

Antonio Ungar. *Tres ataúdes blancos*. Anagrama, 2010. 284 pages. Paper: €18.75.

Winner of the 2010 Herralde Novel Prize, Colombian writer Antonio Ungar's trenchant satirical thriller *Tres ataúdes blancos* (Three White Coffins) is a fresh, disorienting take on the motif of doppelgänger as political impersonator—*The Prince and the Pauper* nightmarishly updated for the decentered twenty-first century. The principal narrator begins as a shiftless souse with an uncanny likeness to one Pedro Akira, leader of the Movimiento Amarillo and sole opposition candidate to Tomás del Pito, diminutive narco-dictator of the hellish tropical republic of Miranda. When Akira is gunned down, the narrator is coerced into a deadly charade of assuming the candidate's identity and carrying on the campaign. Ungar's polyphonic narration masterfully employs a variety of techniques (dreams, radio and TV broadcasts, videotaped sequences, broadsheets, diary entries, blacked-out text), while the anonymous narrator's mordant voice recalls Beckett's *Molloy* and *Watt*. With his love, Ada Neira, and his bodyguard Jairo Calderón, he suffers through a cruel, nightmarish adventure that is by turns hilarious, murderous, and all too benightedly human. His fatalistic account of political tragedy—a possibly posthumous, loose-ended memoir, curiously trapped inside a closed temporal loop—conveys a terrible, visceral sense of enclosure akin to Odysseus in the Cyclops's cave or Arthur Gordon Pym amidships. Capable of subtle lyricism, deep pathos, and macabre realism, the novel spins a web of bravura love, crazy camaraderie, deception, betrayal, hatred, and vengeance, then doubles back to shadow its own episodes and probe its narrative reliability, sorrowfully aware that in Miranda both the executioner's and the narrator's faces are well hidden. *Tres ataúdes blancos* is a political satire that keeps the reader on tenterhooks—laughing in nervous disbelief, cringing in fear—until the last haunted sentence when the telemetric dread is deepened even further by a desire to revisit, replay, and

recover control of a story that deftly refuses to give up the ghost or say who, precisely, lies within the three white coffins. [Brendan Riley]