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VARIATIONS ON THE *NOVELA NEGRA* IN MEMPO GIARDINELLI'S *LA ÚLTIMA FELICIDAD DE BRUNO FÓLNER*

RESUMEN

Con *La última felicidad de Bruno Fólner* (2015), Mempo Giardinelli revisita un género que ha cultivado a lo largo de su carrera literaria: el género negro. Las primeras líneas revelan que el protagonista, un escritor argentino que se reinventa con el nombre de Bruno Fólner, está a punto de comenzar una nueva vida a los 64 años, después de asesinar a su esposa el día anterior y huir a una ciudad costera de Brasil. Este artículo explora cómo los elementos familiares de la ficción criminal son secundarios a las preocupaciones primordiales de Bruno Fólner: las ansiedades del envejecimiento, la muerte con dignidad y el acto creativo de la escritura misma.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Género negro, eutanasia, envejecimiento, la escritura.

ABSTRACT

With *La última felicidad de Bruno Fólner* (2015), Mempo Giardinelli revisits a genre he has cultivated throughout his literary career: el género negro. The opening lines reveal that the protagonist, an Argentine writer who reinvents himself with the name Bruno Fólner, is about to begin a new life at the age of 64, after assassinating his wife the day before and fleeing to a seaside town in Brazil. This article explores how familiar elements of crime fiction are secondary to the primary concerns of Bruno Fólner: the anxieties of aging, death with dignity, and the creative act of writing itself.

KEY WORDS: Crime fiction, euthanasia, aging, creative process.

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For the Argentine writer Mempo Giardinelli (1947), *La última felicidad de Bruno Fólner* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Edhasa, 2015) marks a return to fiction since the publication of his novel *Visitas después de hora* in April of 2003. During this hiatus, the Editorial Edhasa published in 2014 a new edition of his novel *¿Por qué prohibieron el circo?* (México: Editorial Oasis, 1983) in their Serie Azul collection, in addition to ten other previously published titles. With the publication of a brand new novel in 2015, Giardinelli not only assuages the impatience of his devoted readers, but also revisits a genre that has fascinated him since his adolescent years: *el género negro*. Growing up in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Resistencia, the capital of the Chaco province, the principal sources of entertainment and escape from the tropical heat were books and movies, and as a teenager, Giardinelli devoured both, reading translations of hard-boiled North American crime fiction available in cheap paperback editions, and spending hours in the Cine Marconi watching film versions of such classic novels as *The Big Sleep* (1939, film-1946) by Raymond Chandler, *The Maltese Falcon* (1930, film - 1941) by Dashiell Hammett, and *Double Indemnity* (1943, film - 1944) by James M. Cain. The *roman noir* and its film counterparts were especially popular for Giardinelli's generation, who embraced the genre's irreverent attitude toward figures and institutions of authority. Variations on the hard-boiled novel are prevalent among Argentine writers, such as Osvaldo Soriano, Juan Carlos Martini, Sergio Sinay, and Ricardo Piglia who, like Giardinelli, were born in the 1940s and published their early works in the 1970s, during the dictatorship (1976-1983), or so-called Proceso de Reorganización Nacional. Their works have often been labeled Posboom fiction, although Giardinelli prefers the term narrative of "la democracia recuperada" (Pellón 81).

Unlike the classic "whodunit" model of detective fiction, also known as the "locked room" or "puzzle mysteries," in which a crime is committed and by the final pages of the novel all loose ends are neatly tied up and justice is served, for Giardinelli and his fellow writers, the hard-boiled novel provides a means of commenting on a society that considers the law an "instrument of repression and oppression" and therefore has "no faith in justice" (Simpson 1992 12-13). In their crime fiction, torture, disappearances, death, paranoia, corruption, and injustice are not elements of fiction but rather evidence of a dirty reality that in some cases evokes traumatic personal experiences for authors like Giardinelli who received death threats and were forced to live in exile. I explored this notion in my article "El género negro como una radiografía de una sociedad en *Luna caliente* de Mempo Giardinelli":

Por estas razones, los escritores argentinos de la generación del posboom rechazaron el modelo clásico a favor de la línea negra, modificando ciertos códigos de la novela dura norteamericana para hacerlos encajar en su propio entorno. En particular, adoptaron la premisa de que el crimen ocurre como síntoma de una sociedad cuya misma corrupción fomenta la violencia (162).

Giardinelli's earliest incursions into detective fiction in his own literary works coincided with his exile in Mexico from 1976 to 1984, a period in which he worked as a journalist

and also published his first novels and collections of short stories. In 1980, his passion for detective fiction led him to accept the invitation of Edmundo Valadés to write a column for the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* about a literary form unjustly marginalized and often disdained by critics (*El género negro* 9). In 1984, Giardinelli compiled and published these articles in a two-volume set entitled *El género negro*, which was republished in 2013 with the subtitle *Orígenes y evolución de la literatura policial y su influencia en Latinoamérica* (Buenos Aires: Capital Intelectual, 2013). In the introduction to the original collection, Giardinelli bestows high praise upon the genre: “La novela negra moderna, en sus mejores expresiones, es una radiografía de la llamada ‘civilización’ tan eficaz y seria, tan aguda y sofisticada, como en cualquiera de las mejores páginas de la literatura universal contemporánea. Es un medio estupendo para comprender, primero, y para interrogar después, al mundo en que vivimos” (26).

While Giardinelli explored the multifaceted aspects of the *género negro* as a journalistic assignment during the early 1980s, he also began to experiment with its narrative potential in his own works. For example, the short stories “El tipo” and “El paseo de Andrés López”, which appear in his first anthology *Vidas ejemplares* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Ediciones del Norte, 1982), reflect characteristics of the genre. A year later, Giardinelli won Mexico’s Premio Nacional de Novela for *Luna caliente* (Mexico: Editorial Oasis, 1983), which he had originally planned to include in *Vidas ejemplares* until he realized that “ese relato pedía más” (Mouat 48). In this novel, which takes place in the Chaco in the summer of 1977, the discursive elements of the hard-boiled novel serve as vehicles that enable the author to examine the violence that traumatized his country during the dictatorship.

The following observation made by Renée W. Craig Odders, in the introduction to *Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Detective Fiction: Essays on the Género Negro Tradition*, certainly applies to Giardinelli’s crime fiction:

One of the peculiarities of contemporary Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian detective fiction is that it is gradually encompassing more subgenres and more writers and no longer fits neatly into traditional categories. Although clearly informed by the hard-boiled tradition, many contemporary detective works do not adhere closely to the conventions of the genre (1).

In an interview with the Argentine author Tununa Mercado, Giardinelli refers to *Luna caliente* as “mucho más que una novela negra, siéndolo”, a statement that he reiterates about his next novel, *Qué solos se quedan los muertos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1985). In an interview with Karl Kohut, Giardinelli describes this novel that paved the way for his return to a democratic Argentina after nine years of exile in Mexico: “Es una novela-homenaje, una novela-despedida, una novela de transición. No es fácilmente encasillable. Es una novela policial y no lo es” (24). Although this novel incorporates many of the conventional elements of hard-boiled fiction, such as violence, police co-

ruption, drugs, blackmail, and murder, narrated in short chapters that end with suspenseful cliffhangers, the primary focus of the narrative is not the resolution of a crime but rather the protagonist's introspective examination of guilt and his own capacity for violence. I examine these concepts in my article "Una despedida al exilio: *Qué solos se quedan los muertos*, in the following manner: "Aunque el hilo narrativo de corte policial entretiene al lector, constituye sólo la urdimbre de la novela cuyo enfoque principal no es el esclarecimiento de un crimen sino una pesquisa epistemológica que lleva al protagonista a un examen de sí mismo y su sociedad" (91).

Never content to repeat successful formulas, even after receiving literary prizes and movie contracts, Giardinelli has continued to experiment with the *género negro* in unique ways. With each subsequent literary foray into the dark side of human nature, in novels such as *El décimo infierno* (México: Editorial Colibrí, 1999) and *Cuestiones interiores* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, February 2003), Giardinelli has employed aspects of detective fiction to reflect on the human capacity for love and violence, especially under extraordinary circumstances that drive some individuals beyond the limits of transgression. The opening lines of his latest novel, *La última felicidad de Bruno Fólner*, reveal to the reader that the anonymous protagonist, an Argentine writer who reinvents himself with the name Bruno Fólner, has already crossed that line and is about to begin a new chapter in his life at the age of sixty-four, after killing his wife three days before, and fleeing to a small seaside town in Brazil to seek refuge. This study will explore the ways in which familiar elements of the *novela negra*, such as crime, violence, flight, and sex are actually secondary to the primary concerns that occupy the thoughts and dreams of Bruno Fólner: death with dignity, the anxieties of aging, and the creative act of writing itself.

In her book, *Detective Fiction from Latin America*, Amelia Simpson's theory regarding works that modify the canonical elements of detective fiction can be applied to Giardinelli's works, particularly his most recent novel:

In those works that are not simply rote imitations of foreign models, attention is often purposefully drawn in the narrative to differences between the model and the new text. In the juxtaposition of these two texts within one narrative framework, a palimpsest is created. The new text is written over the surface of the old (the foreign, imported detective model), which itself remains legible beneath the surface. [...] In many detective works, on the other hand, and especially in Latin American ones, the two texts of the palimpsest interact on other levels to express views about moral issues and social problems, and to question the ideological assumptions of the model (23).

At the heart of *La última felicidad de Bruno Fólner* is the moral issue concerning the matter of death with dignity and whether the act of euthanasia is a crime or a final expression of love. In an interview with Mora Cordeu, Giardinelli responds to a question about the

origins of the novel: “La novela nació de la idea de la fuga que me fascina y está en varios de mis cuentos; y ahí aparece siempre Brasil, esa frontera protectora pero salvaje. [...] Creo que tuvo que ver también con cierta moda del género negro, que no me termina de convencer y hay acá una pequeña intención contestataria, pero no porque yo vaya a contestar nada” (41). With a narration that slips seamlessly between a third person omniscient point of view and first person reflections, the reader learns in the initial pages of the novel why the protagonist has fled to Brazil and by pure chance decides to stay in the coastal town of *Praia Macacos*, where he checks into the *Pousada da Baleia*, or Posada de la Ballena, with a laptop, false passport, Victor Hugo’s *Les miserables*, and \$34,000 for an indefinite stay with no departure date. The novel begins at the moment of check-in when he is asked to provide his name at the front desk: “–Nombre? –Bruno Fólner–dijo y sintió en el acto una oscura satisfacción. Acababa de inventarse” (9). We learn that the character’s real name is not Bruno Fólner, an alias whose phonetic spelling pays homage to his favorite writer William Faulkner, and that he is sixty-four years old and has just made the second most important decision of his life, to fulfill an old fantasy of reinventing himself and starting over. Once he settles into his room on the top floor of the small hotel with a fantastic view of the sea, he looks into the mirror and says to himself, “Ahora empieza el baile, Bruno Fólner. Lo que hiciste ya está hecho” (10). The reader does not have to wait long to learn just what it was that Bruno had done. Once again the bathroom mirror serves as a witness to a confession: “Soy yo, se dice un rato después y mirándose en el espejo del baño, El mero personaje que está inventándose soy yo. Mi nombre verdadero, el de mis documentos hasta ahora, no importa. O sí, pero no quiero decirlo, me he prometido nunca más pronunciarlo. Digamos que las iniciales (falsas, desde luego) eran G.R. Bueno, G.R. ha muerto. No sólo Sarita. Y a ambos los maté yo” (13).

This passage raises the question of whether indeed Bruno Fólner committed a crime or rather an act of mercy, when he slipped into the hospital room of his wife Sara Grinberg in the early dawn hours of Valentine’s Day and disconnected the tubes keeping her alive, as she lay dying of cancer at the age of forty-five, brain-dead, in a comatose state, with no hope of recovery. The third person narrator recalls that irrevocable decision with the intimacy of an actual witness:

Hoy no sabe, no recuerda, en qué exacto minuto se atrevió y lo hizo.
 Fue duro matar a Sarita, pero fue piadoso.
 Un acto de amor, se dice ahora Bruno Fólner.
 Hay que tener no sé si sangre fría, pero sí huevos, para liquidar a la mujer que amaste durante tantos años (49).

With brief chapters that alternate between the present and the past, the narrator resorts to flashbacks to describe in precise detail, reminiscent of a true crime thriller, the premeditated plan that Bruno Fólner executed and the numerous precautions he took

when he escaped from Argentina into Uruguay using multiple modes of transportation (car, boat, bus, and plane), before reaching his final destination in Brazil.

After settling into the *Pousada da Baleia*, where he is treated with kind attention by the innkeepers Jorginho and Dona Amalia, Bruno turns to writing as a means of salvation and a place of refuge in that idyllic port by the sea. In many of his novels, Giardinelli explores the notion that literature itself is a journey, as the following passage suggests:

Sarita no tenía otro destino y yo tampoco. [. . .] Y puesto que en efecto se trataría de una fuga, que mejor si de una vez a la literatura, que nunca es mal destino y yo me lo debía. Hacía un par de años, por lo menos, que fantaseaba con esa novela que nunca arrancaba. Y hacía mucho más que había empezado a sentirme lo que seguramente era: un escritor agotado, vacío de ideas, mediocrizado quién sabe por qué reiteración de fracasos, reales o imaginarios (46).

The reader learns that in his previous life, Bruno Fólner was not only a washed-up writer but also a burned-out professor who taught literature classes and often fantasized about escaping his professional and personal responsibilities in the Chaco province and starting a new life in a place where he could write without distractions. Throughout the novel, Bruno reflects upon the creative act and on literature itself, commenting, for example, on works by such masters as Dante, Homer, Cervantes, and of course, William Faulkner. He also doles out harsh criticism for the petty world of academia: “Despreciaba a los académicos que se saltaban olímpicamente autores y autoras significantes, vivos y muertos, y redactaban artículos que nadie leía sobre los mismos dos o tres nombres que ellos mismos canonizaban” (47). These reflections alternate with familiar elements of the *novela negra*, forming what Amelia Simpson refers to as a “palimpsest” whose layers “are purposefully drawn into an interaction in order to generate new meanings” (23-24).

As Bruno struggles to overcome the writer’s block that has plagued him for years, each frustrating attempt to fulfill his desperate need to create a good story, even a crime story that loosely resembles his own tale, is thwarted by waves of guilt over abandoning his three children and leaving them without a mother or a father. He wrestles with his irrevocable decision and tries to justify the act of euthanasia to himself, and at one point seems to pull the reader directly into the controversy:

La fantasía de la liberación es siempre encantadora, más allá de la culpa. No la admitan si no quieren, no la reconozcan, pero ahí está ella. Y si además hay un cáncer irreversible en el medio, y una degradación física progresiva que comienza por la anulación de la conciencia y desde el vamos condena al enfermo a un ominoso letargo irreversible que no mata de inmediato pero anula todo rasgo de humanidad, hasta dejar a la víctima convertida en menos que una cosa que respira artificialmente, díganme si no es genuino el deseo de que semejante horror se termine de una vez y una mañana luminosa alguien te diga que ese ser al que amaste se murió y que la vida, la tuya, continúa (15).

One could say that death with dignity is a theme that unites this novel with his previous one, *Visitas después de hora*, whose protagonist is a man who lies in a coma in a hospital in Buenos Aires, while one of his three daughters spends hours at his bedside, speaking to him out loud and revisiting the past with reproaches and resentment, but also devotion and love. No doubt, the author's own brush with death served as inspiration for *La última felicidad de Bruno Fólner*, as he explains in an interview with Silvina Frieria: "Estuve muy enfermo, tuve un cáncer jodido del cual me he recuperado. Estoy bien, pero estuve internado bastante tiempo, estuve en coma y la pasé mal... La idea de no sufrir al cuete entubado y mantenido se me instaló como preocupación" (30). In that same interview, Giardinelli insists that his fiction is just that, fiction, and warns the reader against identifying characters with the author, saying: "Hay que abandonar la identificación con el autor" (30).

Nevertheless, those readers who are also friends of the author cannot help but recognize certain personal obsessions when it comes to Bruno Fólner's writing habits, rituals such as composing first by hand in a red Moleskine notebook and using a vintage Parker cartridge ink pen, before transcribing the manuscript to a Mac. The novel also includes veiled tributes to members of Giardinelli's own family, such as his grandfather and father who passed on their love of the journey, as the author explains in an interview: "Desde muy chico me gustaba viajar. Con mi abuelo ferroviario y mi padre marino, teníamos pase libre para el ferrocarril y para los barcos" (Kohut 42). In the novel, Bruno wonders what it would be like to continue the journey he has just begun: "Ser un eterno viajero como el abuelo, que era inspector de trenes y así recorrió el país; o como mi viejo que fue marinero" (54). Names of familiar places, such as the author's hometown of Resistencia, and nearby Paso de la Patria, Formosa, and Corrientes also appear in this novel that resembles a labyrinth constructed with memories, fragments of dreams, philosophical reflections, and canonical elements of detective fiction. In this novel, Giardinelli also alludes to his previous works, such as *Soñario* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Edhasa, 2008), a collection of dreams that Bruno Fólner published with a similar title: "Así escribió *Sueñomundis*, una colección de relatos breves que llamó artefactos minimalistas y que la crítica ignoró a la perfección y fue un perfecto fracaso de ventas" (137). Zealous readers of Giardinelli's fiction may recognize the allusion to his masterpiece *Santo Oficio de la memoria* in the following passage, in which Bruno reflects upon reading a biography of Jorge Amado and poetry by Durmmond de Andrade, during his "exile" in Brazil: "la literatura brasileña, leída allí, me abría los brazos como quien te espera al llegar de un viaje. El viaje al viaje que la literatura es. La literatura como viaje en sí. Lo tengo escrito en una novela, se dice reconociéndose inquieto" (53).

In addition to Bruno's frustrations over his inability to fulfill his compulsive desire to write and his fear of being caught by the authorities and imprisoned, one other anxiety appears to occupy his thoughts, often accompanied by reflections tinged in self-deprecating humor: the inevitable consequences of growing old. It is only natural that anxieties over the aging

process emerge repeatedly in a novel whose central theme is death and whose protagonist is a sixty-four year-old former smoker who suffers from high blood pressure, insomnia, respiratory problems, and a waning sexual libido, and whose physical appearance affirms the passage of time: hands with arthritic curved fingers and age spots, myopic eyes clouded by cataracts, a balding head with few hairs left to comb, and a potbelly that is evidence of his love of good food, wine and whiskey, particularly Maker's Mark bourbon.

Sex, in the form of vivid fantasies, or explicit scenes of carnal passion, with or without the sentiment of love, is a common element in crime fiction, and a recurring theme throughout Giardinelli's novels and short stories. Fans of the genre know that there will be a price to pay if the protagonist succumbs to the seductive enticements of the alluring *femme fatale*. In his latest novel, Giardinelli incorporates aspects of fantastic literature or the Gothic novel with the strange appearances of Rajane, a beautiful woman who always wears a long white dress and gazes at the sea, the final resting place of her beloved Marco. The reader begins to suspect that perhaps Rajane is a figment of Bruno's imagination, when she appears suddenly in his hotel room like a phantom and awakens his sleeping libido as they make passionate love, only to disappear as mysteriously as she arrived. Bruno also wonders if Rajane truly exists, but feels grateful nonetheless for his resuscitated virility: "Fólner estás entero. Entero Fólner, sexagenario y entero. No sé cuánto dure, pero es una sensación fantástica" (119). In an interview, Giardinelli responds to the question if Rajane is a "producto de fantasía o la presencia de la muerte" in the following way: "Absolutamente, es fantasmal. Existe o no existe esa mujer, es la muerte que viene, es una mujer que está ahí con su historia, es el último amor, la última felicidad" (Cordeu 41).

For Bruno Fólner, the steady deterioration of the body is a sign that death, or as he calls it, that "[p]uta diosa incalificable que lo persigue" (65) is lying in wait for him, and even more so when it appears that the police are hot on his trail and closing in on him. In the final pages of the novel, the narration proceeds at lightning speed and the familiar aspects of the crime thriller take center stage: the arrival of the police who surround the hotel, including the obese detective who had questioned him previously, "el hijo de puta cerdo de dientes amarillos" (105) whose return appearance puts Bruno on high alert when he realizes that the jig is up and he is in a real jam. Ironically, he has to admit that his passion for crime fiction is of no use to him in his precarious situation: "Toda mi vida fui lector intensivo de novelas policiales, pero ahora eso no me sirve para razonar mejor. No recuerdo situación como ésta, no encuentro consejo para darme" (110).

As the suspense builds, the narrator explains Bruno's predicament employing the typical wise-cracking jargon and "street talk" of detective fiction: "Sabe, como lo supo en todo momento, que podía suceder. Era un hecho que algún día iba a andar la poli por ahí. Siempre andan, no hay lugar en el mundo donde no te joda un policía, y a los giles la cana siempre les cae encima. Si no tenés poder o muy buenos lazos sucios, la yuta te cae,

más temprano que tarde” (148). The narration slides from third person to first person and Bruno turns philosophical when he considers his dilemma: “Ahora vienen por mí y a ver como me zafo. Entregarme, ni loco. [...] Siempre vienen por nosotros. Alguien, algo, lo inesperado, viene a buscarte. No falla” (148).

Time is running out, and like a Hollywood fugitive, Bruno decides to make a run for it, crawling out the window and over the hotel roof, but not before grabbing the cash, his beloved Moleskin notebook and Mac, and a cyanide pill that he had bought from El Gordo Núñez in the Bar La Estrella in Resistencia, the very day he decided to put his wife out of her misery. A former *guerrillero* during the dictatorship, El Gordo Núñez still had the cyanide pill that the *Montoneros* had given him to swallow so that he could die heroically if he were ever captured. Indeed, the moment arrives when Bruno Fólner must decide if he will turn himself in or take matters into his own hands and dare to change his life definitively. When he realizes that he cannot escape, he enters the hotel’s kitchen through the service door and sees fear on the faces of Jorginho and Dona Amalia, who have treated him as if he were family. He asks Jorginho for one final shot of whiskey, then puts the cyanide pill in his mouth, bites it and washes it down with a smile.

This is how the novel ends, but devoted fans of Giardinelli’s fiction will not necessarily mourn the death of Bruno Fólner. After all, the narrator does not say that Bruno dies, and one can only question the effectiveness of a cyanide pill that is over thirty years old. Not to mention that Giardinelli has been known to resuscitate his characters after his readers fear the worst, as is the case with Araceli, in *Luna caliente*, and Victorio and Clelia, two lovers who flee the police in the novel *Imposible equilibrio* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1995), and are believed to be dead, only to reappear five years later in *Final de novela en Patagonia* (Barcelona: Ediciones B, 2000). In fact, those readers who have grown fond of Bruno would like nothing more than to see him appear in a sequel to the novel, but if in fact this is the end of the road for him, perhaps the “última felicidad de Bruno Fólner” is that moment when death comes for him and he floats away, finally at peace and free of suffering, down the river into the burning light as the rising sun bathes the water in golden flames, just as La Nona describes her last dream in the novel *Santo oficio de la memoria* (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 1991), a dream that Giardinelli includes in his book *Soñario* with the title: “Reflejos dorados en el río”:

Mientras flotaba, atravesada por nueve líneas de fuego rojo que eran como nueve pasiones anaranjadas, comprendí que la muerte puede ser, también, una larga conversación silenciosa con uno mismo, una múltiple sonoridad acuática, una profusión de monólogos propios y ajenos, eternos, repetidos pero siempre originales. Como el arte. Y me sentí muy bien (16-17).

This novel is indeed a long silent conversation that Bruno Fólner, alias G.R., carries on with himself, a monologue infused with other voices, real, dreamed, or imagined that in

one way or another address matters concerning life and death. As Giardinelli explains in an interview, the driving force behind *La última felicidad de Bruno Fólner* is the change of life:

El cambio de vida es uno de los grandes motores y también uno de los grandes frenos de la humanidad. El tema no es soñar un cambio de vida, el tema es atreverse, es hacerlo. El tema central de esta novela no es tanto el cambio de vida, o en todo caso es el cambio de vida a partir de un tema que determina al personaje, que es la muerte digna, considerada clásicamente como delito. Matar a otro, por muy piadoso que sea, no deja de ser un delito (Frieria 30).

There is no doubt that the ultimate change of life is death itself. If the novel truly does ends with the death of Bruno Fólner, perhaps his final moment is one of happiness, an instant in which he is able to slip away with no regrets for a life well-lived and well-loved, that which we all desire when the sand in the hourglass has run its course.

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