

**A Curious Case of Political Critique:
The Detective Genre in Rodolfo Walsh's 'Operation Massacre'**

Lara Norgaard

In a Tortoiseshell: *In this essay, Lara Norgaard engages in a close reading of Rodolfo Walsh's Operation Massacre. She argues that this story reworks the detective genre by enlisting the active participation of the reader and serving as a critical form for its contemporary context. Her orienting to the genre and this work allows her to build a progressive argument and conclude with its broader implications.*

Excerpt

Walsh alters the detective genre in *Operation Massacre* in another, very significant way. Detective stories are defined by an investigation; we too often ignore the status quo context surrounding the crime, a convention that *Operation Massacre* disrupts. Early in "The Adventures of the Print Proofs," Walsh defines the status quo through a conversation between Hernández and Morel about the challenges of translating Oliver Wendell Holmes. Hernández at this point is described as citizen, not amateur detective, and we hear nothing of Inspector Jiménez.¹ Set against peace and order, Morel's death disrupts the status quo and suddenly the world of crime is central, transforming Hernández into his detective alter ego. The peaceful, unperturbed world of the highly educated middle class dissolves into the disorderly underworld of crime. The ensuing investigation restores the social order.

The status quo of *Operation Massacre* consists not of order but of the collective denial of injustice. Unlike the fictional detective story's first chapter, *Operation Massacre's* prologue takes place after the crime:

I received the first news about the clandestine shootings of June 1956 casually, at the end of that year, in a café on La Plata where people played chess, spoke more of Keres or Nimzovich than of Aramburu and Rojas, and the only military maneuver with any notoriety was Schlechter's opening chess move.²

Walsh juxtaposes his intellectual world with the reality of crime, just as he contrasted Morel's murder with the orderly status quo in his fictional detective story; however, this "orderly" status quo exists despite the fact that the crime already occurred. Walsh continues to emphasize this as he recalls his thoughts the very night of the failed revolt: "Afterwards I don't want to remember anything else . . . Valle doesn't

¹ Walsh, "Variaciones en rojo," 23-26.

² "La primera noticia sobre los fusilamientos clandestinos de junio de 1956 me llegó en forma casual, a fines de ese año, en un café de La Plata donde se jugaba al ajedrez, se hablaba más de Keres o Nimzovitch que de Aramburu y Rojas, y la única maniobra militar que gozaba de algún renombre era el ataque a la bayoneta de Schlechter en la apertura siciliana." Walsh, *Operación Masacre*, 17.

interest me. Perón doesn't interest me, the revolution doesn't interest me. Can I go back to chess?"³ Ostensibly an intellectual game divorced from reality, chess still implies conflict, violence, and schemes. Unlike the fictional status quo of peaceful order, with absolutely no indication of crime, Walsh crafts here a status quo of denial that ignores extreme violence just beneath its surface.

What, then, does solving the crime achieve? Walsh makes it very clear that it does not achieve the justice of "The Adventures of the Print Proofs": the book ends with a trial in which a judge maintains the legality of the massacre. However, the last lines indicate what the investigation can accomplish: "There is not yet doublespeak capable of erasing the terrible evidence that the Liberating Revolution government applied retroactively—the martial law installed on June 10th—to the men detained on June 9th. And that isn't a shooting. It's murder."⁴ Walsh argues that only through investigation, through engaging evidence, can we uncover the verbal gymnastics the government uses to assert a delusional status quo. Walsh's investigation shatters this imposed impression of peace: indeed, Walsh uses the last line to switch the word "shooting" (*fusilamiento*), the very word used in the book's opening line ("clandestine shootings"), with the word "murder" (*asesinato*). *Operation Massacre* twists the detective genre: its interplay of legal innocence and guilt acts not to restore order but to encourage collective consciousness of Argentina's unjust status quo.

Variations in Red and *Operation Massacre* are not totally distinct works; in fact, they share remarkable formal similarities. However, in *Operation Massacre* Walsh reworks the classic detective story to expand the active reader's role and question the orderly status quo. He takes a genre that upholds social norms and institutions and makes it a critical form. Walsh's new political take on the detective story inspires us to challenge the authority of narratives, most especially the narratives of corrupt and violent regimes.

³ "Después no quiero recordar más . . . Valle no me interesa. Perón no me interesa, la revolución no me interesa. ¿Puedo volver al ajedrez?" Walsh, *Operación Masacre*, 18.

⁴ "No habrá ya malabarismos capaces de borrar la terrible evidencia de que el gobierno de la revolución libertadora aplicó retroactivamente, a hombres detenidos el 9 de junio, una ley marcial promulgada el 10 de junio. Y eso no es fusilamiento. Es un asesinato." Walsh, *Operación Masacre*, 173.

Author Commentary

Lara Norgaard

Rodolfo Walsh, one of Argentina's most famous political writers, published his first investigative novel, *Operación Masacre* (*Operation Massacre*), in 1957. This celebrated nonfiction work tells the story of Walsh's investigation into a massacre of innocent civilians committed by the Argentine military during the 1955 coup. *Operation Massacre* marked the beginning of Walsh's career as a leftist activist, which ended when he was kidnapped and murdered in 1977 by *El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*, Argentina's last military dictatorship.

In addition to his political writing, Rodolfo Walsh had a lesser-known career as a detective novelist. He published a popular collection of short stories, *Variaciones en Rojo* (*Variations in Red*), in 1953. Scholars have studied Walsh's crime stories and his political works, but they rarely put the two in dialogue.

I compared the story "The Adventure of the Print Proofs" from *Variations in Red* with *Operation Massacre* for my Fall Junior Paper. Though the two texts are very different—the former is a classic detective novel completely devoid of social critique while the latter is a work of political resistance—they both involve an investigation into a crime. I wanted to understand how Walsh worked the detective genre into his political nonfiction.

In the excerpt of my paper here, I argue that Walsh modifies the detective genre in order to make his political appeal. I had already argued that the detective conventions present in Walsh's crime stories also structure *Operation Massacre*, so this was the final step of the paper: I needed to frame my textual analysis in terms of the real 1955 massacre.

The problem of framing my close reading actually strengthened my overall argument. In considering *why* Walsh would have used the genre in a political context, I went back to the texts and pushed myself to look beyond a 1:1 relationship between them. In other words, I had only been arguing that "The Adventure of the Print Proofs" and *Operation Massacre* employ the same structure, without seeing how and why they might differ. I asked myself—how does Walsh end up making a political appeal about state violence through a detective novel?—and discovered that the slight differences between the detective story and *Operation Massacre* are what really drive home the political content in the latter work.

Rather than seeing argumentative framing as separate from textual analysis, I realized in writing this paper how useful it is to combine the two in the writing process. Having a historical and political context in mind while close reading allowed me to see new, more complex aspects of the text. Then, this made the writing process easier as well. The contextual frame was already woven into the way I read the two books.

Fellow Commentary

Myrial Holbrook

As a Fellow in the Writing Center, I often have students who come into the conference room wanting to work on the “so what?” factors of their papers. Usually, they’re approaching the end of the writing process and want to give their work some final *oomph*. Sometimes, the temptation is to broaden the paper with earth-shattering claims; other times, it seems easier to micro-focus on claims already made. The best approach, however, lies between these two extremes: remaining true to what’s already been done in the essay but taking it one step further. In this way, the writer frames the evidence and its extension so fluidly and naturally that the reader would almost expect it—except that the reader requires the nuanced maneuvering of the writer to get to that point. In her essay “A Curious Case of Political Critique,” Lara Norgaard adeptly manages this transition, taking her close reading to the next level in her framing of not only the significance of the story itself but also its surrounding historical and political context.

In the first paragraph excerpted here, Lara begins the transition to a broader context by setting up the “status quo” and *Operation Massacre*’s disruption of it. She is judicious in her use of textual evidence and firm in her argumentation that “Walsh crafts here a status quo of denial that ignores extreme violence just beneath its surface.” But she doesn’t let her analysis stagnate in mere close-reading for its own sake. In the next paragraph, she poses the question that takes us to her broader “so what?” factor: “What, then, does solving the crime achieve?” It’s here that we begin to see beyond the significance of the text itself to the political and historical climate in which it was written. Lara ends her essay with a reflection on her analysis of *Operation Massacre* and how its depiction of the status quo shows how a detective story can become a critical form for writer and reader alike. Altogether, she avoids sweeping generalizations and overly ambitious claims, instead delivering her final wrinkle as a logical extension of her thorough analysis.

Works Cited

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Bios

Lara Norgaard '17 is a senior from Boulder, CO. She is a Comparative Literature concentrator pursuing a certificate Latin American Studies. Her interests lie in the intersection between fiction and political activism under authoritarianism. At Princeton, Lara has spent her free time teaching English in Trenton with the PACE Center and writing and editing for Princeton's alternative weekly paper, *The Nassau Weekly*. This essay was her first Junior Paper.

Myrial Holbrook '19, in addition to serving as an editor for *Tortoise*, is also a Fellow in the Writing Center, Managing Editor of Innovation, a staff writer and assistant editor for *The Nassau Literary Review*, a Princeton Business Volunteer, a Sustainable Engineering and Development Scholar, and a Community House Big Sib. She hails from Columbus, Ohio, and is majoring in Comparative Literature (a convenient catch-all for her dabblings in English, Spanish, Chinese, history, journalism, and creative writing) and contemplating certificates in Cognitive Science and Environmental Studies. She wrote this as a sophomore.