

en la pampa (or Dostoyevsky's Tears in the Desert)

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Guessing why Dostoyevsky burst into tears when he read Hegel in Siberia was no easy matter,¹ for Siberia, like Africa, is a place outside History, that tool devised by reason to cope with the vast and unlimited. Siberia may not be a *historical* place, but it proved to be a fundamental place, where the writer could taste hell without punishment or guilt. Siberia or the Desert: *stupid* spaces—obeying no reason or purpose—with something of the look of fiction about them. A Theatre.

Outside the Theatre a group of women give a younger woman an enthusiastic send-off. Their bodies, clustered and compact (another accumulation, like the piles of boxes and heaps of cans and mattresses in previous works)², refer once more, in the same vein, to fiction: a tale built up by stacking things together, a collection of disparate elements which at any moment may help to single out one of its components, a send-off. *Ciao, ciao en María Elena*. The young woman (the actress, the crumb of fiction that detached itself from the first *body* in the tale)³ walks off into the desert. And at that precise moment, as she enters and invades the desert *stage*, it turns into the pampas: a desert now occupied by whoever may rise to speak.⁴ So the desert becomes the pampas, as though the Theatre spotlights have been switched on, and a body and that body's language appear and inhabit the scene. Consequently Jordi Colomer, in *En la pampa*, is again experimenting with possible—and precarious—ways of inhabiting fiction. But whereas in previous works the exploration was done by actually building the set—for the protagonists and the audience in equal degrees—⁵, now this twofold game aimed at inhabiting the fictitious is neatly expressed in the decision to place the actress in a desert setting. In a place outside History this vulnerable presence, devoid of baggage, must build (improvise) little stories using gestures, words and itineraries. The narrative, once more, begins.

Of all Jordi Colomer's works, *En la pampa* has most in common with the logic of a *road movie*: everything that happens is arranged within a journey. But we know nothing whatever of the possible destination; this lack of an objective—the horizon of things historical—releases the fiction from any function outside itself. The tale that is told no longer even wavers between success and failure:⁶ it grows out of simply “wandering in open country.”⁷ The story moves onwards, in other words, only as time flows within the plane, fulfilling the expectation, so akin to Tarkovsky, of making motion pictures into a work of sculpture by moulding minor events into time.⁸

In this tale the minor event, or sculptural endeavour, that occupies centre stage is washing the car. Washing a car in the desert may seem absurd

(*Pianito* fought a battle with the dust on the piano as well) but it makes it possible to delve into three crucial issues: it stresses the travel register of the fiction and the constant mobility of the playful clashes between the characters; it sets itself up as a paraphrase of the sculptor's task, after which the object must *appear*, once the excess material has been shaken off (extracting a sculpture *per via di levare*); and finally it forces us to become aware of how the scarce resources (water and the rugged landscape) must be managed in order to attain the goal (that of washing the car or building a fiction using the most elementary means). The action rests solely on the powerful decor: the *Cementerio Santa Isabel*. This might suggest that the events narrated are to be interpreted as a sort of *vanitas* according to which no effort to improve appearances (by washing) can make fiction part of the real world again. Thus the tension is not between life and death but between reality and fiction. It is no longer a matter of denouncing the banality of invention in the face of destiny, but of celebrating the autonomy of fiction, which can happen and never conclude. Within the cemetery no morality lies hidden; it is merely a fragile city, an architecturally flimsy set, designed, as on so many other occasions,⁹ to clothe fiction. Thus the narrative—the journey—is authorized to continue.

Act III. Since the aim is to inhabit a fiction constructed in the most adverse conditions, the scarcity of material resources requires the intensification of time-specific strategies: Christmas exists in the desert (the recording was made in December). He is amusing himself with the remnants of the car, while She is playing around with colourful Christmas decorations. An improvised choreography of games on a fixed plane turns a stretch of wild country into a location for the performance. Even after it is empty, the scene endures thanks to the theatrical potential of the spot: a burst tyre slithers along the ground as though it (too) were a sculpture. The tale, by this time, could go on for ever—without History—, though this would involve using those few "interventions of chance" which could occur in the "obviously depressing" severity of the desert.¹⁰

1 Laszlo Foldenyi, "Dostoevsky Reads Hegel in Siberia and Bursts into Tears," *Common Knowledge*, Duke University Press, vol. 10, No. 1, 2004.

2 The accumulation of objects is a recurring feature of many of Jordi Colomer's works, a sort of constructive anti-method. Disorder as a modality of order—à la Georges Perec—, alien to the nature of things and, for that very reason, like an allegory of the same fiction that pervades any idiom.

3 The group of women gives shape to the first *tale*, just as each body holds up a different letter in the narrative of *Un crime* (2004).

4 Jordi Colomer himself admits that the name of the Atacama desert is missing from *En la pampa*. This is because "the desert does not need to be inhabited" whereas "the pampas is the inhabiting of the desert" (Sergio González, "*Habitar la pampa en la palabra: creación poética del salitre*," *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, No. 13, Iquique, Universidad Arturo Prat, 2003, p. 53-65.)

5 Various examples could be cited but *Simo* (1997) is perhaps the most emblematic: the character compulsively constructs her place and the spectator has to sit among the chairs in the projection

room.

- 6 As happened explicitly in *Les Villes* (2002); but also in other works such as *Pianito* (1999).
- 7 On the expression “wandering in open country,” used in the last episode in the video, see note 10.
- 8 Andrei Tarkovski, *Sculpting in Time*, London, Faber, 1989. Jordi Colomer himself has often suggested that his video works must be interpreted as sculptures drawn out in time.
- 9 The fictionalization of architecture as a way of responding to the traditional peremptory stoniness of conventional architecture is a constant in the work of Jordi Colomer. The series *Anarchitekton* (2002-04) is the most obvious example.
- 10 The last part of the video shows the characters roaming about the desert and repeating, in a playful, mocking way, a sentence taken literally from the Situationist theory of *dérive*: “wandering in open country is obviously depressing and the interventions of chance are poorer there than anywhere else” (Guy Debord, “*Théorie de la dérive*,” English translation in Knabb, Ken (Ed.), *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley, Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981). In its original context, the sentence comments ironically on the Surrealists’ appeal to randomness; in contrast, *open country* is the only place available to the characters in the video.