

The Iconization of Elián

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One of the lasting images of the Elián Gonzalez affair is the untitled cartoon showing the head of the young Cuban boy attached to the body of a chess-piece pawn. And there can be no doubt that from the time he was discovered drifting at sea on November 25, 1999, Thanksgiving Day in America, the survivor of an ill-fated attempt to reach Miami that cost the lives of his mother and nine other Cubans, from then until April 22, 2000, when he was seized by federal agents and restored to his father, there can be no doubt that little Elián was used as an argument, not to say a pretext, by a variety of political interest groups arrayed in complex relations of opposition in principle and alliances of convenience. What is conveyed by the image of Elián as a pawn is the interpolation of these greater national and international struggles into the family drama over custody of the child: a meaningful-structural magnification of the interpersonal relationships that gave them correspondingly large political effects.

Within days of Elián's installation in the house of his grand uncle, Lasaro Gonzalez, in Miami, the Cuban exile community in Florida and the Cuban government apparatus in Havana had each made Elián's cause their own in the conflict with the other. The question of whether a minor who has lost his mother comes under the custody of his father, easily resolvable in American law, had been translated into ideological contraries

as irreconcilable as they were abstract. In Miami, the argument of why Elián should not return to his father was democratic freedom versus communist dictatorship; in Havana, the reason he should return to his father was revolutionary morality versus capitalist perversion. Soon both sides were objectifying these values in daily mass demonstrations. Large crowds gathered outside the Gonzalez house nightly and all day on weekends, chanting the boy's name and beseeching his appearance—which they greeted with something like adoration. Cuba answered with state-organized mass demonstrations, rallying people in the thousands all across the island, complemented by several hours of television coverage and discussion daily. “Here in Cuba,” came the report, “it is all Elián, all the time” (*Washington Post*: 17 Apr 2000). In Miami, the “miracle child” (as Elián was widely known) was the central figure in the annual Three Kings Procession. In Havana, the “boy martyr” (as Elián was widely known) shared the limelight in absentia in the annual celebration of José Martí's birthday. *Granma*, the C.P. daily, also compared Elián to Che Guevara, saying the boy “had been converted forever into a symbol of the crimes and injustices that imperialism is capable of committing against an innocent” (*AP*: 29 Jan 2000). This comparison could only confirm the Miami Cubans' worst fears for Elián, were he to be repatriated. Indeed not long after he did return to Cuba, one of his Miami relatives observed, “They're teaching him to be like Che—an assassin and an asthmatic” (*Miami Herald*: 25 May 2000). In Miami, as already implied, the ideology of liberation was more messianic than revolutionary, associating the boy rather with Christ and Moses than Che and José Martí.

These kinds of associations, these political and religious relays of the macrocosm to the register of the familial and the personal, playing out national and international affairs in domestic relationships, are the topic of this essay—together with some general asides on historiography and anthropology. The Elián affair raises not a few questions of historical agency. Among them is how certain quite ordinary people may incarnate larger communities and collective forces, and thereby become big-time historical movers and shakers. Defying federal court orders and the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service—thus the Justice Department, the attorney general and ultimately the president—the Gonzalez family of Miami was able to hold Cuban-American relations hostage to their own intransigence. Moreover, there would be long term and large scale historical

residues, not excluding (as it happened) the decisive effects of the Elián affair on the U.S. presidential election of 2000. (So to turn anthropological theory into chaos theory, not without some justification: no Elián, no war in Iraq.) Here are fateful confluences of different cultural registers or structural levels, interpolations of the national into the individual, with the dialectical effects of endowing national-political issues with the character of family values and family issues with national-political consequences. The relations between states, which ever since Thucydides we have believed to be governed by Realpolitik, are resolved into sentimental dramas of kinship.

Call it, then, *historical melodrama*. Britain recently went through one with Lady Di. September 11th has had such dimensions to it. Every body removed from the World Trade Center debris was wrapped in an American flag. The crafted *New York Times* pieces on the personal lives of the victims made each one seem like another verse of “God Bless America.” Such syntheses of the national with the interpersonal are also familiar from anthropological studies of soap operas, notably including the very popular Latin American *telenovelas* – which are probably metonymically as well as metaphorically pertinent to the Elián case. A report in the *Washington Post*:

In the *barrios* of Washington and other cities across the country, Latinos are following the saga of Elián Gonzalez like a real-life soap opera, one full of political intrigue and family strife. They know all the characters – the father Juan Miguel, the uncle Lasaro, Cuban dictator Fidel Castro looming in the background – and they understand the plot all too well, particularly how immigration can separate parent from child (9 Apr 2000).

In the *telenovela*, social categories and universals on the order of the state, classes and ethnicities, as well as general moral principles, all take on the emotional charge of the human relationships in which they have been instantiated, such that these categories and customs are then narrated allegorically and their destiny is configured as the denouement of a poignant story of private lives. We should take note in this connection of the many reports of great emotionalism over Elián in Little Havana: a fervor of which I will give examples presently, and for which the Anglo community had as little sympathy as it had understanding. But in Miami, the symbolic correspondences of the historical melodrama were right on top, enough to be explicitly articulated, as by the popular local priest

Francisco Santana. “I am absolutely certain that communism began in Cuba by dividing the family,” he said, “and communism is going to end in Cuba when this family is reunited.” His argument was that “if the boy’s battling family, his communist father and his anti-communist Miami relatives, can make peace, then Castro will fall (*Washington Post*: 20 Apr 2000). At the same time, similar political capital was being made of the plight of “kidnapped Elián” in Cuba. After he had been repatriated, the president of the Cuban National Assembly told a *New York Times* correspondent that regrettably the agitation of recent months would have to be scaled back: “You cannot ask people to have the same emotional level about a boy without a mother, separated from his father, for a discussion of the [U.S. immigration] adjustment law” (*NYT*: 5 July 2000).

Here, then, is another critical point about these interchanges between the collective and the personal: not just any old story will do. It has to be a good old story, structurally speaking – which it was, in several ways. As often remarked in the American press, the whole Elián affair would have been over in an instant, passed without public notice, if it had been the child’s father who was lost at sea and his mother who remained in Cuba. Who could have made a cause of keeping the child from his loving mother? Another felicitous aspect was Elián’s youth, hence an innocence and helplessness that could be an argument either for restoring him to his father or protecting him against brutal governments – alternatively, American or Cuban. Then there were the structural virtues of the focus on close kinship: a common ground for all the parties concerned, upon which they could proceed to develop their working misunderstandings. For Cubans, this was a somewhat different and larger issue than for Anglos: an all too familiar one of an extended kindred torn apart by immigration. From the Cuban vantage, the relationships of the people involved in Elián’s affair were at least four generations deep, including the siblings of the boy’s grandparents and distant cousins. Americans were fixed singularly on the nuclear kinship of mother, father and child. So it passed almost without notice in the American media that while two of Elián’s great uncles, Lasaro and Delphin Gonzalez, were fighting to hold him in the country, their brother Manuel, also in Miami, believed the boy should be returned to his father – which made Manuel a lonely and heckled man, “a comunista and a traitor” on the streets of the city (*Washington Post*: 7 Apr 2000). Again, notwithstanding that Elián’s mother “sacrificed

her life for his freedom,” as Miami Cubans generally saw it, her own mother, living in Cuba, came to America to lobby for Elián’s repatriation to “Communist Cuba.”

The *dramatis personae* of this historical melodrama also occasions some reflection on just who gets to be the history-makers, and in what circumstances. Clearly the structural goodness of the story is more critical than the character of the historical agents it empowers. The devolution of international relations on the likes of Lasaro and Delphin Gonzalez was not a sterling example of the Hegelian cunning of Reason. One is reminded rather of Marx’s remark about Louis Napoleon: that the class struggle in France had “created circumstances and relations which allowed gross mediocrity to strut about in a hero’s garb” (*Eighteenth Brumaire*). The Elián case is even more remarkable because, unlike Louis Napoleon or his uncle, the Gonzalez folks were not enabled as historical agents by their command position in the national-institutional order. The French emperors ruled a hierarchical system that was designed precisely to transmit and implement their will—or for that matter, whatever they did or suffered. (That, all the same, Louis Napoleon was only so-so should occasion no surprise to Americans, who have become so accustomed lately to mediocrity in high places.) Clearly we need to make some distinctions about the different cultural orders of individual agency, notably whether such agency is derived from a position in an institutional system or in the historical conjuncture. Where Louis Napoleon’s powers were structural, the Gonzalezes’ were circumstantial. The Gonzalezes owed their “fifteen minutes” to a certain constellation of forces rather than an office of authority. Indeed a lot of cultural work went into the historical magnification of the Gonzalez clan—including a lot of religious work, which is a main reason I chose to write about it here. But before we get to their empowerment, a further word about the characterological ironies.

As I say, those upon whom history devolves are not necessarily avatars of the progress of Reason. Some just have greatness thrust upon them. So it was for Lasaro, Delphin and Lasaro’s daughter Marysleysis, the principal Miami players. It has to be admitted, however, that at least on the score of DUI charges, Lasaro and Delphin Gonzalez had almost as many qualifications for leadership as George W. Bush and Richard Cheney. And Lasaro, an unemployed auto mechanic, did have the gumption to hold off the American powers-that-be, finally forcing the feds to seize Elián in an armed

raid. This defiance fit the macho image he sometimes adopted for appearance in U.S. courts, dressed up in shiny purple shirts with shiny black ties—another working misunderstanding. Marysleysis, Elián’s first cousin once removed (by standard American reckoning) was popularly considered his “surrogate mother,” apparently because she had primary care of the boy – when she was not being rushed to the hospital for one of her frequent “anxiety attacks” (*Salon*: 29 June 2000). A dropout from the local community college, twentyone-year-old Marysleysis was in and out of the emergency ward six or eight times during Elián’s stay. Taken as a sign of her spirituality and her sufferings, her faintings made her all the more beloved in the Little Havana community. But a disposition that many Anglos perceived rather as hysterical, while it brought her a lot of television time, did not garner a lot of sympathy from the larger American audience. Indeed, the U.S. media generally held her in some contempt, called her “the actress” or worse, according to a *Washington Post* correspondent – who thereupon provided an observation reminiscent of nothing so much as the uncomprehending missionary accounts of the funerary rites of South Seas savages: “Marysleysis often seems cold and haughty, and overly made up and flagrantly fingernailed, and she can sometimes be seen laughing with friends moments before turning [to the?] cameras and crying over Elián (6 Apr 2000). From the mainstream American perspective, the supporting characters of the Elián melodrama were even more dubious. The two cousins who often came over to play with the boy were both felons with long rap sheets. (One was under indictment for an armed robbery committed a half-mile from the Gonzalez home.) It is not clear whether these were the same as the two ex-cons acting as lookouts when the federal raid went down. Then there was “El Pescadore,” the “fisherman” who had helped rescue Elián. He was a frequent visitor at Lasaro’s house, a hero in the neighborhood and an always eager TV interviewee, although in real life he was neither a fisherman or even Latino. Danato Dalrymple was a guy of Scotch-Irish and Italian descent from Poughkeepsie, N.Y., who cleaned houses for a living, and happened that day to go on a fishing trip for the first time in his life when his cousin asked him to come along to drive the boat. Otherwise, however, with two arrests for domestic violence and three failed marriages, El Pescadore did fit the profile for Elián’s guardians. As one report put it, “The Elián Gonzalez saga has made several people unlikely celebrities, and

the unlikeliest may be Donato Dalrymple” (*Washington Post*: 7 Apr 2000). “Unlikely celebrities” – that’s the historiographic point.

But as you may imagine, a lot of political effort had gone into making such unlikely historical agency. In Havana and in Miami, Cubans in both camps were moved to raise the political stakes through Elián by the declining fortunes of their foundational political causes. A tired revolution in Cuba faced off against a waning counter-revolution in Florida, the hard-liners on each side sensing the decline of their original fervor, especially among younger people. Prominent in the drive to keep Elián in Miami was the conservative Cuban American National Foundation, for example, notorious for its anti-Castro activities. Dario Moreno, a Cuban-American political scientist, commented on the old guard’s interest in Elián:

Before Elián Gonzalez, we were growing up, moving to another stage, less extreme, less passionate. Elián Gonzalez allowed the old guard to reestablish control over politics, because Elián was the perfect symbolic case” (*Washington Post*: 6 Apr 2001; cf. *NYT*: 16 Jan 2000, 2 Sept 2000).

Echoed *The Guardian* headline, speaking of Cuba, “A small boy bails out the old dictator” (12 Apr 2000). Clearly, what helped make Elián’s case felicitous was its value for a politics of youth. Accordingly, schools became primary sites of agitation on both sides of the straits. In Cuba, school children turned out *en masse* to demonstrate their solidarity with “the boy hero.” While Elián was in Miami, his empty desk in Cuba was used as a symbol of perfidious capitalism; when he returned to Cuba, his empty desk in Miami became a symbol of perfidious communism—indeed his Miami classroom was dedicated to him with a plaque, and plans were made for a permanent display of his schoolwork. In statements that likewise mirrored each other, spokesmen on both sides commented afterwards on the political silver they had gained in recuperating their younger people—a “silver lining” in the one case, if a “silver platter” in the other. Miami Cubans consoled themselves for the loss of Elián “with the commitment to the cause of young Cuban Americans previously uninterested in Cuba” (*Miami Herald*: 23 November 2000), even as a prominent Havana politico was telling the *New York Times*,

They gave it to us on a silver platter. This is a battle of ideas we clearly appreciate ... Those several months have allowed us to discover new forms, methods and actors –a lot more youth above all (*NYT*: 5 July 2000).

The mobilization of the Miami Cubans intersected in complex ways with American national politics, producing new alignments of the political forces, including several of the strange-bedfellow variety. Ridiculed sometimes in late night TV talk shows, criticized often by print journalists, and strongly opposed by the Democratic Clinton administration, the Cuban-American cause was by all accounts running poorly in the nation at large. Popular sentiment was mounting to end the trade embargo on Cuba. An interest in controlling immigration to the U.S. also gave Presidents Castro and Clinton common cause for returning Elián. On the other hand, Senator Joseph Lieberman, soon to be Democratic vice presidential candidate, was prepared to join certain conservative Republicans in circumventing the INS by sponsoring a Congressional bill that would make Elián an honorary U.S. citizen. A very rare Congressional act, such honors had heretofore been reserved for the likes of Winston Churchill and Mother Theresa. “I don’t think it’s in [Elián’s] best interest to send him to a place where the government can tell him what he thinks and what he’ll become,” said Republican Senator Connie Mack in co-sponsoring the bill that would have the U.S. government decide Elián’s best interest and future. Lieberman, incidentally, had been a darling of the Cuban-American community since 1988 when he ran for the Senate against the independent Lowell Wiecker, who favored an opening to Castro. Early in 2000, when he was standing for re-election to the Senate, Lieberman received a campaign contribution of at least \$10,000 from the Free Cuba Political Action Committee. Despite all this, and Al Gore’s pandering to the Cuban-American community by advocating that Elián be kept in America, when the Clinton administration repatriated the boy, the Florida Cubans came out *en masse* in the presidential election with the aim of “punishing the Democrats.” So add this to the numerous unnecessary and sufficient reasons why the Gore-Lieberman ticket lost Florida and the presidency. On the other hand, many liberal Democrats had been opposing measures such as the Elián citizenship bill from the beginning – on conservative Republican principles – the way that Maxine Waters, African-American congresswoman

from California, arguing on national television for restoring Elián to his father, invoked the sacred Republican cows of “family values” and “natural rights” (CNN:4 Jan 2000).

Of course, the American political Right had its own contradictions, of which its commitment to “family values” represented one side and libertarian anti-communism the other. Its ensuing dialectical contortions at once weakened the Right’s hand politically while pushing it to shrill ideological extremes of possessive individualism. A significant number of prominent Republicans stood firm on family values. “It’s a no-brainer,” said Representative Steve Largent (R. Okla.), the former football star. “He should be sent back to his father” (*Chicago Tribune*: 22 June 2000:1, 12). On the other hand, then, the Radical Right, forced to abandon the family values high ground, fell back on the bedrock position that individual freedom is the greatest good: a right of the self to the self that must take priority over any parental claim. For months, the talk radio shows, the downchannel TV stations, and the internet were indulging in paroxysms of libertarian fundamentalism, linking the Elián case to every major and minor threat to free enterprise and the American way of life.

Here is just one example from the over-the-top internet Right-site, “Capitalism Magazine.com.” This cyber journal is authored by Ayn Rand types, including one Edwin Locke, a professor of Business and Psychology at the University of Maryland, whose far-out reflections on Elián are only run-of-the mill for the site. Interviewed in April of 2000, Professor Locke opined that returning Elián to his father in Cuba would amount to the worst form of child abuse – and just the kind of thing encouraged by the relativist multiculturalism now running rampant in America. For multiculturalism, Locke said, “maintains no way is right and everybody has his own opinion. If you accept multiculturalism, then everybody is equal. Castro is no different than Thomas Jefferson.” But, the professor continued, what else could one expect of the attorney general, Janet Reno, who in a matter of months had not only managed to “sentence a boy to slavery in a dictatorship,” but (referring to tobacco liability cases) “to destroy a whole industry” and (referring to Microsoft) “to crush America’s most successful company.” Regarding the damage suits against cigarette manufacturers, Locke thought it “preposterous to abrogate the rights of sellers because buyers abuse products that give them pleasure” [does that go for heroine dealers?], even as it is preposterous to penalize Microsoft because some

“resentful laggards” convinced the government to give them a competitive advantage that “they could not earn by their own effort.” Hence the obvious connection to Elián Gonzalez, who was similarly dispossessed of the freedom to maximize his own interests:

Whether the issue involves a whole industry, a single company or a simple individual, the fundamental principle is the same. Either people possess the right to their own life, which includes the right to trade freely with other men, or they do not (*CapitalistMagazine.com*: 23 Apr 2000).

Thus Edwin Locke. For possessive individualism, John Locke could not have said it better.

Another value contradiction incited by Hurricane Elián swept all across the political spectrum, although it may also have been more severe on the Right. Some of the American opposition to keeping Elián was fundamentally self-critical. It came from the uncomfortable and not always subtle doubt, based on experience of the contemporary U.S. youth culture, that Elián’s future as an American kid would be as beneficial as the champions of his “right to freedom” were claiming. It could be even worse here than there. Nor were the images broadcast of an Elián loaded down with toys and other goodies—including the toy guns he liked to shoot off—reassuring to a lot of Americas coping with problems of teen age violence and self-indulgent drugging. The Elián story broke in the same year as the massacre of students and teachers perpetrated by teenagers at Columbine High in Colorado. So even a conservative South Carolina columnist writes:

Under the cloak of freedom we have lavished him [Elián] with toys, made him a celebrity, handed him a puppy, taken his picture, raised his hands in a victory sign, and then asked him if he wants to go back to icky Cuba. Could we say we want to keep him because our society is permeated with drugs, sex and violence? (Parker, *ChicagoTribune*: 19 June 2000).

The extravagant consumerism of it all: the houseful of battery-operated toys including the dune-buggy Elián could drive himself, the wrist watches, sporting equipment, the clothing, etc., etc.: Most of this stuff was gifted by Miami Cubans. And no doubt it had local meanings and functions, ranging from bribing Elián’s affections to affirming his status as a “special child,” something approaching King of the World. On a visit to Disney World, boasted the Cuban journal *Libre*, “Elián was personally received

by Mickey Mouse ... at 11:00 a.m.” (2000:16). But the picture of super-indulged Elián could appear otherwise to middle Americans. A cartoon published in the Green Bay, Wisconsin, paper shows Elián with a playmate from whom he has taken what appears to be a G.I. Joe doll, while in the background are a man and woman identified as Elián’s relatives and a caricature of Janet Reno labeled “Feds.” Elián shouts at the other child in reference to the doll: “You can’t have him back! He’s mine now! You’re never going to get your hands on him! Not now! Not ever!” At which one of his relatives says, for Reno’s benefit, “See? Elián truly is one of us!”

Again, the journalist Richard Rodriguez, on PBS’s “*Newshour*” evokes other cartoons of Elián that speak to the embarrassment Americans harbored about “the people they had become”:

[A] cartoonist in the morning paper, mediocre talent, who every time he had a chance to draw Elián would put him in sunglasses with his Nike shoes, you know the consumerist Nike child. And I think, if you were really to ask a lot of American parents, would this boy be better off in Havana or would he be better off in South Beach on roller-blades with sunglasses, a lot of Americans, in our middle-aged *caution*, would say we would not want Elián to grow up like our own children (*PBS*: 26 Apr 2000).

Break here for an anthropological reflection on order in culture. This whole involuted complex of political positions, with its chiasmic relationships and dialectical oppositions, should be of some relevance to the current postmodern disposition to “always disconnect.” I mean the perverse satisfaction that many in the human sciences, following the lead of certain cult-studs, seem to derive from finding incoherencies in culture and cultures. You know, the celebrations of contested categories, fuzzy boundaries, polyphony without harmony, the impossibility of master narratives and the other sly delights of deconstruction. In this connection, the question raised by the politics of Elián is whether there is anything systematic going on. Certainly when we look at something like the dialectic schisms in the American Right between individual freedom and parental rights, or the reservations about growing up in America in an important fraction of the middle class, or the emphasis on youth in Havana and Little Havana, the

answer seems yes: the positions are not aleatory. Perhaps we have been too quick to equate differences, as of “conflicting discourses,” with disorder. It then becomes all too easy to call off the search for relationships *in* and *of* the differences—to call off the search as it were *a priori*, on the grounds that such systematicity is impossible. I prefer Bourdieu (quoting Goethe) on this tactic: “Our opinion is that it well becomes a man to assume that there is something unknowable, that that does not have to set any limit to his inquiry” (*The Rules of Art*, 1996: xvii). Or Julian Barnes: “When a contemporary narrator hesitates, claims uncertainty, plays games and falls into error, does the reader in fact conclude that reality is being more authentically narrated?” (*Flaubert’s Parrot*, 1984:89). I am arguing something more than that the political positions taken on Elián are, as differently situated subject positions, coherently motivated by the respective interests of these parties—although that is already saying something systematic, as Bakhtin tells us. These subject positions stand in specific logical and sociological relationships to one another, and thus imply a larger, complex order, marked by a dynamic of contrasting moral and political doctrines. Yes, George (Jim, or whoever), there is a culture. There would even be a master narrative, though with its diverse cast of characters and complex plot, it could never be a simple one. End of theoretical break.

Meanwhile, back in Miami, one of the regulars outside the Gonzalez house says that, “If Elián were just a child, Fidel would not have bothered him. Fidel knows he is divine, and wants to destroy him” (*NY Daily News*: 9 Apr 2000). The national political storm spreading out from Little Havana was being continuously whipped up by a powerful religious afflatus. “The Miracle Child,” (*El Niño Milagro*) or, indeed, “The Child King” (*El Niño Rey*), Elián had come to redeem the sufferings of the Miami exiles, to destroy their pharonic or herodic oppressor Fidel Castro, and to restore them to their homeland. “I have the feeling he will be the one,” said Marta Rondon, a woman who had joined one of the vigils of people anxious to see Elián (*Miami Herald*: 10 Jan 2000). Something like saintly processions of the child around the Gonzalezes’ yard before an adoring crowd were a regular feature of the Elián phenomenon. This time, when the boy finally emerged on the shoulders of Delphin Gonzalez, making “V” signs with both hands and then pretending to douse the crowd with an empty water gun, Marta was overcome:

“I feel such emotion, such warmth in my heart for him. He’s a special child. Definitely, he’s a special child” (*Ibid.*). Many of the Cuban Catholic clergy thought so too—although the Anglo hierarchy in Miami was skeptical of the supposed miracle, let alone prepared to join in Elián’s canonization. “Herod—Castro—is waiting in Cuba,” said the Rev. Jose Luis Mendez, pastor of the Corpus Christi Church. “Pontius Pilate is washing his hands in Washington, and that is President Clinton. And the suffering of this child is the suffering of the Cuban people” (*Washington Post*: 20 Apr 2000). Or, to put it succinctly, as on one of the banners outside the Gonzalez house: “Elián is Christ. Castro is Satan.”

The correlated buzz on Miami Spanish radio and in Cuban coffee shops—as well as on the official Elián web site—was that the boy had been saved by dolphins that surrounded the rubber tube to which he was clinging and protected him from sharks. “Any Cuban would know this is a story right out of the Bible,” another follower told a *Miami Herald* reporter (8 Jan 2000). Actually it isn’t in the Bible, although it is in Aristotle. Indeed, “shipwrecked sailor saved by fish,” or something similar, is a world-wide mythical topos: e.g., “Escape from sea on fish’s back,” Stith Thompson motif B541.1; “Fish carries man across water,” B551.1; “Sea beast allows voyager to land on his back,” B556; or “Magic salmon carries hero over water,” B175.1—among other analogous themes (B256.12, F1088.3.2, B551.5). Similar stories are told of Cuba’s patron saint, Our Lady of Charity: how she miraculously intervened to calm a storm and save a fisherman or brought one fisherman (or three fishermen, or a little boy) safely to shore in a storm. Poems were written about the dolphins’ rescue of Elián.

And the child sailor was protected by dolphins

Who resembled little angels hovering over the little rafter.

—Jose Manuel Carballo (*Miami Herald*: 23 Jan
2000)

Cartoons, paintings, and murals depicted Elián floating in the sea encircled by dolphins who were being benignly directed from the heavens by flying angels, Our Lady of Charity, or the hand of God. A more elaborate folk mural, synthesizing Christological and Santeria motifs with icons of the political struggle, is described in *Religion in the News*:

Elián floating on the sea in his inner tube with Our Lady of Charity, Ochun [the orisha], and Elegua [son of Ochun] in the tube with him. Three dolphins circle around, while overhead preside the hands of God and a tiny Virgin and Child. The scene is framed by a larger scale of justice in which repose the head of Pope John Paul II on one side and that of President Clinton on the other. In the background hover two shadowy images of Fidel Castro, a grim-faced Statue of Liberty, Jesus himself and an archangel holding another scale.

Talk of raising the historical stakes of a family melodrama! Part Jesus, part Moses and part orisha, to name only the most salient identities, Elián's iconization as a messianic hope thus gave cosmic significance to the kindred relations and political conflicts in which his fate was being worked out (*Religion in the News*: Summer 2000). More than ideological reflexes, these religious representations were, as I say, structural relays, motivated mediations, by which the history of the national was interpolated in the interpersonal, so that in the event what the Gonzalez folk did *became* the event. We have had some indication already of the Christological aspect. "Elián did the stations of the cross to get out of hell," said the Miami weekly *Libre*. "He saw his loving mother, as she placed him on the inner tube they had shared so that he could be saved. His life was saved as he was surrounded by dolphins that protected him from the sharks" (2001:97). Signs of Elián as Jesus were often sighted in the crowd around the Gonzalez house: like the poster that read, "After the crucifixion, Elián and Cuba will rise up too" (*Washington Post*: 20 Apr 2000); or the homemade crucifix with a baby doll displayed after Elián's repatriation, together with the sign, "Clinton, Reno crucified Elián" (*Religion in the News*: Summer 2000).

As might be expected from the circumstances of Elián's survival as well as the religious tradition, the theme of Elián-as-Christ was also marked by Marian symbolism. Elián's own mother was celebrated ritually and enshrined in bricolage altars. On the day Elián was sent back to Cuba, a woman was heard to say, "Maybe his mother will show up and this will be over" (*Miami Herald*: 28 June 2000). The Virgin Mary had already shown up twice: as an image on the mirror of Elián's bedroom in the Gonzalez house, and more publicly on the window of a bank a few blocks away. The bank's image was

unmistakable, according to a teller, Maria Rodriguez, even though “you could not see the body or the face.” This Virgin of Totalbank, 468 NW 27th Avenue, attracted varying degrees of veneration, ranging from the mothers who came to press their babies against the windowpane to the skeptic who declared the so-called Virgin a residue of Windex (*Miami Herald*: 26 Mar 2000). Perhaps the unbelievers were convinced some time later, not long after Lasaro Gonzalez had purchased the famous house at 2319 NW Second Street, when 2-3-1-9 hit on the Florida lottery – paying \$5000 each to 192 ticket holders, most of whom must have been Cuban.

Of course the mother figure also played in the topos of Elián as Moses (*Chicago Tribune*: 17 Jan 2000; *Washington Post*: 22 Jan 2000, 20 Apr 2000). “A Cuban Moses” reads the caption on the back cover of a local Spanish-language magazine. “God’s will is absolutely inscrutable to man’s mind,” observed a former political prisoner of Castro’s, “but the characteristics of this case point to Elián being something like Moses” (*Washington Post*: 20 Apr 2000). A brilliant exegesis of Elián’s story by Jose Marmol, a columnist of a Miami Cuban paper, made the point for point case for a second coming of Moses. Moses’ mother too had set him adrift in hopes of sparing his life, said Marmol. And then,

“The daughter of the pharaoh took in Moses and this changed the history of the Hebrews ... Moses lived to lead his people out of Egypt to the promised land of Israel – about the same as our exile from Cuba” (*Chicago Tribune*: 17 Jan 2000).

The logical motivation of such symbolic amplifications of Elián is impressive. It extends also to the boy’s incorporation in Santeria as Elegua or the son of Elegua, the orisha whose powers include the opening and closing of roads. Santeria, moreover, had the general value of making a direct and malevolent link to Castro. Like Santeria itself, Castro was outside the established Church, and thus could be credibly perceived as under the influence of the orishas and their priests, or even a secret adherent. The *Washington Post*’s Gene Weingarten was furtively handed a piece of paper by a demonstrator outside the Gonzalez house that says it all:

It is indeed astonishing. It says that Fidel is a devotee of the mysterious Afro-Cuban religion of Santeria. It alleges that the Cuban dictator fears he has run afoul of the mighty Santeria saint Elegua. It says he has consulted snail shells,

and “thrown coconuts,” and sacrificed monkeys and goats and bulls and sheep, to no avail. It alleges that he believes Eleggua has taken up residence in the body of Elián Gonzalez, and that for Castro’s luck to change, to save his regime, he must get Eleggua back. It implies that when he gets him back, Elián will be sacrificed to the god that inhabits him (7 Apr 2000).

Despite the furtiveness, Weingarten subsequently learned that this document was no secret. It was available all over Miami as the lead story in a Spanish tabloid under the headline, “The Boy and the Beast.” The newspaper was free. Weingarten picked up a copy from the stack in the office of the Hon. Alex Penelas, Mayor of Miami-Dade.

Some of the ritual performances of Elián’s sanctity were even more public. Not the Santeria sessions or the countless private prayers, of course, but certainly the many Sunday church services and, by the end of Elián’s stay, the nightly services in and around the Gonzalez house. Six nights a week a mass was held inside, thanking God “for the miracle that brought 6-year-old Elián Gonzalez safely to them” (*Miami Herald*: 10 April 2000); while each night in front of the house from 5:30 to 11:30, six Catholic and six Evangelical pastors, “numbered like the 12 apostles,” took turns leading a prayer service—except on Friday, the day of the crucifixion, when all twelve officiated jointly (*Miami Herald*: 10 Apr 2000). Given the well-known oppositions of Catholics and charismatics, the ecumenicalism was another miracle attributed to Elián. It did not, however, extend to liberal American Protestants who, as represented by the National Council of Churches, actively supported Elián’s repatriation. Although the religious enthusiasm in Little Havana helps account for public opinion polls there running 83 percent or more in favor of keeping Elián, the same could be a turn-off in the Anglo-community.

Still, the miracle could reach some Anglo hearts—of a certain conservative bent. Peggy Noonan, Republican intellectual and former speech writer for President Bush the First, filled *The Wall Street Journal* with surprisingly banal pieties about the Elián story—a story, she said, that was marked from the beginning by “the miraculous” (24 Apr 2000). For it was “a miracle that when he was tired and began to slip, the dolphins who surrounded him like a contingent of angels pushed him upward.” (Just for the record, neither the fishermen who found Elián nor the Coast Guard rescuers could confirm the

presence of dolphins.) A miracle, too, Noonan wrote, that Elián was saved on the American Thanksgiving Day, even as it was a sign of Democrat blasphemy that he was abducted by federal agents on the eve of Easter. “Too bad Mr. Reagan was not still president,” she said. “Mr. Reagan would not have dismissed the story of dolphins as Christian kitsch, but seen it as possible evidence of the reasonable assumption that God’s creatures had been commanded to protect one of God’s children.” There it was: “Miracle! Miracle! Read all about it in *The Wall Street Journal*” – a publication that has always been a firm believer in the Invisible Hand in any case.

Then finally there was Tom DeLay, the Republican Majority Whip in the House, who called Elián “a blessed child” on *Larry King Live* – prompting the *Star Tribune* to editorialize:

And it came to pass that Tom DeLay the Righteous appeared to Larry the King in a dream. And Larry said unto him, “What doest thou make of the boy Elián snatched up by agents of the Emperor Bill?” And DeLay the Righteous said unto Larry, “This is a blessed child. Two days he was in the waters and the great fishes bothered him not, neither did they devour him. Neither did the hot sun blister him” (Hamrick-Stowe, 2000).

All this piety in high places convinced the journalist Richard Cohen that Elián had truly been saved for a purpose – “to make fools of politicians” (*Washington Post*: 12 Apr 2000).

And thus, to make history.