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## FANTASTIC SYMBOLISM IN THE SPANISH AMERICAN SHORT STORY

THE traditional, Platonic form of the fantastic short story is characterized by a simple narrative stratagem: putting preternatural events into a realistic narrative as if they were literally true. This feature has long been recognized as distinctive, because it separates the fantastic from allegory, fable, parable, fairy tale, and other fictional forms that we usually call *fantasy*. Tzvetan Todorov, in his *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris, 1970), has taken this characteristic as his basic premise in giving a structural definition of the fantastic genre.<sup>1</sup> A great deal of fiction—perhaps the major part of what we call *fantastic*—does not qualify as such by this criterion, because it departs from strict standards of what is preternatural or literal, usually by being metaphorical or symbolic. I am not concerned here with the latter type. In the coming pages I will speak only of the “primal fantastic” in which there is an unrationalized textual confrontation between the real and the unreal. This form of fiction was created in the late eighteenth century and survives today.<sup>2</sup> It first appears in Spanish America in the 1850’s, during the romantic period.

<sup>1</sup> Todorov holds that the supernatural must appear in a realistic context and be taken literally, not as allegory or “poetry.” He divides fiction which meets this criterion into three types: the uncanny, which has a logical explanation; the marvelous, whose explanation is only supernatural; and the true fantastic, in which the reader is kept hesitating between one and the other. His book is translated as *Introducción a la literatura fantástica*, tr. Silvia Delpy (Buenos Aires, 1972) and as *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, tr. Richard Howard with Foreword by Robert Scholes (Ithaca, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> Todorov traces it back to Jacques Cazotte’s *Le Diable amoureux* (1772).

The primal fantastic as a literary artifice which gives its name and character to a short story cannot, in itself, serve the literary goal of aesthesia, a heightened perception of reality. It produces intellectual bewilderment, and ideally this ought to drive the reader to the plane of purely aesthetic apprehension, but it does not. The astonishment or mystification it produces tends to dominate and almost eclipse all other elements of the narrative. A writer, in order to show any kind of reality, must find a way of restoring verisimilitude after the fantastic has removed it. This is very hard to do, for if the supernatural element is linked to rational truth, it becomes symbolic or metaphorical. Consequently, the fantastic is generally used for itself alone, to distract and titillate, and the fantastic genre is often characterized as escapist, non-serious, and "minor." We can account for its survival through the nineteenth century and up to our own time by the fact that it has been the sole repository of the clearly preternatural in literature since realism came into style in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century it served as a saucy dig in the ribs of realism, naturalism, and rationalism.

This is nowhere more visible than in the history of the fantastic genre in Spanish America. The romantics used the fantastic to astonish and horrify, as well as to flout the reasonable, down-to-earth outlook of rationalism and positivism. The modernists could hardly use it at all, for religious and aesthetic reasons. Horacio Quiroga, around 1920, hit upon a formula for converting the fantastic into a truly literary mechanism by cutting it down to size, but he seems to have used his recipe only once. Since then, other writers have used it, or something very close to it; but they have done so infrequently, and the primal fantastic remains, by and large, escapist and shallow. These are the things I will try to show in the coming pages, in support of my belief that when it follows the example of Quiroga and a few others, the "minor" fantastic is brought into the mainstream of art.

Before realism came into vogue, literature had been, relatively speaking, an indiscriminating combination of reality and fantasy. When realism had begun to seek verisimilitude above all, pushing fantasy aside, some writers began to take this disinherited child, unreality, and shove it brazenly into a realistic narrative, affronting rationalism right on its own ground. This had, whether it was intended or not, the value of a "position paper" in favor

of all those things in earth and heaven not dreamed of in an earth-bound world view. The romantics in particular had need of a narrative vehicle standing against the rationalism spawned by the neoclassicists, which was to dog romanticism's footsteps throughout its life. The fantastic had a shallow but double virtue; it opposed realism in method and rationalism in vision. It was the only narrative mode which put a reader's intellectual or critical faculties to sleep through his willing suspension of disbelief, jolted them awake again with a radically incongruent element, and then paralyzed them with a textual discrepancy beyond the reach of rational thought. Producing intellectual paralysis became an end in itself, because it implied an alternative reality beyond science and reason. Therein lies the virtue and the weakness of the fantastic, for it powerfully insinuates what it cannot show; it has no examples. It cannot go beyond the negation of reason and its postulates. To the extent that we expect literature to show us some kind of reality, we must say that any literary merit to be found in a fantastic story is there in spite of the fantastic mechanism, not because of it.

The primal fantastic remains the quickest, easiest path to intellectual defeat, an objective now sought in modified degree by more sophisticated narrative forms such as Kafkian dream, the befuddling techniques of Joyce and Faulkner, magical realism, and other modes aimed at driving a reader out of his mind and into something above it—a supra-intellectual, nonliteral apprehension of real-life phenomena. But unlike these modern mixtures of the real and the unreal, the primal fantastic sets out to attack reality and cannot therefore partake of it. Its highest accomplishment is that it brings back metaphysical ideas we have rejected: destiny, static or circular time, the falseness of the I-thou dichotomy, biological metamorphosis, and other notions out of our primitive past. Criticism is full of claims that fantasy and the fantastic take us on a trip to clairvoyance. Todorov sees the "marvelous journey" as a "total exploration of universal reality" (p. 72, quoting Pierre Mabille); Eric Rabkin, in *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton, 1976), views it as a revelation of "the truth of the human heart" (p. 27); and Diana Waggoner, in *The Hills of Faraway* (New York, 1978), says that we escape from reality in order to see it as it is, "no longer blinded by our eyes" (p. 27, quoting Rupert Brooke). But the revelations they are

talking about are the product of *fiction*—the kind which, by whatever narrative means, is able to deal with reality and to poke it with a stick to see if it will stand its ground. To accomplish that goal, the primal fantastic, at least, has to overcome its own methods. Farther on I will try to show that the fantastic as a narrative device has become artistically effective when compressed into a symbol by writers who are concerned for showing reality, not stamping it out.

Before coming to that, I want to consider the use and non-use of the primal fantastic in the romantic and modernist periods in Spanish America. Spanish America is a good source of example because there the history of fantastic fiction is shorter, more intense, and more central to the development of the short story than it is elsewhere. For our purposes no better selection of stories from the nineteenth century could be made than the one given by Oscar Hahn in his anthology and study *El cuento fantástico hispanoamericano en el siglo XIX* (México, 1978), since he has followed, to the extent possible, the criterion of Todorov and therefore of what I am calling intellectual paralysis. His selection is quite representative. From the romantic period he presents nine stories from seven authors, spanning the years 1858–1882. Unless I cite Hahn, the following opinions are my own.

The most obvious feature of this fiction is its consistent romantic insinuation that the heart is better than the head. It offers no recognizable, real-life truth to support a number of shallow ideas surrounding that central affirmation. It has three salient characteristics, all of which can be put under the heading of anti-rationalism: the resort to wonderment for its own sake, the postulation of numinous powers, and a moralism rooted in the idea that the heart is the sacred source of virtue.

Astonishment for its own sake is best seen in Hahn's oldest example, "Gaspar Blondín" (1858) by the Ecuadorian Juan Montalvo. Full of horror, witchery, and lovers who turn out to be dead bodies, it is hardly more than a series of shocking images without literary embellishment; Blondín, an evil man hanged for murder, appears alive among guests at an inn. A quieter example of mystery without other purpose is Juana Manuela Gorriti's "Coincidencias" (Argentina, 1874), a series of four brief narratives of which the first, "El emparedado," is typical. A monk appears in a monastery cell without opening the locked door, answers a

question that has not been verbalized, says that he sleeps nearby, and disappears; when the monastery is remodeled soon after, a monk's skeleton is found behind a wall. The story gives only bare-boned narratives in a minimal framework.

The romantics were fond of representing inner, intuitive truth as numinous or supernatural powers, often as demons or angels. Most interesting is their preoccupation with the Muse, an artistic symbol revived by the neoclassicists and believed almost literally by the romantics. Miguel Cané's "El canto de la Sirena" (Argentina, before 1882) poses the question whether poetic inspiration (the Muse) is supernatural or is a kind of madness (obsession). A musician who believes there is literal truth behind every legend becomes obsessed with finding the song of the Sirens. He winds up playing celestial music—in an asylum. The idea that neoclassicism's crazy artist is romanticism's saint is a catchy notion, but it is hardly a "heart's truth" that every reader is longing for, and to show even this much reality Cané had to write a story whose fantastic nature is borderline at best; the implication is that the music played by the musician is indeed the original song of the Sirens, for which he has sacrificed his sanity. Eduardo Holmberg uses a similar theme in "El ruiseñor y el artista" (Argentina, 1876), in which an artist's painting takes on life and movement under the influence of his dead sister, who comes as a ray of light; she is the Muse, the real creator of the work. Again, the small reality that comes from the text is a tenet of romanticism, not something from real life.

Moralism always carries a religious connotation, but in this fiction it is based on an idealistic, almost pollyanna view of life that abhors questioning and cogitation. "Gaspar Blondín" stamps a heavy foot on illicit love, sexuality linked with necrophilia, and other wicked perversions, not from a religious angle but with the implication that evil, born of reason, is contrary to the pure-sweet truth of the heart. In connection with Gorriti's "Quien escucha su mal oye" (1864), Hahn points out that romanticism condemns curiosity, the desire to peer into the arcane, which we can paraphrase as the desire to rationalize the heart's truth. In this story a young political rebel opens a secret door and spies on strange activities involving hypnosis. Eduardo Blanco plays on the same theme in "El número 111" (Venezuela, 1873); the Devil imbues a virtuous young man with an evil curiosity to see into the hearts

of others, where he finds only rottenness except in the heart of a woman he loves from afar, who is "protected by heaven." Human love is equated with divine protection—again a representation of inner "truth" as a numinous power that defeats science, which comes of the Devil.

As it drew closer to the coming modernist period, the primal fantastic had difficulty in remaining primal. Writers in general had realities on their minds and moved toward thematic concerns soon to be typical of modernism. Holmberg, in order to expand anti-rationalism into a rejection of pragmatic utilitarianism, had to leave the fantastic and go to science fiction. In his "Horacio Kalibang y los autómatas" (1879), Kalibang (Shakespeare's Caliban) is a man-made robot through whom Holmberg is able to moralize that doctors who kill and orators who pander to the crowd are also automatons. "Lanchitas" (México, ca. 1880) by José María Bárcena deserves more comment than I can give it here; it has no romantic message and is closely pre-modernist in its use of legend and religious miracle. More modernistic than romantic is Eduardo Wilde's "Alma callejera" (Argentina, 1882), which is short and lyrical, almost a prose poem. The narrator's soul journeys to the boudoir of his beloved, where it spreads itself over her sleeping form in a fleshless erotic caress and is absorbed into her body with an intake of breath. In this story, clearly, we have left the fantastic and gone into poetry.

To sum up, the romantics used the primal fantastic and forms very close to it for no higher purpose than to promote romantic ideas about reality without showing any of it. In the context of rationalism and logical positivism, their fiction had limited value as a kind of manifesto, but that value was tied to the times and their literature is now a curiosity.

In the modernist period, extending roughly from the appearance of Rubén Darío's *Azul* (1888) to the 1920's, intellectual paralysis brought about by the clash of the real and the unreal was inconsistent with the religious sensibilities of the times and antithetical to the modernists' aesthetic views. The romantic preoccupation with the heart and the head had its religious dimension, faith versus science, and this was enlarged during the modernist years. Faith as inner experience was expressible only in its symbolic language, a corpus of supernatural beliefs, because of which the supernatural as such was vaguely endowed with religious significance.

The narrator of Darío's "El caso de la señorita Amelia" affirms his orthodoxy by saying, "Creo en Dios y su Iglesia. Creo en los milagros. Creo en *lo sobrenatural*" (emphasis mine). As this implies, the supernatural did not constitute spurious unreality for the logical mind; to make it function as such in fiction was difficult.

Enrique Anderson Imbert has shown how Darío (1867–1916) exemplifies this state of affairs. In a lecture given in 1967,<sup>3</sup> he observed that Darío was unable to produce really fantastic fiction because he could not separate imagination from religious belief, nor could he use supernatural material heretically—and "fantasy is more effective artistically the more it risks caprice, even heresy" ("Rubén Darío . . .," p. 105). Like other modernists, Darío wrote many religious fables, miracle stories, and variations on classical myths, but very little that resembles the primal fantastic. Both Anderson Imbert ("Rubén Darío . . .," p. 70) and Hahn observe that poor Darío believed everything and was tormented by his superstitious credulity toward the occult. He lacked a firm body of false ideas.

But this has its purely artistic side also. The modernists, who were moved by the principle of art for art's sake, laid stress on form for its own sake and presented more or less patent reality only in order to vivify its colors and make beauty palpable and sensible. They poetized and caressed obvious things. They had no use for a device which attacked reality, required literalness instead of poetry and metaphor, posed conflict where they saw only harmony, and insinuated "other" reality to which no beautiful form could be attached.

To complete his survey of the nineteenth century, Hahn has chosen three stories by Darío which come closer than any others to being fantastic: "D.Q." (1899), "El caso de la señorita Amelia" (1894), and "Verónica" (1896).<sup>4</sup> The longest is "Amelia," because Darío gives us a catalogue of human knowledge as a background to the protagonist's conclusion that the world's truth can be

<sup>3</sup> Published as "Rubén Darío and the Fantastic Element in Literature," tr. Anne Bonner, *Rubén Darío Centennial Studies*, ed. Miguel González-Gerth and George D. Schade (Austin, 1970), pp. 97–117.

<sup>4</sup> *Cuentos completos de Rubén Darío*, ed. Ernesto Mejía Sánchez, with "Estudio preliminar" by Raimundo Lida (México, 1950). "D.Q." is not included; I refer to the text given by Hahn. "Verónica" is entitled "La extraña muerte de Fray Pedro," being a later version than Hahn's.

summed up in a pair of eyes—that is, that knowledge, like beauty, is subjective. Amelia, a young girl, does not grow older during a period of many years. This revelation, coming at the end of the story, is only momentarily stupefying, for the reader quickly assumes that the girl's eternal youth, despite its being acknowledged vaguely by other characters, is really in the eyes of a man who is old enough to be her father but has an unfatherly yen for her. The story is doubtfully fantastic.

"Verónica" is the story of a monk to whom the Devil gives an X-ray machine. Since the sacramental bread of the altar miraculously contains the body of Christ, the monk X-rays it and gets a picture of Jesus. The early version of the story given by Hahn describes the holy visage as "terrible," which accounts for the monk's falling dead. A later version changes it to "sweet," prompting Anderson Imbert to remark that Darío was "more attentive to the conventions of a religious tale than to the demands of a fantastic one" ("Rubén Darío . . .," p. 106). This remark pretty well sums up the use of the fantastic in the modernist period. As for the central theme, ludicrous logic does not constitute the supernatural, and the frivolousness of the sacramental X-ray prevents our taking it seriously.

"D.Q." is the best of the three stories. A strange flag-bearer in a company of Spanish soldiers fighting against the Yankees in the Spanish-American War turns out to be Don Quixote, who jumps into an abyss, signifying the end of the Spanish era in the New World. The story is not fantastic, because we intuit Quixote's identity before it is revealed, and we take him symbolically and without surprise. The story perhaps leans in the direction of what I will call, farther on, irrational symbol; but it falls short of it because Quixote is already a large literary convention and symbol, and putting him into a company of soldiers in 1898 does not create a new one; it only invokes a familiar one.

Stories by other modernists hardly justify discussion in relation to the primal fantastic. The *Cuentos misteriosos* of Amado Nervo are mostly moral fables and are not very mysterious. Leopoldo Lugones (1874–1938) is usually held up as the chief fantasist of the period. He wrote several stories of a pseudo-fantastic kind, notably in *Las fuerzas extrañas* (1906),<sup>5</sup> a typical one being "Viola

<sup>5</sup> For "Viola Acherontia" see *Leopoldo Lugones: Selección de poesía y prosa*, ed. Leopoldo Lugones, hijo (Buenos Aires, 1962), pp. 76–82; my source for other stories mentioned is *Los caballos de Abdera* (México, 1919).

Acherontia," in which a man hears flowers crying; it is actually science fiction, and the idea of intelligent flowers conflicts with knowledge more than reason. "La lluvia de fuego," often anthologized as fantastic, has nothing fantastic about it; despite its setting in Sodom, it is pure realism, and its genuine virtue lies in vivid narration and convincing detail. "La estatua de sal" builds on the Genesis 19 account of Lot's wife and miraculously revives the lady, but her revival is only an addition to the already-fantastic story of her being turned into a pillar of salt. "Los caballos de Abdera" is allegorical and poses no intellectual problem for a reader. Resembling "D.Q." is Lugones' "Dos ilustres lunáticos" from *Lunario sentimental* (1909), wherein "H" and "Q" converse in a railroad station and turn out to be Hamlet and Quixote. There is nothing fantastic about it.

In sum, the appearance of the primal fantastic in the modernist period is anomalous, if it can be said to appear at all.

Now we come to Horacio Quiroga (1878–1937). Many of his stories, even the most realistic, contain hints of the supernatural, and some border on the fantastic. He plunged clearly into supernatural fiction about 1920, the date of "Juan Darién," "El síncope blanco," and other stories published in 1924 as *El desierto*. In 1935 he published *El más allá*, which includes stories about life after death; these are fantasies, not the fantastic, since they do not baffle the reader with a textual contradiction but posit supernatural situations as "reality" and proceed with consistent narration by the norms established. "El síncope blanco" is a strange combination of realism, fantasy, and the primal fantastic. I will go on to "Juan Darién," since I must make a complete summary of its plot, which will take several paragraphs.

Judged by the wealth of social, psychological, and theological implication crowded into a short narrative, "Juan Darién" <sup>6</sup> is an unusually adroit story. Compactness and multiple suggestion are accomplished through an irrational (preternatural) symbol, a tiger who is also a boy. The story raises this metaphor to a polyvalent symbol by compressing into a single image the essential oxymoronic clash of the real with the unreal; the image—the boy-tiger—must be taken literally, despite its emergence as symbol, because it cannot be paraphrased. Carrying the necessary viola-

<sup>6</sup> Horacio Quiroga, *Cuentos*, ed. Raimundo Lazo, 2nd ed. (México, 1970), pp. 74–80.

tion of reality within itself, it frees the rest of the narrative to pursue reality—to restore verisimilitude by using the supernatural part of the metaphor symbolically without destroying its literalness. The image thus takes on the character of religious language, which is both literal and symbolic because there is no alternative to it; it embraces multiple realities and exceeds them all. Told with childlike simplicity, “Juan Darién” achieves a certain majesty. This is due in part to the fact that it allegorizes the life of Jesus—but not with allegory as its purpose or meaning. It is an extended *allusion* to Jesus, made with a purely artistic goal. From the literary standpoint, the interesting thing is that it does not do what “D.Q.” does, and therefore is infinitely better; it does not bring Jesus into the story as “D.Q.” brings in Quixote. Instead, it uses tigerness and boyness to suggest the dual nature of Jesus, who is divine and human, and uses Jesus as the suggested ultimate example of multiple realities embraced by the symbol. Let me summarize the story as briefly as I can.

The setting is in a nameless village whose inhabitants hate and fear the tigers of the forest. A young widow who has lost her baby to smallpox finds an orphaned tiger cub and takes it to her grieving breast, saying that one life is as good as another. Because the villagers will kill the kitten if they find it, a serpent tells the mother that in the universe all life has the same value and that the tiger will be transformed into a boy. He will not know he is a tiger, and he will remain human unless a human mother denounces him and demands his return to his animal state. Thus he escapes death and grows to the age of ten, “noble, good, and more generous than anybody,” and he never tells a lie.

In school Juan Darién is not very intelligent, but he makes up for it with diligent study. The other children make fun of his coarse hair. When he is ten his mother dies. The villagers dislike him because he is generous and studious and is the best pupil in the class. A school inspector comes to measure the children’s progress and becomes suspicious when Juan, nervous under examination, makes an abnormal sound. The inspector notices his coarse hair and the greenish tint of his eyes. Remembering that people in hypnotic trance can be led to recall a forgotten past, the inspector makes Juan close his eyes and imagine that he is going through the forest describing what he sees. Juan

startles himself and others by seeing rocks and fallen leaves at eye level and feeling moisture on his *whiskers*.

The inspector wants Juan killed, but he cannot prove he is a tiger, so he calls on an animal trainer for help. The trainer's dogs fail to detect a tiger's odor on the boy, so the trainer beats him savagely, telling him to show his stripes. The villagers join in the horrible vilification and drive the child, now in agony, toward the forest. He lifts pleading hands to a young mother standing in a doorway, who screams that he is reaching for her baby; she too demands that he show his stripes. Now the villagers are ready to kill him, and they place him in the middle of a fireworks display prepared for a celebration. In the fiery torture he resumes his animal form. Thinking he is dead, the villagers drag him to the forest to be eaten by vultures. He manages to shelter himself and convalesces for a month, and all his wounds heal except a large one in his side. He has retained three human traits: his memory, human speech, and the use of his paws as hands. He congregates his fellow tigers, captures the animal trainer, ties him between two trees, and sets fire to the dry leaves below. The trainer sobs for forgiveness and sees himself "abandoned by God." Juan then goes to his mother's grave and speaks to her, saying that she alone understood the universal right to life and that she had taught Juan to love, forgive, and understand. When he hears hunters killing in the forest, he writes "and Juan Darién" under his mother's name on the tombstone, using blood from the wound in his side. Then he goes into the forest to be a tiger forever.

The irrational symbol makes brevity possible. Juan could have been a black child passing as white in the southern U.S., a Jew in Nazi Germany, or any kind of persecuted outsider, but the necessity of realistic detail would have lengthened the narrative unduly. The allegory is obvious: Juan is good, a person from another order of being, incarnate in human form, hated for truth-telling, exonerated by the dogs (Pilate), tried by the animal trainer (Caiaphas), publicly accused and whipped, vilified by a mob, "crucified" on the eve of a celebration, wounded in the side, given up for dead, and "resurrected." He then appears among his followers (the tigers), and he finally "ascends" into tigerness forever. The crucifixion of the trainer, who begs for forgiveness (not mercy) and cries that God has abandoned him (as Jesus

did on the Cross) no doubt signifies the salvation of sinners who are "crucified with Christ." There is no presumed discrepancy between the tiger's execution of the trainer and his own statement that he has learned to love and forgive.

In all religions, the narrator tells us, the serpent knows the mysteries of life. The serpent who turned the tiger into a human being is the same one who in Genesis put Adam and Eve into the human condition. This takes the allegory back to the beginning of the Old Testament and implicates human nature. The story converts the Judeo-Christian statement of the human problem into a universal, existential myth—existential in the sense of being a part of existence itself, capable of embodiment in other symbols than those of religious tradition. Quiroga's depiction of human response to Juan's tigerness poses the question of human nature vis-à-vis what is more than human—the "other" that calls human life into question, which is both fearful and benign. Ever since William Blake (1757–1827) made his "Tyger, tyger, burning bright / In the forests of the night" the symbol of ultimate and mysterious reality, no serious writer has been able to use the tiger for anything else. Juan Darién is the symbol of what we can hate, fear, and reject but cannot destroy; we can drive it out of the real and into the void, but it will come back as the "tigers of wrath" which Blake said are wiser than the horses of instruction. This is what the romantics were trying to say, but they didn't know how to say it through the fantastic.

There is a subtle heresy in Quiroga's universalizing of the Judeo-Christian myth that amounts to poking it with a stick as a good artist should; any truth, so poked, only grows larger. The Christ story is a historical event—a singular, unrepeated intervention of God in human affairs. Because it is in linear time, human response to it is not predestined but is a matter of free will. By putting it on a fictional stage with different characters, Quiroga implies its archetypal, Platonic pattern, pushing it into the heavens where it is a static condition or endless repetition, a destiny to which there can be no free-will response; human fate is sealed by human nature. Or, depending on one's theology, we could say that Christ is forever crucified and we are redeemed in spite of our nature. Or, we are to be conformed in time to what is timeless. Obviously, Quiroga has not made a didactic statement; he has nudged a reality and made it show its various faces. That reality

is not only religious but also social and psychological. Into the vacuum created by the intellectually arresting symbol we can put anything that can be suggested by the image of something harmless and benign that is turned by human fear into something hateful and dangerous—unpopular ideas, alien people, foreign cultures, moral imperatives, guilt, God, inexplicable inner feelings at war with reason . . . Quiroga's only apparent philosophical statement is the same as Albert Schweitzer's: reverence for all life. But a larger meaning is clear: reverence for all being, all reality.

The central point to be made is this: Quiroga's story converts the primal fantastic into a different use by compressing it into its nucleus, a paradoxical image which comprises, in effect, a fantastic micro-text; the fantastic principle is not abandoned but abstracted and re-used. This reduction of the fantastic to a condensed paradox unlocks its literary possibilities. Unfortunately, no other story by Quiroga exemplifies this conversion.

We can open any anthology and see that what has been written and classified as fantastic fiction from the 1920's to the present includes both the primal fantastic and variant forms which do not technically qualify as such. The latter fiction is consistently better, if the evocation of reality is used as a yardstick; the fantastic remains an end in itself and offers only escape. Occasionally we run across stories which turn the fantastic into symbol, not exactly as Quiroga did but in very similar ways. So far as I know, no writer has done this consistently or even frequently. A few examples follow.

Héctor A. Murena (Argentina, 1923–1975) has written novels, stories, poetry, drama, and essays. His fantastic fiction is not plentiful, comprising only some of the stories of *El centro del infierno* (1956). One of his most popular is "El coronel de caballería."<sup>7</sup> A retired artillery officer (the narrator) attends the wake of a fellow officer, where he finds many old friends. Alcohol is flowing freely, but he drinks coffee. Among the officers and their wives is a middle-aged, agile man, apparently a cavalry colonel, whom nobody remembers although he seems familiar. The colonel is aggressively affable to the point of being overbearing. He makes himself the center of attention, gets people involved in silly games, induces two men to get on all fours and

<sup>7</sup> *El coronel de caballería y otros relatos* (Caracas, 1971), pp. 7–18. Contains the stories by H. A. Murena mentioned subsequently.

imitate a horse and rider, and in other ways makes fools of the guests and offends good taste. The daughter of the dead man whose body lies in another room ought to be scandalized at this lack of decorum, but even she is captivated by the overpowering personality of the colonel. In the wee hours of the morning the narrator and the colonel leave the house at the same time. The colonel begins to say terrible, insulting things about the people inside, damning them for the stupidity and vulgarity of which he was the cause. Taking off his coat, he exudes an acid-like odor; his face looks dark and hairy in the half-light, his eyes are intense and burning, and he seems shorter and heavier. When the narrator turns to say something to him in answer to his insults, he has disappeared—possibly, but not probably, having jumped aboard a passing streetcar. The reader supposes at this point that the colonel is a malignant supernatural being. At the funeral the next day, nobody who was at the wake is willing to talk about the colonel. At the dead man's home the acid-like odor pervades the rooms, and the daughter attributes it to the many flowers brought in for the wake.

The reader is unsure whether the colonel is a man or a demon; but in any case, he is the externalized spirit or influence of the alcohol that flowed so freely. Everything he did to rob the guests of their dignity can be attributed to "demon rum." The colonel could fulfill his symbolic role in the story without being supernatural, but the suggestion of his demonic nature enlarges him with an implication beyond alcohol; he becomes something more cosmic than a bowl of spiked punch. He is anything that can evoke our imperfections when our guard is down—our vulgarity, discourtesy, and social insecurity. He is also the one who puts us into an attitude of feigned bravado and hilarity in the presence of death. Like the guests of the story, we are all ashamed after being with the colonel.

One of the marks of good literature is that it leaves us with usable vocabulary. Juan Darién's name is able to remind us of his history and all that it implies. "The colonel" is an apt symbol for anything that causes us to behave in a gross and unfitting way, stealing our dignity and honor. Murena provides another, similar symbol in "La sierra," whose theme resembles that of Jorge Luis Borges' later story "El encuentro" (*El informe de Brodie*, 1970). In a meat shop, among bloody things, hangs a

butcher's saw. A little boy, son of the butcher, comes in and plays with his father's tools, which he is forbidden to do. A burly form appears in the doorway, and the boy is terrified. The man comes and stands over him, red with anger. He grabs the boy's wrists, lays them on the butcher table, and picks up the saw. The boy's mother comes in and stops, paralyzed; but she does not know why, for she sees only the butcher sawing the bones of a goat while the boy looks on, pale. She decides not to speak because she sees that they are "in another world." After she leaves, the boy awakens as if from a trance and scoots out the door. The butcher drops the saw, sits down with his head in his hands, and shakes as if sobbing. Now comes the fantastic part: the saw goes on dreaming. Called into being by men, conceived by a human will that is supposed to be free and dominant, the saw takes advantage of every lapse and weakness in that will.

One cannot help being reminded of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac, who at the last minute is replaced with a goat (Genesis 22), but the parallel stops there. The story is a literalized metaphor: man is often the tool of his tools, a slave to the purpose for which they were made. Murena turns the saw into a Frankenstein monster by giving it intelligence and a malignant intention. It becomes symbolic of many things, even of man's whole rational and utilitarian hierarchy of knowledge; man created it, and if he is not careful it dominates him, dictates his laws and his conduct in spite of his reason and his better perceptions, and divides his world mechanically into true and false, good and evil. Murena's supernatural saw reminds us that our goals and philosophies, without continued surveillance, are not our friends.

Taken superficially, these stories built on irrational symbols are metaphors: the boy is a tiger, alcohol is a demon, man is threatened by his creations. But the superficial metaphor is also half of a larger one, the other half of which, unstated, comprises a post-textual vacancy into which we can put multiple realities. This is true only because the unstated half of the larger metaphor covers an area of deep or universal reality: human nature, knowledge, destiny, free will. When the fantastic symbol is used to show a smaller, more local truth, the larger metaphor or open analogy is absent. In the hands of a committed writer—one who wants to push a social, political, or other mundane idea—the finite reality he is committed to is the only one visible, although

it may be analogous to others. But the supernatural in itself has an enlarging effect, giving the writer's limited idea a suggestion of transcending importance. This is especially true when the irrational symbol is a supernatural person. Literature continues man's oldest epistemological activity, converting abstract ideas into palpable gods with personalities. A good example is "Chac Mool" by Carlos Fuentes (México, 1928-).<sup>8</sup>

The Chacs are ancient Mayan gods of rain and lightning, depicted in statuary as half-reclining male figures with the abdomen hollowed out as a receptacle for blood sacrifices. In "Chac Mool" the protagonist, Filiberto, is an urban member of the minor bourgeoisie who acquires a life-size stone Chac. In his basement, flooded by rains and broken water pipes, the Chac slowly comes to life. It so distracts Filiberto that he makes mistakes at the office and loses his job. When it is finally alive, it keeps Filiberto in slavery through its power to kill by fulmination or by water. It lives on slaughtered dogs and cats and turns Filiberto's home into a bloody, smelly charnelhouse. But it tries to civilize or at least to prettify itself by dousing itself with cologne and face powder and dressing in a silk robe. Filiberto finally flees to Acapulco, where he drowns for defying the god. He leaves a diary telling about the Chac, which a friend reads as he escorts Filiberto's body back to Mexico; the diary seems to prove Filiberto's insanity. Before his friend can unlock the door of Filiberto's house, it is opened by a grotesque figure smeared with powder and lipstick, dressed in silk, and smelling like a perfume factory.

The Chac can be taken to represent Mexico's indigenous past, which is still wielding noxious power over modern Mexicans. That influence frustrates Filiberto, who because of it cannot keep his place in the bourgeois economic society. The Chac is as pathetic as it is baneful; it is pitiable in its effort to deodorize and modernize itself. Here we have another irrational symbol, but this time a closed one which points to one reality—a social reality large enough to bear symbolic representation. Through the Chac-symbol Fuentes is able to function as a committed writer, derogating bourgeois or capitalistic values in the details of the text.<sup>9</sup> Although he does not idealize the Indian influence,

<sup>8</sup> Carlos Fuentes, *Los días enmascarados* (México, 1966), pp. 13-29. Contains "Letanía de la orquídea," mentioned later.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Franco, in "The Crisis of the Liberal Imagination and the Utopia of Writing," *Ideologies and Literature*, 1, 1, 5-24, puts Carlos Fuentes with

he seems to justify it as a reality that stands against bourgeois modernity; primitive as he is, the Chac is still bringing rain out there in the cornfields, and cosmetics cannot change him. Perhaps he is symbolic of Mexico itself.

The same limited or committed kind of irrational symbolism is visible in "El hombre araña" by Lino Novás Calvo (1905-), a Spaniard turned Cuban who went into exile in the United States in 1960. This story was written in Havana in the same year, and Novás Calvo has confessed its obscurity and "distortion."<sup>10</sup> The reader is not sure whether the main events are real, a dream, or a metaphor. A summary would be difficult, so I will tell only the main point. Pincho Peláez shoots and kills a long-legged man, the "spider man," who apparently symbolizes the Castro regime or Castro himself; but later he sees the man alive and well, although he has been put on trial for his murder. I resist the temptation to interpret this complex and subtle story, except to say that it seems to imply an ambivalence in the author toward the Castro revolution. Was it an accident of history, alien to the Cuban cultural character, or is Castro part and parcel of Cuba's innate destiny? Whatever the interpretation, the immortal spider man is the Castro phenomenon at its largest, with all its implications and reverberations in the conscience of a Cuban; among other things, Castro is the *caudillo*, an indestructible part of Spanish American political life.

I must mention Julio Cortázar in order to disqualify him from consideration. Scattered throughout his collections of short stories (*Bestiario*, 1951; *Final del juego*, 1956; *Las armas secretas*, 1959; *Todos los fuegos el fuego*, 1966) are narratives which at first glance seem to be clearly in the class of the primal fantastic: "Lejana," "La puerta condenada," "Una flor amarilla," and others. Their undoubted literary merit would seem to refute my thesis that intellectual bewilderment produced by the preternatural is inconsistent with good literature when it is not confined to an image and made symbolic. But I stand my ground. In the stories just mentioned, for example, the preternatural is offered only as an option which the normal reader does not pick up because of

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Severo Sarduy, Julio Cortázar, and others who "share a common problem—that of producing a text that transgresses bourgeois society" (p. 7). No doubt "Chac Mool" is an early example of the effort.

<sup>10</sup> Lino Novás Calvo, *Maneras de contar* (New York, 1970), p. 297. The author's comments precede the stories of this anthology.

the overpowering realism that surrounds and engulfs it. Cortázar's manner of narration, so crowded with an intimate reality that is seen in detail through the ranging, omnivorous eyes of his narrators, denies by its nature that the reader is going to encounter anything so incongruous as a supernatural event that disrupts what he does not want disrupted. The reader looks for meaning and wants comprehension so much that he almost rejects anything that smacks of fantasy, supposing it to be metaphorical or suspecting that Cortázar is simply omitting an essential detail that would rationalize it, as he seems to do in "Casa tomada" and "Después del almuerzo." In "Lejana," where Alina Reyes knows and feels what is happening to another person half a world away and finally trades bodies with the other woman, we feel that these events are only in the mental world of Alina, and her private reality is so believable that when the exchange of bodies takes place, we suspend our disbelief instead of being baffled or amazed; what amazes us, rather, is the deftness with which Cortázar has made the final event inevitable. In "La puerta condenada" the seemingly inexplicable crying of a supposedly nonexistent baby, coming at the end of the story, seems less significant and is certainly less interesting than the previous events which gave the crying a logical, though conjectural, explanation. The crying at the end seems like an echo, a residue of reality, a memory, not a fantastic happening. In short, Cortázar puts so much cogent reality into his narratives that anything unreal is pale and is absorbed by the reader with that kind of literary faith which does not even ask whether an event is natural or supernatural. Cortázar blends it all into one transcending perspective. "Una flor amarilla" makes such a personality of the sub-narrator that we understand his fantastic obsession sympathetically instead of believing it supernaturally. Closer to the primal fantastic are such stories as "Las babas del diablo," in which a magically moving photograph must be taken literally because, as the narrator suggests at the beginning, there is no alternative language for saying what he says. Cortázar's photograph comes short of irrational symbol, however, because what it symbolizes is as much his own creation as the symbol itself; it is not in nature. In "Carta a una señorita en París," where the narrator says he produces live rabbits out of his gullet, the reader knows that this extraordinary habit is entirely within the limits of literary reality and

is not intended to confront and subvert the kind we see in the world. Jaime Alazraki has shown that much of Cortázar's fiction comprises "surrealist metaphor."<sup>11</sup>

I will say nothing of Borges, who follows a different theory of the fantastic and has produced a superior literature. Generally speaking, we cannot discern the preternatural in his stories because we cannot locate his basis of reality. John Sturrock, in *Paper Tigers: the Ideal Fictions of Borges* (Oxford, 1977), has shown convincingly that Borges substitutes the norms of fictional narrative for the laws of nature, turning nature into a page of fiction and God into a writer.

The traditional or primal fantastic has come a long way in Spanish America since "Gaspar Blondín" and "Coincidencias," if we measure it by those writers who have turned it into symbolism and used it to show some kind of recognizable reality. But measured in bulk, its track record is less impressive; it remains as limited as its central device. I could offer many examples, mostly from second-string writers, but I prefer to dispraise only those whom I have previously praised. Murena and Fuentes, for example, have written stories which in my opinion add little if any luster to literature and are typical of the primal fantastic as it continues to be written. Murena's "El sombrero de paja" is mystifying to the point of irritation and offers nothing else. A young man has fallen in love with a girl he met two years or more in the past, of whom he now knows nothing. In a dream he sees her wearing a frayed straw hat, and she tells him that she loves him. Later he enters his house, sees the straw hat, opens a door, freezes on the threshold in horror, and falls senseless. Granted that I may have missed something, the story in any case is lacking in literary credibility, that degree of verisimilitude which Adolfo Bioy Casares has said a fantastic story must have,<sup>12</sup> and it is disassociated from life. "Lo que no vieron," also by Murena, is a ghost story typical of the last century. A daring young man sleeps in a haunted house, armed with a pistol. The

<sup>11</sup> "The Fantastic of Surrealist Metaphors," *Dada*, 5 (1975), 28-33.

<sup>12</sup> "Prólogo," *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, ed. Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo, and Bioy Casares, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires, 1965). Bioy remarks that a logical explanation of a fantastic event, given in a story, is generally "una escapatoria del autor, que no ha sabido proponer con verosimilitud lo fantástico" (p. 13).

next morning he is dead, five bullets fired from his gun. His friends fail to notice that the bullets are on the floor, their points toward the dead man; they never struck the wall. This is astonishment for its own sake. To end the matter, I will mention Fuentes' "Letanía de la orquídea," possibly a very low-level irrational symbolism, though the meaning of the symbol is highly conjectural. The protagonist Muriel sprouts an orchid out of his tailbone. Thinking how lucrative it would be to grow others and sell them, he snips it off. It is replaced by a stake that penetrates his vitals. In its subordinate details the story decries the presence of the United States in the Panama Canal Zone; taken as a whole, it is even less interesting than the image of sacro-vertebral vegetation.

I suppose the primal fantastic will continue to be written for those readers who are looking only for a few minutes of escape from this world into another. The fantastic of irrational symbol will, I hope, continue to be written for those who want to see this world better.

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