a agarrar?
VOZ DE MOLINA: No, al final te fuiste de la isla, contento, a seguir la lucha con tuscompaiieros, porque era un sueiio corto, pero era feliz . . . (p 1 40)

VALENTIN'S VOICE: And in the end, did I get away from the police, or did they catch up with me again?
MOLINA'S VOICE: No, you left the island in the end, quite happy, to carry on the struggle with your comrades, because it was a short dream, but it was sweet ...

(Valentin had dreamt that he was on a desert island.) After these final spoken words there is one more stage direction:

Se abre la puerta, Molina y Valentin se abrazan con inemnsa tristeza, Molinasale, la pueria se cierra, con el teldn.

The door opens, Molina and Valenit'n embrace with great sadness, Molina leaves, the door closes Curtain.

This does suggest that Valent(n survives. Molina, of course, dies, but the struggle against tyranny continues even if Valentin does join the thousands of *desaparecidos.* One individual is no more, but there will always be those who fight on, and the authorities do not, in this case, find out what they want to know. Furthermore, there may be a reason why Molina had to die. This is another point that we shall return to.

Perhaps the most important puzzle of all, since it leads us to the fundamental question, Molina's motivation, is to do with his agreeing to contact the revolutionary group on his release: he has, after all, frequently begged Valentin not to tell him anything about their mission. Does Molina know at the end of his period of imprisonment that he is almost certainly going to be killed? And if he does, why does he go on? Needless to say, critics have considered this point and come up with a variety of answers. The text, though, is not helpful. In the last chapter, Valentin dreams that the woman he loves, Marta, is inside him, and he confesses to her his feelings of guilt and his fervent wish that Molina may have died happy since he was serving the cause. Marta replies, significantly, that Molina allowed himself to be killed because this meant that he would die like a screen heroine. 'Eso lo sabra *e1 s6lo,* y hasta es posible que ni *e1* lo sepa', replies Valentfn ('Only he could know that and it's possible that not even he knows') (pp.284-85). At this point, then, Puig is saying that Valentin is saying that Marta is saying that Molina died in a gratuitous melodramatic gesture; and in the play there is even more of a *mise-en abyme* since it is *Molina* who tells Valentin about Marta's opinion on the motives behind his death. Gilberto Triviiios, writing about Puig's first two novels, calls them 'relatos de relatos' ('stories about stories')." His judgment is even more apposite whe n it co mes to *El beso de la mujer arana* and the resulting subtleties; but, as we have already observed, there is little doubt that the ambiguity is intentional. Puig refuses to judge or pronounce, or even to be explicit, and he is aided in this by stylistic complexity. It is more than ten years since he explained his position in an interview, and we have no evidence that he has changed his viewpoint; this is what he said then:

Yo tengo mis ideas y mis convicciotíes pero trato de no expresarlas muy directamente sino de que los hechos que cuento las pongan de relieve.

I have my own ideas and convictions, but I try not to express them outright; I prefer them to emerge from the facts that I recount.

And he added that where political matters were concerned, any explicit message would turn the work into a pamphlet, and that that would be counter-productive.

Several critics have come up with the observation that, to use Gustavo Pell6n's words, 'the author has refused each of them [the protagonists] the benefit of his authority; both Molina and Valentin speak for him'. " And although Garcia Ramos may well be right when he claims that Molina is slightly more important than Valentin, since the author has so often written about and discussed his preoccupation with the theme of sexual exploitation, there is really no way in which either of the prisoners could be judged the hero of the novel." Both of them have appealing and reprehensible characteristics; the problem therefore is that it is fairly easy to be selective, and make a case either for or against one of them which does not bear thorough examination. It is not difficult, for example, to list Molina's unattractive features and see him as an unsympathetic 'mujer arana', luring his prey into a position of weakness and taking advantage of this situation. One example of this viewpoint is Maurice Molho's essay. 'Tango de la madre arana' ('Tango of the Spider Mother'). " Although he is right, in my opinion, to assume that the novel approaches activism from homosexuality, and not vice versa, he then

goes on to portray Molina as calculating and single-minded in his egoistic aim of seducing Valentin. For Molho, Molina's ultimate sacrifice - he calls it a 'martirio' ('martyrdom') is 'absurdo y a contrtiempo' ('absurd and out of place'), the footnotes (which we will come to later) seem to him to be taken from 'la biblioteca de alg6n homosexual inquieto de si' ('the library of some homosexual who is unsure of himself'), and the sum total of Molina's actions, which he refers to as 'manipulaciones perversas' ('perverse manipulative acts'), is a process of captatio benevolentiae designed and carried out entirely for his own advantage. Molina traps Valentin by turning himself into a surrogate mother who tells him bedtime stories, cares for him when he is ill (an illness that he has deliberately connived at), and gives him good things to eat which he claims that his own mother has provided. (In fact, they are the props supplied by the authorities for the comedy that he is acting out.) The film stories, says Molho, divorce Valentin from reality, making him almost cataleptic, and in this way Molina acquires power over him, reducing him once again to helpless childhood. Very neatly, Molho draws our attention to Molina's shift from his mother fixation to becoming his mother when he his shopping-list' to the prison governor. And the items on it, he claims, are symbolic: for example, a kind of sweetmeat made from caramelized milk is judged to be 'leche materna, dulce, nutricional y placible' ('mother's milk, sweet, nutritious and delectable')," and he asks for not one but two jars of it. This is seen as a parody of motherhood, and the father's role is taken by the institution, with its unassailable power; Valentin and the prison are two manifestations of virility that Molina must overcome. But in the end Molina dies, and Molho sees this as the inversion of the domination of the theme of homosexuality.

With some minor exceptions, the evidence that this critic produces from the text is indisputable. The point is, though, that it does not constitute anything like the whole truth, and proof of this is that so many others have found enough evidence to support the opposite approach, convinced that Molina's appealing features outweigh his defects and that he changes as the narrative progresses. Even his treacherous pact with the authorities can be explained, if not condoned. As Claude Le Bigot has argued, when he found himself caught up in a kind of pernicious triangle, he was forced to choose between his mother and his cell-mate; " this may be seen as not his fault. Like the night-club singer in the (largely invented) Mexican film who is obliged to prostitute herself in order to maintain her sick lover, he had no option but to promise to betray Valentin. And then, what tips the balance very much in his favour as far as the reader is concerned is the fact that he does not actually keel) his side of the bargain. Indeed, he is loath to receive any confidences (pp. 135, 136, 137), and though we cannot be entirely sure whether this original refusal to become involved is a carefully worked-out, underhand feature of his strategy, his increasing affection for Valentin tends to suggest that this is not the case, and that his behaviour is based on pragmatic desperation. Indeed, it could be argued that the sincerity of his helpless romantic love for Valentin is what makes him sympathetic and affecting; after his release he makes only desultory efforts to renew his acquaintance with the waiter who was formerly the object of his affections, and he is reported by the Secret Police as spending much of his time looking towards the penitentiary where Valentin is still a prisoner.

My contention is that Molina is not a reprehensible character, only a misguided one, and in this he has much in common with several Puig characters that we have already met. Though there is certainly more to him than his sexuality," this is undeniably what is most immediately distinctive about him, and at the same time, it causes him to be fatuous,pathetic and touching. In other words, he is another of Puig's female creations, and his approach to life is similar to that of Choli, Ncn6 and even the young Toto.

As he tells his stories and serves the author's avowed purpose of avoiding conventional third-person narration wherever possible, he also embodies the notion of sexual exploitation. He is another ill-used woman, glad to suffer - or, at the very least, prepared to suffer - at the hands of a 'superior' man. Five of the six film stories that make up the book illustrate what the author himself has termed 'the various cliches of femininity'," and in them Molina invariably identifies with the passive, though central, character. This is very different from the orientation of the vast majority of immature male protagonists in fiction. To take just one well-known contemporary example, Holden Caulfield, J. D. Salinger's adolescent narrator in his novel, *The Catcher in the rye,* has the somewhat bizarre ambition of becoming a 'catcher', a kind of saviour and protector, when others fall down. There is no doubt that in the same fanciful circumstances 'I'oto would have wanted to be the one who was caught, while Molina would succour those that have been hurt, with loving gratitude his only reward. That is to say, he sees himself as cut out for a domestic, caring role, like conventionally selfless wives and mothers, or the pure and simple heroine of the radio serial El *capitan herido (7he Wounded Captain in Boquitas pintadas.*

The first film that he recounts to Valentin, *Cal People,* is the most important. It is the only one to survive the reduction of novel into play, and the book's very title is a slightly amended reference to a key moment in the film. Its retelling, of course, involves many changes, many of which are highly significant," but whatever else is excised or distorted, the eponymous kiss remains inviolate. The kiss of the screen panther woman (in Latin America, the title of *Cat People was La marca de la pantera – The Mark of the Panther* Woman) is imitated much later on in the novel by the kiss of the ‘spider woman': Molina. There is only one kiss in the original film, even though it is a love story, and only one in Molina's re-creation of it, and in both cases it is a prelude to death. Irena, the screen heroine, falls in love and marries, but she finds it impossible to express her feelings for her husband, for sexual arousal causes her animal proclivities to come to the surface and she turns into a ferocious wild beast. Her macho analyst is the only one rash enough to kiss her, and she claws him to death. At the end of the novel, we find that Molina is happy when Valentin agrees to give him a farewell kiss, and flattered and pleased when he says, 'Vos sos la mujer araiia, que atrapa a los hombres en su tela' ('You're a spider woman, catching men in her web') (p.265). But a good example of what we might term Puig's 'non-distanced irony', an element that we shall look at later, is that it is the person who desires the kiss that dies. The victim, that is to say, is the spider woman herself. It is surely important that one of the radical changes in Molina's version of the original film is found in the character and motivation of the heroine. **In** *Cal People,* Irena is vicious and vengeful, and Valentin is not mistaken when he sees her as a 'psic6pata asesina' ('psychopathic murderess') (p.45), but Molina, identifying with her, omits any evidence that could point in that direction and -portrays her as the undeserving victim of an arbitrary condition.

As Roberto Echavarren says in an admirable essay on the novel, there is another subtle reversal of accustomed roles: here it is the homosexual who indoctrinates the political activist and the active becomes passive. And we might add that neither character does himself a great deal of good by means of the association between them. Like Gladys and Leo in *The Buenos Aires Affair,* they are essential for each other, but their relationship could never flourish and at least one of them is eliminated. Molina has *to* die. Death is inevitable, but for Molina it comes sooner than it might have done had he not become involved with Valentin. Where Valentin is concerned, even though he may not die, his immediate mission ends in failure as, presumably, Molina is killed without passing on the message he gave him. Furthermore, the modification in his outlook could mean that he will now face death with less conviction and, therefore,

diminished fortitude. Weakness is appealing, but it is strength that prevails: the meek may inherit the earth, but the strong control it.

There are many parallels between Don Quixote, the idealist, and Valentin, while Molina has been seen as a latter-day Sancho Panza; but the two sets of characters have a point of contact that has not, as far as I know, been elaborated on to date. This is to do with the processes of modification that Salvador de Maciariaga called the 'quijotizaci6n de Sancho ('the Quixotization of Sancho') and the sanchificaci6nde don Quijote' ('the Sanchification of DoO Quixote') in the Cervantes novel. Because of his master's influence, Sancho begins to see life differently; by the time Part Two is reached he isjudged madder tharf Don Quixote himself, and his shallow simplicity has acquired subtlety and understanding; he becomes less *of a* servant, more of a partner, in the search for glory,. But, as Madariaga has it, 'mientras el espiritu de Sancho asciende de la realidad a la ilusi6n, declina el de Don Quijote de la ilusi6n a la realidad' ('as Sancho's spirit rises from a position of clearsightedness to dreaming, so that of Don Quixote descends from dreaming to clear-sightedness'), and his attitude as he goes forth on his adventures in the latter half of the narrative is no longer spontaneous. His approach to his activities now contains a certain element of compulsion. His later sorties are based on an unwillingness to be unfaithful to his original commitment rather than on continuing unswerving conviction. In a way, the two characters are transpositions of each other: 'parece que les forjaron a los dos en una rnisma turquesa' ('apparently they both come out of the same mould') says the priest in Chapter Two of' Part Two of the novel, and this observation clarifies a great deal." 'T'hey complement each other, act on each other, learn from each other; they are, so to speak, inseparable. Sancho achieves a moving dignity with the hurtful process of *desengano* (disillusion), and there is a final stage of *desengano* for his master too, as his awareness of approaching death obliges him to repudiate his past fantasies. What is remarkable is that although both of them are disabused and enlightened awav from different positions - fancy's excesses are tempered by the mundane in the case of Don Quixote whereas coarse materialism is sweetened by the spiritual and the philosophical where Sancho is concerned - in both cases enlightenment takes the form of an invasion by 'reality' or 'real life'; perhaps we could even call it 'truth'. Yet in the end, death is the only outcome; the two men may be inseparable, but they are separated, and there is infinite sadness. It is not only *El beso de la mujer arana* that suggests this comparison, but also the disabusing of *Nen6 in Boquitas pintada,s.*

The two protigoiiists of *Elbeso de la muje rarana* have the same need for each other as the *Don Quixote* characters; even though Sancho does not make his appearance in the Cervantes novel until after the first foray is over, and the first six chapters could be thought self-contained, it is with his presence that the sense and complexity of the work begin to take shape. The same is true of *El beso:* Molina comes into Valentfn's life and prison sentence (even if not into the text), fairly late in the day, since Valentin was arrested three years earlier and has still not been brought to trial. Yet it is only when the two men act as catalysts on each other for various reasons - some of them reprehensible - that the real drama begins. So it is that it would be as absurd to consider Valentin on his own as to isolate Molina. There is binarism in all Puig's writings, and this is yet another example of it. Valentin is cold and mechanical and single-minded (Molina says lie has no feelings, p. I 10) when we first meet him, but our critical judgments should be even-handed, and we should be able to see that both he and Molina are incomplete, and that there is no real condemnation of either of them on the part of the author. Even the fact that, ironically, Valentin, whose entire life is a struggle against exploitation, immediately and unconsciously exploits his cellmate is portrayed by Puig more in sadness than in anger. It is another example of an ironic view in which he does not distance himself.

Let us consider a few examples of irony in the novel, and we shall see that the author's involvement and identification with the situation and characters he invents are evident. Perhaps the most suitable area to begin with, since we have just mentioned it, is that of exploitation. As we said, it is the initiator of the eponymous, fatal kiss that dies, but not before he (originally an exploited character) has been revealed as an exploiter in his own right, maliciously seducing his victim and 'governing' the prison Governor (Chapter Eight). The perfect mother, in Molina's version of Cat People, is another manifestation of this kind of irony. She is a class exploiter, says Valentin, not without justification, but she in her turn is exploited by her husband. Then, we saw that a man whose life is dedicated to a fight against the humiliation of others adopts all that is blameworthy in the conventional male role in his treatment of someone weak and female: in this case, Molina. After his original superior and demanding attitude and his attempts to impose his interpretations of the film stories, which themselves constitute a kind of domination," we are lulled into a false sense of security with Valentin's apparent conversion, but this security is then shaken when he forces Molina to promise that he will never allow himself to be exploited (p.265)

There is irony, too, in Puig's portrayal of gender and of the relationship between the sexes, even in the fact that here indoctrination comes from the homosexual. And where sexuality is concerned, we know that Molina looks like a man but, according to him, 'is' a woman, imprisoned in a *calabozo* (dungeon) (p. 200). He is actually in prison for being a threat to society, but is well-behaved, pacific, conservative and domesticated, anything but a rebel - indeed, he embodies what feminists would consider all the worst elements of the female partner in a traditional bourgeois heterosexual relationship. Following from this is his unquestioning espousal of a pre- feminist viewpoint in general. No good can come of it. (In Puig's fifth novel, *Pubis angelical,* there is again the basic situation of a woman who dedicates herself, unsuccessfully of course, to the search for a superior man.) It is strange, then, that someone who represents an oppressed minority - effeminate homosexuals - and whose only hope of progress would appear to be an opening up of society and a liberalization of attitudes, should be no more and no less than another version of all the complaisant female victims of male oppression that we have already come across. It is Echavarren's opinion that the most striking benefit gained from the presence of the footnotes in *El beso de la mujer arana* is the way that they emphasize the gulf between what homosexuality might be and the I mo(lelo reducido'('scaled-down model') that Molina's condition and attitude constitute." Although Valentin is undoubtedly sincere in his belief that there, in the prison cell, 'nadie oprime a nadie' ('no one is oppressing anyone') (p.206), he is clearly wrong; and the theories of Michael Foucault - so hostile to the post-Freudian idealists - which see sex as a pivot of power, are demonstrated for all to see. This is an example of irony that is tragic indeed." In the end sexuality is an ineluctable pivot of power, whatever the conscious morality or intentions of the subject may be.

It is difficult, too, to cope with the need for separation between sexual appetite and romantic love. When we considered the apparently insoluble problems of Gladys in the previous chapter, we saw that she might well be judged over-ambitious in her wish to enjoy an active and totally fulfilled sex life and (her idea oo romance. Certainly there is something of this incompatibility in Molina. It would be difficult to reconcile his record of sexual promiscuity with his avowed desire to spend a lifetime of' service and fidelity to one single partner. Even if the protagonists' habits were to change dramatically with the advent of a more liberal society, no long-term relationship is likely since, as he himself points out (a double irony here for, ironically, he is aware of irony), he sees himself as female and he wants a real man; yet a man's first and *testing* interest would be a woman, whatever the social climate. In any case, wherever society

insists on the concept of 'the couple', exploitation is inevitable, and without this ideal there is no such thing as romance
The only way that Molina can even approach being loved as he wants to be is by changing his sex. And that, in a way, is what he does. Not for the first time in literature a homosexual relationship is facilitated by one of the partners 'becoming', in one way or another, a woman. One example is the 1914 *novella* by the Portuguese writer Mirio de Si-Carneiro, *A Confisstio de Lucio (Lucio's Confession).* Here, the narrator, Lucio, is profoundly shocked when his intimate friend suddenly produces a wife from nowhere. The wife (who, coincidentally, is called Marta, like Valentin's lover), wastes little time in seducing L6cio, and in spite of certain reservations on his part, the affair continues until Marta betrays him with another lover. Her husband, Ricardo, is distraught at the break-up of her relationship with Lucio and confesses that he had fabricated Marta out of the air: she was part of him, 'sexualized'. He shoots her in hysterical despair, but when Lucio looks down at the dead body, it is Ricardo that is lying there. This, clearly, is a fantastic story, a 'tale of mystery and imagination' or *conte fantastique,* but even so, there are points of contact with *El beso de la mujer arana.* In each story we have a triangle formed by two men and a fabricated woman. In the Portuguese version Ricardo creates Marta in order to seduce L6cio; in the Puig novel Molina creates a mother/]over (who is also Marta, for Molina and Marta are the same character in the end) and he is successful in seducing Valentin. Lf we continue with this line of thought, we may decide that this is another reason why no good can come of the relationship. As Erich Neumann has pointed out, the anima figure, the Young Witch, is much less dangerous than the Great Mother," and, of course, although Molina takes on both these forms, it is the mother figure that is predominant and more effective (Valentin, as a heterosexual, is not likely to be led astray in a definitive sense by a sexual relationship with another man). One further thought: if Molina is both mistress and mother, the physical consummation of the relationship between the two men, in many ways a liberating act, is also an act of incest. And we cannot but remember that, as we saw (n.9), Freud said that freedom and happiness in a man's erotic life can only be attained if he is able to conquer his respect for the opposite sex and his revulsion at the thought of incest with his mother." It is claimed that Molina restores Valentin's faith in the maternal figure, since Valentfn has been estranged.from his mother for so long; if this is the case, then this compounds the basic irony.

Perhaps the most fundamental irony of all is to be found in the inextricable link not only between sex and death, but also between romanticized love and death: the dream may be necessary, but it is also dangerous. The traditional sex/death connection is explicit. For example, any attempted physical contact with Irena, in *Cat People,* will prove fatal. And odder still is the fact that her name means 'peace', since, conversely, it is sex with Valentin, part of whose name is Paz (peace), that leads to the same outcome in the novel's main narrative ('la Ficci6n (1)' as Michelle D6bax has designated it, calling the film narratives 'la Ficci6n (2)') There are countless other points at which we are made aware of the connection, even implicitly, such as when the drums referred to in Molina's recounting of a film about zombies on a Caribbean island are.judged both erotic and sinister (p. 213). Sex may be 'la inocencia misrna' for Valentin (p.224), repeating Puig's own words, but from the beginning the reader is aware that it is the source of Molina's guilt, and later realizes that this constitutes the first step towards his untimely death. According to the Hollywood ethic, love should destroy fear. As the Dorothy Lamour song that forms the epigraph to Chapter Two of *The Buenos Aires Affair has* it,'En la noche de la jungla/ me asusta la oscuridad,/ pero con tu abrazo fuerte/ mi termblor aquitaras' ('In the jungle night/ the darkness frightens me/ but with your strong embrace/ you will calm my trembling'); and this does happen, briefly, in the story of *Cat People(p.20).* But human love is based on and includes sex, and only in the fantasy world of Puig's next novel can an innocuous 'pubis angelical', a sexless genital area, exist. The aim, presumably, of those who have been

made to feel what Mario Mieli has called 'false shame' on account of their sexuality and the orientation of their drives," is to leave these behind with a kind of mystical journey which repudiates the senses. It is by means of enlightened carnal activity that the problems of the flesh are forgotten. The happiness/absence of desire equation was clear in the Leo-Gladys combination in *The Buenos Aires Affair.* Here, after sex with Valentin, Molina confesses that he has become someone else, 'que no es ni hombre ni mujer, pero que se siente . . . ', and it is the heterosexual Valentin who finishes the sentence for him: ' . . . fuera de peligro', comprehending because he shares his feeling (someone else 'who is neither male nor female, but who feels…' '… out of danger') (p.238). This desire for the *vita minima* - and this is not the first time this is found in literature - is due to emotional exhaustion: it is too trying to keep up a struggle against unequal odds. It could almost be seen as a kind of suicide wish. After all, when Molina is happy, he says that he wants to die (p.239), and this is strange since it is only when one is happy, as he has just pointed out (p. 238), that one can believe that it is a lasting state. This kind of flying in the face of all evidence is an example of the consoling dream that is not quite credible enough, and Molina knows, deep down, that the only way to preserve these fleeting moments is to stop living. In the same way that some Romantic and Decadent writers attempted in their fiction to prolong ecstasy by combining the moment of orgasm with the lovers' death, Molina, somewhat less melodramatically, reveals his awareness of the ephemerality of happiness in this world.

There are far too many indications in *El beso de la muje rarana* of Puig as an ironist to consider them all. Some of them are serious indications of self-deception at a tragic level - Molina admires a self-sacrificing middle-class Marxist character in a film about Latin-American urban terrorists but accuses Valentin, a carbon copy of that character, of being without feelings, for example (p. 129), while Valentin thinks that the enclosure situation of their prison cell means that he and his companion are free from external pressures. Equally important is the fact that society's view of Molina as a man means that his knowledge and experience of the feminine condition are limited to its sexual and emotional aspects: he is ignorant of the pressing socioeconomic problems that are influential in women's lives. Other examples of irony are formal, to do with the framework and structure of the novel and the use of fiction within fiction, especially, of course, with reference to the world of film. For instance, there is no question about the fact that Molina is constantly aware of the artificiality of the medium, the'trucos del cine' ('tricks of the cinema') as he calls them (p.80). As Frank McConnell has said, film is an art 'that seems at once absolutely artificial and absolutely realistic'," and Molina reflects this in his d indeed why, he will tell a story. Molina's consciousness of how, an awareness is indubitably a reflection of Puig's awareness: Puig relates Michelle D6bax's 'Ficci6n (1)', Molina the 'Ficci6n (2)'. Since this kind of writing is bound to be very consciously planned, it would be difficult for the novelist to refrain from extending patterns of reflection and self-referentiality into the text itself. The process adds a certain ludic, but not frivolous, element to the novel. It is fun for both creator and reader but it does not in any way debase the value of the serious irony nor lessen the involvement of the author. Some of the authorial game-playing has-been noted by Michelle D6bax, while at the same time she draws our attention to more profound connections and areas of self-reference (such as the similarity between Molina's relationship with the prison Governor and that of the heroine of the Nazi propaganda film with the French Resistance organization, the Maquis). One or two of the more light-hearted cases are that the last words before the laguna (gap, void) which separates the first two parts of the novel are Molina's: 'd6jeme pensar un poquito, porque tengo como una laguna en la cabeza. . .'('. . give me a moment to think, because my mind has gone blank' - literally, 'I have a gap in my head') (p.157); then, at the beginning of Chapter Ten, almost the first words (again Molina is speaking) are that it is ten past ten. More tenuous a connection, perhaps, is that between the convention that footnotes

illuminate what is above them and that, in *Cat People,* when the heroine's architect husband and his colleagues are working at night, their faces are illuminated by the light that comes through the light-table from below. The text refers to the text: 'la Ficci6n (1)' refers to 'la Ficci6n (2)'.

The irony, the observation of the gulf between what appears to be the case and what is, makes no attempt to ridicule or mock the protagonists, and there is no hint of cruelty or malice in its presentation. We are never told that Molina looks or sounds foolish, even by implication; we are never encouraged to see the stories he tells as inferior kitsch - indeed, they are presented to us at great length and, so to speak, in verbatim detail, so that we too are trapped by their spell. Though intellectually we, as readers, may side with Valentin in his original questioning of the simplistic values and events of the first story, it is not long before Molina's skill and reasonableness, sensitivity and good humour carry us along too. The unacceptability of his effeminate sexual orientation and the sexual problems of both the protagonists are at least partly based on their unthinking adherence to dubious social conventions, yet their suffering is so sympathetically described that we are never impatient with them. Perhaps the strongest indication that Puig does not distance himself is that here again there is no obvious answer to any of the problems he presents: ironic perception is usually seen as involving authorial certainty and manipulative purpose. As D.C. Muecke reminds us, irony always contains the basic concept of a purposeful deception, together with mockery, and an ironic observer will make any affecting ironic contrast painful for the actors and amusing for the reader." Admittedly, Vladimir Jankelevitch claims that irony is too cruel to be really comic," but that does not affect my argument, since whether or not the Molina/Valentin combination is comic is, not at issue, nor is it likely to be. There is, however, an objection that could well be raised, and perhaps we should anticipate it: since this text obstinately refuses to fit into any of the apparent categories of irony, it might be claimed that is not ironic at all. Are we falling into the trip of seeing irony where it does not exist? Wayne Booth, in *A Rhetoric of Irony,* is helpful on this: he dedicates a whole chapter to the question 'is it ironic?"' The chapter's first subdivision deals with 'straightforward warnings in the author's own voice', and the most immediate of these, where ' "secret" intentions' are often found, is a book's title. Where *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is concerned, it is at least likely to alert the reader on this score. Booth's suggested category of 'known errors proclaimed' also applies to Puig; though 'proclaimed' is clearly too strong, there can be little doubt that the author is not at one with the ignorance or - in his case - *innocence* of his characters, and he knows what he is doing in highlighting these. We could paraphrase Booth and say that Puig is communicating with us from behind his characters' backs, but we should have to add, unless I am entirely mistaken, that the omniscient state of mind that is usually attached to this activity is missing. In theatrical asides, for example, complicity with the audience and humour are achieved by means of this kind of communication, and it is invariably mocking. It is in the section of his chapter that Booth calls 'Conflicts of Facts within the Work' that we can most easily recognize *El beso de la mujer arana,* as we can see from our selection of examples, and we are made even more confident in our claim that the book is actually full of irony by reading the last subdivision of the Wayne Booth essay, 'Conflicts of Belief': he is referring here to the conflict between 'the beliefs expressed and the beliefs we hold *and suspect the author is holding'."* Puig does not invent or impose irony, he recognizes it; in this sense he is not an ironist, but an aware observer who includes himself among its victims.

Although *Cat People* is incontrovertibly the key film in *El beso de la* mujer arana, the others are not without importance. The second story, *Destino (Fate),* is taken from a Nazi propaganda film which, though in fact no more than a pastiche, might well have been shown in Buenos Aires in the forties, as Molina claims. Its most striking feature is its weighting in favour of what, to us,

constitutes the wrong side in the struggle. This is hardly surprising considering its context, but Puig's motives in inventing and including a story of this kind are worth thinking about, 'especially when we consider the amount of Nazi sympathy in Argentina during the Second World War. It deals with a beautiful Parisian night-club singer, Leni, who falls in love with a charming German officer; thus she is torn between her devotion to him and her loyalty to France. Like Molina, she belongs to two worlds: she originally comes from Alsace, so that her Christian name is German and her surname is French. The repellently cruel and exploitative nature of her own countrymen is contrasted with the irreproachable and high-minded courtesy of the German occupiers, and this intensifies her confusion even before the relationship with her lover begins. Further complications arise when she is asked to take the place of a young Resistance worker who has been killed. This girl had found herself in the same trap as Molina does in *El beso:* her mission to discover the location of a German arsenal for the Maquis had failed because of her love for an enemy officer. It was the Maquisards themselves who had murdered her in cold blood, a deed made all the more horrifying by the fact that she was happily pregnant and felt secure in her lover's support. Leni has no option but to agree to take on the job, as a young, and totally innocent, cousin of hers is threatened with death if she refuses. Once again we have one of Le Bigot's pernicious triangles, as the heroine finds herself with two intolerable solutions. Her first step, like Molina's, is to agree to do what is asked of her: then, also like Molina, she is trapped, and furthermore an apparently unavoidable chain of death and disaster follows. The young cousin sacrifices himself in an attempt to kill the brutal maquisard blackmailer, while Leni discovers that her]over is less civilized than she had supposed. She decides to denounce him to the Resistance and is prevented from doing so only because she receives an invitation to star in a film in Berlin.

It is at this point that Valentin's distaste for the story becomes so much of an irritation to Molina that he refuses to go on. The narrative is carried on in the (invented, of course) official publicity hand-out from tile Tobis, Berlin film studios, and is presented in the form of a lengthy footnote. In spite of its alleged origin, the document's tone varies little from that used in the first half of the account. The voice is clearly still that of Molina, with its plethora of descriptive detail, its excited wallowing in phrases such as 'su arrogante uniforme militar' ('his arrogant military uniform') (p.91) and its interest in the heroine's search for 'un hombre superior' ('a superior man') (p.91). The story that this note tells is of Leni's conversion to the Nazi cause, led, revealingly, by a figure referred to as the *Conductor.*" Werner, her lover, convinces her *by means of* a film that be was justified in ordering the death of iii(, two Jews who have earned a reputation as the leading anti-Nazi fighters. One of these depraved master-criminals is still at large, and Leni is convinced that she has seen his face somewhere. Werner returns to Paris before her; when she joins him there, she is shocked to see flow much Jewish influence there is in France, and she determines to locate the hateful anti-German terrorist. At this point we find the word 'Sigue' ('To be continued') (p.94), but in fact this story is not (Continued here, and the next footnote is part of the next chapter an(] consists of a treatise about the possibilities of a physiological basis for the homosexual condition.

There is clearly reference in the orientation of this story, as well as in its narrative style, to the necessary dream that we have considered before. Though Valentin has little time for it, Molina confesses that if he were to be offered the chance to see just one film over again, he would choose this one (p.63). For Valentin, it is an 'inmundicia nazi' ('a piece of Nazi filth') (p.63), but Molina is so deeply involved in it, so moved and thrilled by it, that his cell-mate's criticisms infuriate and offend him to the extent of making him cry. Through his tears he claims that it is a work of art. And Valentin could not possibly know anything about it since he never saw it (p.63). Molina's criterion is aesthetic while Valentin's is moral; like Leni herself, who says at first

that the only thing she likes about Germany is its music (p. 61), Molina is capable of suppressing his awareness of unpleasant facts and concentrating on cosas lindas' ('beautiful things') in order, as he puts it, not to go insane (p.85). 1 am in sympathy with Gonzalez Uriarte when he claims that this reaction reveals 'la fascinacion que siente *Molina por el aspect oexterno* del nacismo. Fascinaci6n que es compartida por todo un tipo de homosexual y por una parte de la pequena burguesia de los paises del cono sur' ('the fascination Molina feels for the trappings of Nazism: a fascination shared by one kind of homosexual and by a section of the lower middle classes in Southern Cone')," if by this he is saying that there is little ideological sympathy. Leslie Fiedler, in a memorable phrase, once referred to 'the immunity of popular taste to ideology'. 'There is something profoundly disturbing,' he went on, 'about the power of vulgar works . . . to move us at a level beneath that of our conscious allegiances, religious or political'. Fiedler may well be right, in fact, when he claims that we will one day abandon, or at least 'drastically downgrade', both ethics and aesthetics in favour of what he calls 'ecstatics'. Perhaps we already have. This encapsulates the most important element in Molina's point of view. The film may have been invented by Manuel Puig, but many aspects of it are based on the early, European work of the director Douglas Sirk (though not of course the Nazi viewpoint). In a perceptive appraisal of Sirk's melodramatic output, the critic David Thomson puts his finger on the reason for the appeal of these films to the Molinas of this world: what he calls their 'graphic fluency' expressed the timelessness of a genre that 'soothes away the romantic wound'. 'There are no ugly or gross shots in Sirk,' he adds, and in answer to the anticipated accusation that the material is trite, says, 'The material is style'. This could also be an answer to an accusation that the material is an indefensible 'inmundicia nazi'.

In a move from footnote to the main body of the text, we find that it is Molina himself who finishes telling the story, starting from the point where he had left off', not from the last word of the footnote: 'sigue'. (In the English translation of the novel, the 'official' footnote actually runs below Molina's last recounted episode, modifying the nature of the reading experience.") It all ends when a complex plan which, like Molina's own, involves seduction and apparent betrayal, backfires. Leni kills the inhuman Maquis leader and is herself shot; she dies, like Ziegfeld's wife is *La traici6n de Rita Hayworth,* pretending that there is nothing wrong. After her death she is honoured by a life-sized statue in the heroes' pantheon in Berlin. Luise Rainer lived on in Toto's heart; Leni lives on in Molina's; the well-intentioned, noble woman lives on in truth. The adult and the child react similarly; perhaps the only difference is that Molina is so much more aware of the processes involved in the creation of his response. This does not, however, invalidate it. Frank McConnell has something helpful to say on this:

> Sentimental art, the art of the romantic imagination, recognises both the necessity of recapturing the naive perceptions of a child for the sake of a fully human, fully conscious life and the impossibility of recapturing that life without the aid of the sophistication, the intelligence, and the techniques of artifice which separate it from us so irrevocably. We are never, in other words, taken out of ourselves: we read the poem, view the film, as mature men and women; and the gift of the poem or film is not a cancellation of that maturity, but an enrichment of it."

The word 'mature' begs a question, but even so Molina is undeniably older and more experienced than Toto.

The third film is one that Molina tells himself when Valentin insists on abandoning him in favour of studying. In spite of its being a fairly close rendering of the 1945 Hollywood offering, *The*

Enchanted Cottage, and of an auto-reference in the narration to 'la casa del encantamiento' ('the enchanted house') (p. 1 14), few interpreters have recognized it, and fewer still have seen it as vital to their view of the novel as a whole. Yet it seems to me revealing on several levels. First of all, we are again reminded of the Toto/Molina connection. In the same way that Toto was talking to himself when he gave his version of the Ziegfeld story, Molina here is both narrator and interlocutor. And the setting of the tale strikes a chord in our memory too - it is not all that far removed from Toto's 'cabin in the snowy forest', even if there is more evidence of authorial control ('si no hay nieve es otono': 'if there's no snow it's autumn', p. 104). Then, though less obviously than in the case of Toto's intervention in *The Great Ziegfeld,* the narrator reveals that he sees himself as one of the dramatis personae (p. 106). If narrative is a sign, then it is a sign of the truth of one individual.
Here, too, we find a pervading theme in Puig: the possibility of achieving beauty with unpromising materials. In *The Buenos Aires Affair* Gladys's sculptures were fabricated from rubbish; Molina's discourse is constructed from a less than respectable genre, and from fairly lightweight examples of it at that. "An extension is the beauty that is found under the skin, so to speak, of the unattractive heroine of *The Enchanted Cottage* and the horribly disfigured man that she loves. One of the reasons, perhaps, that critics have paid so little attention to this film is that itdoes not fit in with their theories: all the films in the novel have a tragic end, claims Gonzalez Uriarte, inaccurately;" all the female heroines are young, beautiful, dark-haired and white-skinned, says Maryse Vich-Campos, equally inaccurately, they eternally live an impossible love, are victims of uncontrollable forces and are often being blackmailed. And they die. " Clearly, *The Enchanted Cottage,* the story of a handsome man engaged to be married to a beautiful if unpleasant woman, who because of his own facial injuries looks beneath the surface o@ his 'sirvienta fea' ('plain servant') and discovers her 'fine soul' (p.111) is taking us in a different direction. By some sort of magic the couple become beautiful in each other's eyes; they marry and are blissfully happy, and we are glad to endorse the view that the oppressed and unattractive are morally superior. This is a romantic film, and that is a romantic idea." All of us can identify with it since we are all insecure. Puig himself once said when a journalist from a Brazilian newspaper asked him why he had set *El beso de la mujer arana* in a sordid prison-cell, 'Porque eu procuro a beleza no feio. Porque eu sou o feio' ('Because I'm looking for beauty in ugliness. Because I am ugliness'). " But there is more to it than that of course. We are back with the question of truly *seeing,* of distinguishing between what is and what is only superficial. The ugly, clumsy servant-girl is really beauty itself, she is loyal, self-sacrificing, even - unaccountably - cultured. The only one who recognizes this at first is the blind narrator (another *mise en abyme:* Puig narrates the tale of Molina, who narrates the tale of a blind man, who narrates the thoughts of the servant-girl, who is a reflection of the second narrator, Molina). Molina sees himself in this girl: like him, she is not what she appears to be, but the exigent gaze of the sighted is not capable of this discovery. And yet, as Echavarren has said, this is another of the metaphors that represent a 'sujeto invisible' ('invisible subject'), sit)(:(- the girl is actually not beautiful and Molina is not a woman. " This too is an aspect of the necessary dream: the individual's reliance for survival on the hope that someone, somewhere, even if it is in heaven and not on this earth, will recognize the truth of his being. For this can produce the longed-for happy ending. It will be an understanding that transcends all misconceptions and, on a deeper level, will overwhelm not only the horror and putrefaction of death but also what Puig occasionally seems to see as the horror and degradation of the flesh.

This is a moment of hope and consolation for Molina, for romantic love is liberating - not only in socioeconomic terms, as it was for radical feminists, or even as far as pleasure is concerned" - but on a transcendental level. In the same way as Gladys, in the previous novel, was prepared to endure pain to attain what was probably an unattainable aim, Molina is capable of denying,

even sacrificing, his sex life, though not his sexuality. This may be judged one of the most potent and tragic ironies of all: rejection of the flesh in a relationship that is born of the needs of the flesh, a step in the direction of the *pubis angelical* of the next novel. We remember that Molina's stated aim is to look after his lover for ever, 'day in, day out', as the hero of *La dama de las camelias* puts it in the epigraph to Chapter One of *The Buenos Aires Affair*. He frankly admires the mother in *Cal People,* at least as he imagines her, a moral person, well dressed, who has made her family happy, someone who is affectionate, fastidious, flirtatious, but almost virginal (pp.22-23). Also, his own real-life sexual experiences have resulted in opprobrium and seem likely to result in more unhappiness, at the very least. In all the novels, the flesh is presented as repulsive, other than when coitus is accompanied by dedication and devotion. In *Boquitas pintadas* we are constantly reminded not only of death but of illness and decay: the decline of the organism. In *The Buenos Aires Affair* no attempt is made to gloss over the repellent aspects of sexual intercourse, and the autopsy report adds to the reader's revulsion, especially when we are brought to an awareness of the sterile uselessness of' the protagonist's final circulation, post mortem (p.226). The affective life, which for Molina, as for many women, means all there could possibly be to life, is based on sex; but sex itself is something that society condemns, by and large, and the individual may well find it reprehensible, ugly, even nauseating. Love is redemptive, sex degrading, and Molina has little option but to cloak his general masochism with the terminology of love so as to live with it. In the end, though, this too brings tl)out death. In a way, it must be added, this is what society exacts: Molina wants what women are supposed to want, but his personal tragedy is that he is not really a woman. Feminine masochistic sacrifice is not an unknown phenomenon: this would be a very much more straightforward situation (even if it could not arise from the circumstances presented in this novel) and would lead to less thought, soul-searching and concern on the part of the reader. The answer would seem to be easier to locate: society could and should put an end to feminine abnegation by recognizing the rights and needs of women. I fear, though, that Puig himself realizes that this is only a superficial and, ultimately, unsatisfactory solution. As we have seen from *Boquitas pintadas and The Buenos Aires Affair,* it would be an improvement, but death must come, and the path that leads to it is not without unhappiness or frustration whatever happens. There is more genuine escapism in *7he Enchanted Cottage* than in any of the other films. Their protagonists started off with something - beauty, talent, money, sex appeal, even love - and life became impossible; here the heroine starts with no obvious advantages and life rescues her.

An important feature of the last film recounted in Part One of the novel is the way it underlines Molina's orientation. As he thinks over the story he has just started telling (a complete invention of the author's, incidentally), a story that ostensibly reflects Valentin's life and position and which has a male protagonist, his mind is on the hero's sophisticated French mistress and his elegant mother. Both the woman of the world who has befriended the young radical during his period in France and his mother represent the other side of Molina's Jekyll and Hyde aspirations. Gone are the gentle, ill-used, unattractive victims of male exploitation. Here we are in the world of Choli's jewel thieves from *La traici6n de Rita Hayworth:* intelligent, glamorous, strong-willed and strong women. Their strength, though, is insufficient for them to avoid love and its attendant tragedies. For Molina this could be seen as the correlative of another fleeting hope - that success, glamour and elegance are possible even if the web, similar to the one that he himself is weaving, has trapped its victims. 'True love', with its concomitant devotion, exclusivity and sacrifice, does exist and should be sought at all costs, but ideally women should maintain their impassive beauty and dignity and not allow themselves to be humiliated. Like all the other comforting dreams, this one is completely impossible. As Stanley Cavell has said, film turns our epistemological convictions inside out because reality is

known to us before the appearance of it. However, what Molina, and those like him, desperately want to believe is that adhesion to appearances can somehow affect, even change, that reality.

Like Valentin, the hero of this film has rich parents, but he turns against what they represent when his social consciousness is raised by studying politics at the Sorbonne. Nevertheless, he is unswerving in his devotion to his mother. It is his father's capitalist views that he finds intolerable. And he seems more concerned about his parents' divorce and his mother's consequent loneliness than he is with the cause he supports. He himself fits in nowhere: the people he wants to fight for despise him because of his background of money and privilege; his mother is about to marry again; his career as an independent racing driver is ruined when his home-made car is sabotaged, presumably by someone hired by one of the big names in Formula One racing. When he has to return to South America because his father has been kidnapped by guerillas, the usual Molina-esque complications are to be found - with deception, when the boy convinces the revolutionaries that he is on their side; sacrifice, when his French mistress pays a huge ransom fee; and death, when the terrorists murder his father. There is a police shoot-out that prefigures Molina's own death, and there is the hero's reunion with his mother, while the French woman, whom he really loves but who comes from another world (p. 126), goes back to Paris.

Molina elaborates on all this and parallels become even more obvious: the hero, a boy whose wrath is aroused by social injustice, seduces a poor girl and makes her pregnant, 'una muchacha a laque no dan ganas de acariciarla despu6s del orgasmo' ('a girl that you would not want to caress after the moment of orgasm') (p. 133) - at least for Molina there is to be one post-orgasmic kiss from the man who makes him promise not to allow himself to be exploited. Then the triangular situation involving the young revolutionary, his mother and the woman he loves is emphasized by the similarity in the descriptions of the two women. The choice between them echoes all Oedipal situations, but particularly Molina's. And we find, ultimately, that the mother too is tiidirig something. She has been unfaithful to her husband, is involve(] in political intrigues and was an accessory after the fact when her husband was killed. The youth is betrayed, in other words, as so often happens, this time not by Rita Hayworth and all she stands for but by Neumann's 'all-powerful numinous woman' who is his mother. As we have seen before, it is not the tempting Young Witch but the deceitful Old Witch who is so dangerous." Significantly, the protagonist orders his mother's execution, then dies himself. At this point we cannot help remembering the sixties view of the homosexual as revolutionary.

Indeed, this is a key moment in the novel for Molina, for it is here that, consciously or unconsciously, he prepares to discard his mother as the dominant figure in his life in favour of a lover, however unsuitable. With the waiter, Gabriel (a name reminiscent of Genet's *Notre Dame des fleurs),* he had wanted to have both, but now his mother's claims on him begin to recede into the background. Later, he is to say, 'My mother has had her life' (p.258), and this constitutes the final rejection. It is relevant that the substitute for the mother in the symbolic story should be older than the protagonist, a woman who has lived and suffered and know ' s the ways of the world, not altogether unlike the woman she might have replaced; for Molina, there is a related sense of having found someone who, though admittedly younger than he is, is a dominant, even a domineering character. And, for him, an 'hombre superior'.

It is at this point in the novel, too, that the controversial footnotes begin to be really obtrusive. These have been judged as carrying on 'a rather elementary symposium on homosexuality' by

one critic, and as unconnected to the main text, as clarifying and explaining nothing, and as forming a separate text by another. Puig does, in fact, risk ruining his narrative with them and clearly their very length is going to constitute a practical problem for the reader since it is impossible to read two texts at once." It seems to me that the explanation is a fairly simple one, but it is important because one aspect of it ultimately reveals the author's ambivalence, even pessimism, The simple answer is that Puig is prepared to take the risk of alienating his readers because if he succeeds in holding their attention, the gain will be immeasurable: he will have prepared them for what is about to happen and rendered them not only reasonably well-disposed, but sympathetic, towards what might otherwise seem a shocking scene. Garcia Ramos is absolutely right when he claims that the author is conditioning us for the physical consummation of the love that is burgeoning in Molina's heart." The reader should not ignore the footnotes, for if he does, a major key to at least some kind of understanding of the novel will have been passed over.

The more thought-provoking aspect of the relationship between the footnotes and the main body of the text demands investigation into the ion pattern and theme of the notes themselves. They are, with the exception of the 'factual' and intradiegetic notes to the Nazi propaganda film , a homogeneous collection, orientated towards the theories proposed by the politico-sexual liberation movements of the sixties, and at least some of the sexual idealists of that epoch. Their quasi-scientific nature f gives them an impersonal, even objective air, but they are not, 0 course, either impersonal or objective. Like the sixties movements, they constitute an explicit plea for freedom from repression, a repression that was seen then as the pervasion of society by a ruthless masculinity.

The first note of all, taken from the writings of D. J. West, is refutation of the three possible physical causes of the homosexual condition; West supports his argument by referring to other experts. This appears fairly early in the narrative, in the middle of the Nazi propaganda film and before the note that accompanies the film. The ground is prepared. But it is almost forty pages later that the alternative text' is continued. This time West investigates the views of the general public as to the causes of homosexuality: could it be the result of impulses that are just wicked, corruption by other people, or enforced segregation in adolescence? All of these theories are rejected, and there are references to Freud and his views on neurosis and sexuality, on the role of society and on the family. For society, the two most inconvenient manifestations of the libido are incestuous desire and homosexuality.

Halfway through Molina's reflections on the story of the Latin-American radical and in the middle of the account of his ministrations to the sick Valentin, we find the third footnote. They are now becoming more frequent - We return to Freud and his appreciation of the need for the individual to adapt to the norms of the society in which he lives, for the couple is not everyone's ideal. There is a reference to the theory of over-repression, taken from Anna Freud, and then to the Oedipus complex and infant bisexuality. just five pages later, the author cites Fenichel's views on the probability of a homosexual future for a child who is closer to his mother than his father, and elaborates on this with references to Freud, mother Fixations, and the possibility of narcissism. With the next note we move towards the concepts of repression, domination, exploitation and female inferiority within society; the idea of sexuality as sin is mentioned, and we finally come to the point that all this has been leading to - the need for sexual liberation. We have a short summary of some of the views of Marcuse, Brown and Marcuse I s disciple, Altman. Below Chapter Nine - that is, in Part Two of the novel - all this is made even clearer. Particular attention is paid to Norman 0. Brown's view of the possibility of true sexuality, to Marcuse's theory of 'surplus repression' and to Kate Millett, who in *Sexual Politics* (1970), one

of the handbooks of feminism, argues against the hypocritical economic exploitation of sexual alliances that makes bourgeois marriage the only possibility. The ultimate thesis is that of a certain Danish doctor, 'Anneli Taube', and this encapsulates many f the theories that we have already extrapolated from the previous novels. We have worked up to this with all the other notes, even including the occasional piece of devil's advocacy, such as the anthropologist Unwin's claim that sexual liberty can be equated with social decadence, and that social vigour is born from sexual repression.

The solution, as is so often the case, is seen as a kind of happy medium, with the elimination of 'surplus repression'. And a parallel to this is the need for a role for the bisexual in society: exclusive homosexuality can itself become authoritarian, the socialist countries are notoriously hostile to it - somewhat invalidating the argument that the sexual and political revolutions must go hand in hand - and even if this could be remedied, the implication (supported by Puig himself in past interviews) is that homosexuality is as much a limitation as exclusive heterosexuality. 'Anneli Taube' claims that the male child's rejection of his natural parental model in favour of feminine characteristics - tenderness, tolerance and culture - is a deliberate, courageous act. But the model role is also submissive, and the male homosexual will learn to be submissive and accept, if not welcome, male exploitation just as his mother has done, emulating the worst characteristics of female heterosexuality. However, things are changing, we are told, especially since the sixties liberation movements, and it is becoming accepted that a strong man and weak woman no longer constitute the universal paradigm.

At the same time as the notes move towards their final argument, Valentin's reserve and hostility are being weakened. Molina starts off by telling him something about his sexual orientation; then, as Valentin shows few signs of sympathy - indeed, he is still hostile to him and insists on reading - the fact that Molina lets slip that 'his turn will come'(p. 103) indicates that the next stage in the wearing-down process is to be that of physical debilitation. But in the meantime Molina tells himself the story of *7he Enchanted Cottage, the only* film in which I misunderstood, 'misread' character finds happiness and erotic fulfilment, and before the appearance of the next footnote we are told of his interview with **tire** Governor, **in** which it seems that it is *Molina's* resolve that is weakening: he is now trying to have things both ways. He is affectionate and attentive when Valentin is ill; comforts him with good things; tells him another story. But now the account is interrupted by negative mental images which force themselves into his head, suggesting his concern for the potential outcome of his actions. This violent world is one which he is beginning to be aware of through his growing love for Valentin. Valentin's vulnerability becomes clearer and clearer, and when he loses control and hurls a cake across the cell, we can see that the,.3pider woman's web is trapping its preyjust as it was intended to. Not without reason has Molina referred in passing to Sparafucile, the professional assassin in *Rigoletio(p.25).* In Act II of the opera, the jester, Rigoletto, reflects that he and the man of violence have much in corn mon: 'Pari siai-no!' ('We are two of a kind!') he sings, for whereas Sparafucile kills with the sword, he kills with words.

But will Molina actually use his power over Valentin? His vacillation is increasingly obvious. In a second interview with the Governor, he manages to postpone his deadline and he gives nothing away. Valentin is now a contrite, affectionate and grateful friend who begs Molina's pardon for his bad behaviour over and over again. When Molina tells him that his appeal is going well and that he is to be moved out of that cell, that is the end. Valentin is not only confused and shaken, but almost distraught: this is a culminating point in the 'first fiction', for Valentin is incontrovertibly trapped. But as the footnote makes clear, Molina's adhesion to

feminine social models has trapped the effeminate homosexual too. In the sixth note, we find Roszak's apt claim that liberation is most needed for the image of woman that men keep in their minds, and which so many real women try to live up to. Molina is one of these 'real women'.

My contention is that although it would be only too easy to see all this as an unequivocal cry in support of the utopianism of the sixties, it would be a mistake to do so. Everything we have read so far suggests that Puig does not see the possibility of social paradise based on sexual liberation, even if there is room for much improvement. The experts that he refers to in the notes do not necessarily support the position he is portraying, and he is quite aware of this. After all, he refers to Wilhelm Reich, for example, whose 'total orgasm' theory ignored friendships between people of the same sex, the possibility of' romantic love and, of course, homosexuality. Since the sixties, with the new permissiveness and the new selfishness, we now have what Charles Rycroft has designated 'neuroses of confusion'; and Rycroft adds that 'the sexual revolution has so far at least proved to be largely an upper middle-class phenomenon having little if anything to do with the class war'." In Puig's writings there is not only ambivalence but also pessimism. So many people - psychologists, theologians, even poets - have seen the aim of ridding man of his neuroses as illusory, and I am sure that he shares this view. He once, in fact, commented that with the elimination of the strong man/weak woman paradigm in the United States little had been gained. Now, he said, there were 'dificultades en restablecer un entendimiento' ('difficulties in re-establishing some kind of understanding')." As Cavell has said of film, sometimes the narrative mode is not 'Once upon a time but 'what if one day but a great deal of what Puig ostensibly hopes for and his novels plead for is as much part of the world of fantasy as are the relationships and events of the Hollywood films that inspire Molina. Like these, though, it is a dream that is necessary, and the struggle must go on.

There are just two films left before Molina's fatal sortie into the world. The first is a very free adaptation of a 1943 horror story, *I Walked wz'th a Zombie,* which itself was a modern Caribbean version *of Jane Eyre.* (Incidentally, it was directed by Jacques Tourneur, who was also responsible for *Cal People.)* It is interesting that in the 'first fiction' Molina no longer has to adopt the role of supplicant. At this point, Valentin not only suggests that he tell him the story of a film, but to all intents and purposes begs him to do so. He has eaten well, feels better, and says that this would be the finishing touch to the evening.

The story is of a girl who travels from New York by ship to join her fianc6 on a sinister Caribbean island. Our fears regarding the likelihood of a happy outcome are built up by the equivocal reaction of the ship's captain when she tells him her story, and are compounded by our discovery of the fact that her future bridegroom is a widower whose acquaintance she had made only a couple of days before agreeing to marry him. Furthermore, she is greeted on her arrival at the island by a less than ideal situation: her fianc6 is a weak character, there is a repellent, all-powerful butler - similar to the housekeeper in *Rebecca* and an unpleasant scene when a cask of rum, brought as a wedding present by the natives, is rejected. Things are obviously not going to go well.

Unlike the situation in *Jane Eyre,* the male protagonist's first wife is not still alive. But neither is she dead. She has been turned into that most horrifying and significant of creatures, a zombie: a living corpse. She is, furthermore, by no means the only one of these on the island, though she is the only woman in this unhappy position (female weakness means that there is little to be gained in reducing women to a state of impotent servitude). The zombie workforce obeys and labours through each night, but in the moonlight their tears are visible, and it is clear that they

are suffering. Indeed, there is little happiness to be found anywhere. The. bridegroom is irresolute and afraid and ends each night in a drunken stupor. The heroine is worried and nervous, with at best curiosity about her predecessor, and at worst, consuming suspicions and fears which lead her into danger. And all the time we are conscious of a sinister presence that is manipulating events and circumstances, and we hear about a voodoo priest. When one day the heroine goes alone to a beautiful mansion that had caught her eye on a tour of the island, but which she had been warned against visiting, she finds that it is the. female zombie's prison house and that her black housekeeper, the one sympathetic person she has met since her arrival, is this woman's nurse and gaoler. From her she learns about her husband's ambivalence and cowardice, of how he had witnessed the inhuman repression of the plantation-workers' rebellion, years earlier, by the brutal landowner who was his father. And of how that repression had taken the form of converting them all into creatures without will-power or, indeed, any power at all.

After his father's death - and there is mention of an ambush, again prefiguring Molina's later circumstances - the son tries to remedy the situation but achieves nothing. Yet another standard Molina feature now emerges; the wicked voodoo priest had blackmailed the young man's first wife threatening to kill her husband if she did not yield to him. Her husband was mistakenly convinced that she had betrayed him, so he killed her, and was then blackmailed in his turn. So we have another deceived character who is trapped by circumstances beyond his control. Now, more than ever before, Molina seems to be identifying with the male protagonist, even though it has to be added that this is in addition to his involvement with the plight and personality of the heroine and the indisputable connection between women and zombies. We are not limited to, or even greatly aware of, male/female exploitation in this film though, but rather of two innocent victims whose problems have both constitutional and accidental sources. The latter, as always, are susceptible to modification, but in none of the previous stories nor, ultimately, in the 'first fiction' of the novel, does any advantage seem to be gained by the attempt to change them. If we consider the prison/body/native country images, present throughout the book, it will help us to see this more clearly. (We remember that in the explanation of Valentin's terrorist code, it is explicitly stated that 'house' means 'native country', p. 140.)

All of these images are, in a way, interchangeable, since even if they represent something accidental rather than constitutional, there is little possibility of radical and permanent change. All improvement in Puig is a question of degree; many problems are insoluble anyway. The idea of the body as a prison is by no means new, but for a woman trapped in a man's body the connection takes on a new force. It occurs to us that both the body and prisons constitute no more than temporary homes, but the price paid for freedom from the body is death, and in this story that is also the cost of freedom from the characters' 'accidental' incarceration in the Villa Devoto penitentiary: Molina moves heaven and earth to achieve release from his bonds, but has to promise to betray another human being for this purpose, and dies himself before he can enjoy his liberated state. Divided loyalties are a commonplace. Could Molina's final gesture be interpreted as an attempt to escape from the prison of exclusive feminine orientation? Is his act of courage a manifestation of his male side? Not all masculine traits are reprehensible, and it is bisexuality, not homosexuality, that both the footnotes and the author defend. That his final action is not only unsuccessful but also misunderstood again reveals the authorial pessimism that I have already referred to.

There is the same degree of failure when the young protagonist of the Caribbean film sets fire to the zombies' huts so as to liberate them. In fact, they survive, if this can be called survival.

They go on half living, and suffering, and there is no liberation. In the previous story the Latin-American terrorist set fire to his own house, in the same way as political rebels apparently try to destroy their country; for them, the accepted model is actually unacceptable, heritage and the social environment are repellent, the house, the home, are incompatible with freedom. None of it is tolerable, but the liberating aim is, at least in part, unrealizable. To use Fromm's terms, I static adaptation' - the acquisition of new habits - is all we can hope for; 'dynamic adaptation' - fundamental change - is really impossible." As Stanley Cavell once said, in Hollywood films, when the hero goes home, his life is over. Home is not heaven, but a prison, and when you escape there is nowhere to go.

In spite of the horror and danger and the loss of the man she (presumably) loves, the heroine of the zombie film does achieve some kind of happy ending. It is by no means a straight run, as it was in *The Enchanted Cottage,* where no one suffered (the hero's original fianc6c, who soon disappears from the story, was insensitive and unpleasant, and therefore does not count). Nevertheless, in spite of a hairsbreadth escape from the clutches of the butler, who turns out to be the villainous voodoo priest and who embodies all that the insistent drums have suggested about sex, danger and the occult; in spite of violence and rejection from her drunken husband and his death at the hands of his poor, suggestible first wife, who still loves him; in spite of all this, she *does* escape, the voodoo priest is struck by lightning, the zombies' huts and the first wife's house are burned down, they at last escape into death, and the handsome captain is waiting to take the heroine away on his ship. Love will conquer all, and the future promises happiness.
There is now a degree of optimism in Molina, then, even if he realizes that there is a price to pay and someone will suffer if he finds fulfilment. ']'he island - the prison, the body, the house - can be left behind. The escape by sea is an escape to happiness; the sailing-away image has frequently been used to represent this, and as well as its connotations of a new start, it often has erotic overtones. Above all it is consolatory, for in leaving behind the horrors of the island and going into exile one leaves behind one's own involvement and guilt, and an authority figure will be there to protect and guard the victim against future misery.

Yet despite the ending, this film is less than comforting, not only because death and suffering form an integral part of it, or because images of the living dead, among others, are only too distressingly relevant to both prisoners, but also because, intercalated in the tale in italics, is the series of mental pictures I have already mentioned, pictures that are not dissimilar to the 'sensations' of Gladys and Leo in *7'he Buenos Aires Affair.* And these undermine optimism as they illuminate the narrator's confusion and indecision: like the footnotes, these images are strategically placed in their fifty-three pages of text. A nice irony is that it is after the impression has been given that Molina has made up his mind to sacrifice himself for Valentin, an impression gained from the cumulative effect of these odd images as well as by one particular statement, that Valentin's strength and reserve are shown as totally broken and Molina has him in the palm of his hand (pp. 193 and 198 respectively).

It is all mixed up and surrealistic: here are the zombie film, a police ambush and a sinister, dream-like hospital - another enclosure and impotence situation. On this level, the filmic sea voyage is an escape to death: an injured heart drowns in black sea-water, the roughly-painted ship's figurehead (reminiscent of an unsuitably made-up face) is of glass, and is shattered by a male fist; at first the fist is said to be undamaged, but later this is amended. And the image of glass persists - a glass brain is hurled against a filthy wall and it is pointed out that a glass doll (like the voodoo dolls with stakes through their hearts in the zombie film) is all too easy to break. The vulnerability of the weak and fragile and the presence of death are the keys, and

these are evident, too, in the hospital scenario. Someone who is very ill and weak is left alone with an infectious male patient; an inexperienced young nurse is on night duty with him - who can she turn to for help? She is a victim; she has to do something so that he does not either die or assault her. The night is long and cold: if he attacks her during the night, there is no escape.. The night nurse, like the female zombie, is a sleep-walker; the patient is revolted by her. She talks in her sleep and betrays everything. There is great danger of infection and the patient is getting worse. She trembles when he looks at her. Ultimately, the gravely ill patient is reported as being out of danger.

However, this stage is not reached without a nightmare of indecision. In the poor glass brain there are picture-cards of saints and whores they belonged to the past and are rotting and yellowing, harmful to the survival of the organism. When the brain is shattered, they fall on the floor, automatically discarded with the destruction of their container. Mixed up with all this is a young suburban girl, who is then referred to as a suburban homosexual, not actually a girl. She used to go to the cinema to avoid church-going, we learn. There is a cultured man too, but he is an executioner, and he obeys orders without knowing their source. The poor homosexual's head rolls, but - and this is the point at which it seems to me that the (literally) fatal decision has been made when he is dead his forehead can be stroked, even kissed, after his eyes have been closed. For he will have died with his eyes open.

In a kind of coda, there is a rich man who begs a poor man for alms, only to mock his benefactor because he has often offered a counterfeit coin. So the hospital patient gets better; the rich man sleeps soundly if he gives his gold to the poor as Valentin charitably gives his love to Molina; but the homosexual's body is irretrievably broken. Little critical attention has been paid to this stream-of-consciousness section, and impressionistic interpretations of the outcome of the 'first fiction' of the novel have frequently been offered without any reference to it. To me, it seems an essential compendium of the evidence. for Molina's actions, for it reveals his determination not to carry out his original plan and the reason for his lack of commitment to it.

The last *recounted* film (for Molina's death is also, in a way, a film story) is yet another in the series of elaborations on divided loyalties, apparent betrayal and the far-from-smooth path of true love; at the same time, it invites both the reader and Valentin to reflect on tile subject of power, while underlining what we have always known - that for some, at least, the dream that is essential is one of exclusive devotion unaffected by death.

Though an invention, the story takes place in familiar territory, for the film is a pastiche of many that were extremely popular in the Mexican cinema of the forties and is concerned with a character who has been a stand-by in works of art in many countries and all epochs: the woman of uni mpeachable morality - and great beauty, usually - who is forced into prostitution by circumstances, and then misjudged and abandoned by the man she loves. The blackmailed first wife in the zombie film is the most recent example of this situation for us, of course, but countless other cinematic and literary melodramas have been constructed around it. This version is an accurate objective correlative for Molina's present situation: by this time, Valentfn has become so considerate, pliable, even submissive, that he is happy to go along with Molina's choice of film. No longer is there any rhetoric behind the story-telling. It is now no more nor less than a self-portrait of the narrator.

The lovers in his story first meet at a masked ball, for it is carnival time. As the night is ending, he asks her to remove her mask, but she refuses: they will never meet again, she says, and tomorrow is Ash Wednesday. Their encounter has been a blissfully happy dream, but it is soon

to end (and in the shadow of death, furthermore). But the hero, who is a journalist, realizes that he has been waiting for her all his life, and he has no intention of losing her now. When the action moves from the lush, tropical spiendour of Vera Cruz to Mexico City and he returns to work, he finds her again. Site is the subject of a sensational revelatory article to be published in his newspaper, and she is newsworthy because she is a famous ex-actress and night-club singer, now the kept woman of a Mafia tycoon. He calls on her to say that he will see that the article is suppressed an(] she reveals how her simple faith in the seemingly good man who is her protector has been betrayed, telling of his abnormal jealousy. She is, like so many other people in *El beso de la mujer arana* and elsewhere in Puig, kept a prisoner. After a series of misunderstandings during which, among other things, the hero pens (and sings) the lyrics of appropriate sentimental songs, drowns his sorrows in ever more frequent bouts of drunkenness, and destroys the valuable presses on which the notorious article is being printed (thus ensuring that he will never work again), he goes back to Vera Cruz. The night-club singer manages to escape from the clutches of the tycoon and prepares to start up her career again, but at the last minute her jealous - and rich lover buys the club which was to employ her, and all is lost. The hero works briefly as a Tabourer, but his health soon fails, and it is from a hospital bed that he calls for her; when she is found, she has to prostitute herself to pay the fare to Vera Cruz. They go and live together in a picturesque little house, and there he convalesces, supported by her immoral earnings. When he discovers that she is not a singer but a dockland whore, he leaves her. She knows that he knows the truth.

It is at this point that there is an interruption of the story-telling that is especially important. This time it is Valentin that is fascinated by it all, but Molina refuses to go on because it depresses him. Ironically, Valentin encourages him, tells him he need not feel that he is inferior and that he certainly does not have to be a martyr (p.247). To the reader, it is all too clear how closely Molina is identifying with the film situation. There is no alternative for him, but there is no hope either. He is now totally committed in his love for Valentfr. - 'Estas en mf . . . estoy en ti . . .' ('You are inside me . . . I am inside you . . .') says the film song (p.243), and this reflects Molina's fusion with the man he now sees as his husband (p.246).

When the heroine of the 'second fiction' locates her lover for the second time, he is desperately ill, and though he talks of their future together, she knows that the end is near. He tries to sing his latest song to her, and in his delirium fantasizes about their leaving together by sea. as in the zombie film. But he dies, and, *like a sleepwalker,* she goes back to the home they briefly shared. When one of the local fishermen asks after her lover, she replies that he has gone away, but that it is not important for he will always be with them, if only in the memory of his songs. The final close-up, Molina tells us, is of her face: she is smiling, but her eyes are full of tears. Valentin is very taken with the conclusion: it is better to have loved and lost, he says; but for Molina, it is a 'final enigmitico' ('an enigmatic ending') (p.263).

The central figure in *El beso de la muj'er araita -* for Molina *is* more important than Valentin - is in prison on a charge of corruption of minors. Yet it is abundantly clear that he is more of a victim of life than one of its agents. And as we listen to his discourse, it becomes more and more obvious that there are other victims too, even if they are not all in his peculiar situation; one of them is Valentin. The real 'corrupted minors' are human beings themselves, for their constitutional characteristics predispose them to imposed suffering, and this is invariably exacerbated by accidental factors. It was, perhaps, Freud who really opened our eyes to the difficulty of accepting the concept of the basic goodness of man and, indeed, to the total impossibility of perfecting his being or even his circumstances. For life itself is a kind of prison sentence. Fromm summed this up when he said that 'the child has a mother - who by her love

wards off all dangers,' adding, "The adult has - nobody'. The problem is that danger persists, even increases, when so-called maturity is reached, and political and socioeconomic factors cannot be ignored: the avoidance of any consideration of such factors has often been judged one of the failures of psychoanalysis, and Puig, in this novel, combines the constitutional and the accidental, revealing that he is as aware as anyone of this weakness.

Constitutionally speaking, people never really achieve maturity, for all human beings are incomplete. Any solution is no more than a pipe dream. Freud once said that 'access to the halfway region of phantasy is permitted by the universal assent of mankind, and everyone suffering from privation expects to derive alleviation and consolation from it'." The one consolation is that sometimes, for some people, some aspects of some dreams do come true. What Puig never lets us forget is that even if they do, death is never far away: Thanatos is always struggling with Eros for dominance in our lives."

If the erotic bond is so frequently pernicious, especially for those who have been condemned to a marginal existence from infancy, if not from birth, is there any hope of happiness? The answer is that there is, but that it will either be very short-term and with a false foundation, or slightly longer-term and based on fusion: fusion of male and female (in the same body), of head and heart and of force and submissiveness. 'There is no escape, really, in escapism based on a sexual relationship; as we have said before, sexuality is a pivot of power, and the exercise of power is an irresistable temptation for all human beings; furthermore there is no avoidance of related constitutional conditions, such as neurosis, or of arbitrary and accidental circumstances and events, such as totalitarianism in society or wars. There are two types of power: that of some unknown force, which may be called fate, or destiny, perhaps even God, and against this there is no appeal; the other is that exploitative force used by one man against another, and something has to be attempted in order to change that. Ultimately, though, there are so many constitutional elements in the situation that little will be achieved.

It is all a question of faith in something in the face of the odds, faith in ‘cosas lindas' when the world is so obviously made up of lies, betrayal, disappointment, apathy, irresponsibility, malice, egoism and cruelty. The terrible thing is that these manifestations of what is ugly and wicked may exist in the very same people who are searching for something beautiful. Man has to know himself or, at least, to know himself better in order to avoid *unnecessary* suffering, for there is no way of avoiding suffering completely. One of the reasons for the disapproval that Freudian theory has provoked over the years is the simplistic view of some of Freud's followers that, as Bettelheim puts it, 'the negative aspects of a man's behaviour are merely the consequence of his living in a bad society'." Conversely, some improvement must be possible. In Antoine Vergote's words, 'what power could be assigned to the cure if analytic theory condemned man to be irremediably captive to his illusions?"'