

Spanish American Fantasy and the "Believable, Autonomous World"

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In his recent *Introducción a la literatura fantástica*,¹ Tzvetan Todorov has set out to define the fantastic as a kind of fiction and has succeeded, instead, in showing the categories into which the fantastic as a narrative method can be subdivided. He defines the fantastic as a literary text (or part of one) which is taken literally (not "poetically" or as allegory) and which causes the reader to vacillate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events narrated. The fantastic exists, he says, only so long as this vacillation occurs, and unless it is sustained throughout the text the story is not fantastic. If a natural explanation is given, the story declines into the merely strange — the "supernatural explained"; if only a supernatural explanation is possible, it sinks into the marvelous — the "supernatural accepted." Todorov concludes that the pure fantastic is limited to a historical period, mainly to the nineteenth century. He leaves us unsure about what to do with the many forms of fantasy in our own time.

Todorov's ideas are extremely useful and provide a vocabulary for textual analysis; but as an approach to the value and meaning of the fantastic in literature, they not only miss the mark but almost ignore it. They assume the reader's complete passivity and keep him on the purely intellectual plane as he confronts an irrational text. They deal with the fantastic as a jigsaw puzzle and say nothing of its effect and power. Todorov does not seem to acknowledge that the fantastic, whatever its textual form may be, appeals to a different order of reality that the reader already believes in esthetically and may even want to believe in literally. Unless this power is acknowledged as an essential property of the fantastic, no classification of texts can be artistically valuable.

My purpose here is not to define the fantastic in any sense, but to point to an effect it has on the reader which I think must be a part of any definition that may be attempted.

Let me begin, with a general statement of my thesis. The fantastic posits irrational ideas and events as if they were true, affronting our notions of what is real and possible; it may thus be intellectually engaging, like detective fiction. But its esthetic appeal lies in its heretical departure from reason as such — not in the strange events but in their implied cause. What it really attacks is the implications or consequences of our rational world-view. All fantastic literature, whether distractive and "escapist" or abstractive and "purposive," and whether it directly violates only our provable, commonsense ideas of reality or attacks our still-debatable metaphysical conventions, is in any case essentially metaphysical; it involves the very nature of reality and subverts our understanding of it, giving us a new set of consequences which liberate us from our old ones.

This liberating function is that of art itself. George Steiner, writing about Borges, recently said: "The liberating capacity of art lies in its singular capacity to 'dream against the world,' to structure worlds that are otherwise."²

But the fantastic goes more directly to the goal than does realism, romance or any other combination of reality and imagination; it is a short-cut to the core question of art, the making of a "world" that is not the one we live in. Enrique Anderson Imbert said in a lecture in 1967: "To the extent it replaces a reality already moved aside, all literature is fantastic. But even so, there is some fiction that is especially concerned with creating believable yet autonomous worlds. This is the case in fantastic literature. With the power of his imagination the writer renders helpless the norms that had ruled our minds before, suggesting instead the possibility of other norms as yet unknown."³

These other norms are not spelled out for the reader as he confronts the supernatural in a text, but they are not really unknown to him. The literary fantastic is a hangover from a primitive time when, as philosophers tell us, *nothing* was fantastic because *everything* was. There was no rational, scientific system of knowledge, and every deviant statement or idea was taken as another way of looking at reality. Truth and metaphor were the same thing, because instead of expressing reality, every idea discovered it. Cassirer, Langer, Eliade, Vignoli, Frazer, Malinowski and other writers have amply described the primitive ontology that preceded our rational world-outlook, which was characterized by now-fantastic ideas about the nature of things.⁴ Cassirer, partly to avoid the notion that these "ideas" were mental formulations, speaks of the primitive man's world-view as an archaic "life-feeling"; men behaved *as if* they believed that time is cyclical or plastic, that causes and effects are interchangeable, that inner and outer reality are identical, that language is literally equal to reality, that abstract ideas have physical existence, that death is only a metamorphosis, that men are predestined and impotent, and that human personality is an illusion or a particularized manifestation of a single life-substance; one man can be another man, a rock, an animal, a tree. In this world-view all truth is archetypal and static.

Cassirer's life-feeling is the cause of these ideas in primitive men. Our own rational world-outlook, however, caused itself; by reasoning and by grouping phenomena, men constructed a hierarchy of useful and systematic knowledge. They broke into linear time and prophetic religion with all of the psychological, ethical, and cultural consequences: human responsibility, free will, the inevitability of change, the necessity of social progress, death as the end of life, an eschatological "end" of time or Judgment Day, and above all, the confinement of reality within fixed, credible classifications. The category of the fantastic comes into being as a catch-all for the miscellany outside the system, the "useless" ways of conceiving reality which are therefore "meaningless," poetic, and untrue.

There remains a suspicion in all of us, furthered by idealist philosophy, that our rationality is arbitrary and man-made. This intellectual skepticism tends to grow in those moments when we tire of the consequences of reason; and however much we may believe in the rightness of those consequences, they are undermined when, through experience, we know intuitively that things are not as our language says they are. There is only one alternative to rationality — only one place to go when the value of the man-made system is in doubt. In literature we do not go there with intellectual seriousness, as we do in philosophy, but with a wish-fulfilling half-seriousness. Fantastic literature, by positing ideas taken out of that miscellany that is inimical to the "real," helps us to move back into the liberating atmosphere of the archaic life-feeling. As Macedonio Fernandez,

the Argentine metaphysical humorist, wrote, "Let the absurd, the miracle of irrationality, momentarily believed, liberate man's spirit, for an instant, from the oppressive dogmatism of a universal law of rationality."⁵

As one of the simplest examples of how the fantastic can effect this liberation, I offer Jorge Luis Borges' two-paragraph fiction called "La trama" (*El hacedor*, 1964). A gaucho is assassinated by a group of men, among whom is one who is like a son to him; his murder repeats the death of Caesar. This is not a story but a brief narrative-commentary; Borges suggests that Destiny requires symmetry and repetition, and that the gaucho died without knowing that his death occurred in order to repeat a scene.

Here, as in all of the best fantasy, the "art" lies not in the events but in their implied cause. The events of "La trama" are not really fantastic but they point to a believable coincidence that is sufficient to thrust the reader straight into a metaphysical problem. All of us wonder at the implications of coincidence and cannot explain it except as accident or as God's will; in that sense it is outside the system — fantastic. Borges "explains" the coincidence of the gaucho's death by putting it into an autonomous structure that is more complete and coherent than accident or the will of God. He implies a universal principle: time is plastic, somehow simultaneous; Destiny is a static entity of architectural aspect; God has theatrical tastes, and men are only actors on his stage; human personality is subordinate to archetypal action, and the gaucho is not only as important as Caesar, he may even be Caesar. Causality and time-sequence are suspended in favor of an a-temporal determinant; symmetry requires identical deaths and it hardly matters which precedes. And finally, neither Caesar nor the gaucho has the power to understand his fate or to overcome it. This little episode turns real life into some kind of poetic image, perhaps a great book whose beginning and end are the same.

We do not believe Borges' sophistical suggestions, but our inability to account for coincidence on a rational basis weakens our resistance to them. Whether or not we believe them becomes less important than whether we like them, and we cease to judge the text on the intellectual plane. Even before we formulate a meaning the text brings us a little thrill; its heretical aspect puts us into brief danger, for we momentarily rebel against dependable, "sacred" truth about free will and human self-direction. For a moment the text becomes a little Garden of Eden in which we can hide from reality, and we wind up affirming it — not as true, but as valuable despite its incredibility. It becomes a door to an autonomous world that is believable because it transcends the question of true or false. Truth and poetry are, for an instant, one.

Not all fantasy, of course, deals directly with metaphysical questions, such as the nature of time and space, destiny, will, the universal ethic, human individuality, the reliability of sense perception, or the validity of the subject-object dichotomy. Stories of fairies, flying carpets, and men who change into animals affront our common sense more than they suggest the archaic life-feeling, except when such ideas have a discernible symbolism that gives them weight. But whatever its kind, the reader of the fantastic, like the reader of any fiction, brings metaphysical questions to the text because they are the only kind he has; science and reason have removed the rest. This is why a definition of the fantastic lies as much in the reader as in the text, and

this is why the fantastic is ultimately metaphysical in impact. The reader of even the most "committed" or message-laden fiction does not read it in order to be persuaded of a common truth, but for what is miscalled "escape" — a change in his way of understanding; otherwise he would read diatribe. Borges has said that philosophy is a branch of fantastic literature, and twentieth-century writers, particularly in Spanish America where everything has to be relevant to something else in order to be respectable, do not hesitate to use the fantastic to push social and philosophical viewpoints. Borges himself is no exception, despite his avowal of uncommittedness and his scorn for "message" literature. Julio Cortázar is a more obvious case in point.

The fact that Borges and Cortázar are two of the most outstanding and successful users of the fantastic mode in Spanish America is not unrelated to their religio-philosophical positions. They are both heretics. Borges is a freethinker and agnostic; Cortázar is the same thing with existentialist and Marxist limitations. Anderson Imbert has shown how Rubén Darío's lack of skepticism — his inability to play around with sacred truth — spoils his fantastic fiction, and says, "If Darío was surprised to find that Poe was imaginative at the same time that he was skeptic, it was because in his own case imagination was inseparable from religious beliefs." He adds, "Fantasy is more effective artistically the more it risks caprice, even heresy."⁶ All of this testifies to the fact that fantasy, whose epithet wrongly implies escapism and frivolity, is just as serious as any other mode of art and is not essentially different. It only uses a more direct, more violent approach to an "autonomous, believable world" by appealing to what Wilbur M. Urban has called the "natural metaphysic of the human mind."⁷ Borges has described the method of fantasy:

I suspect there are two ways of thinking: the logical way, in which we proceed through premises, reasoning, and conclusions, and the nonvigilant way, that of dreams, which is the route not of logical man but of the child or primitive man, in which we think through images, metaphors, or parables. In Plato we still find the fusion of both types of thinking: in Platonic dialogues there are myths which correspond to the realm of dreams of primitive man and also reasonings which pertain to the vigilant and lucid state. I suppose that the function of literature is to serve as a sort of dream for Man, perhaps helping him thereby to live in reality.⁸

Indeed, the escape into art helps us to go back to work on Monday morning. Our momentary escape from the consequences of rationality, which include the paradoxical knowledge of our finiteness and our infinite responsibility, is a kind of gospel which "forgives" us by making us forget. This accounts in part, I think, for Borges' recent, insistent use of the idea that forgiving and forgetting are the same thing and that forgiveness can only benefit the forgiver, not the forgiven. Taken as a moral or religious statement this is quite heretical; but it must also be taken in a hidden context because real forgetting is not an act of the will. Borges' work is notoriously devoid of moralism, and even in his intimate and personal *Elogio de la sombra* (1969) where he admits taking up ethics as a theme, almost everything he has written seems traceable to a literary idea as its point of origin, for he sees art as one of man's two serious *ways* of thinking. In a short piece called "Leyenda," where Cain discovers that Abel cannot remember who killed whom, we are told that Cain must forget his own crime in order to be forgiven,

because "mientras dura el remordimiento dura la culpa" ("as long as there's remorse, there's guilt").⁹ Borges says in "Una oración" that he cannot ask to be forgiven for his errors because "el perdón es un acto ajeno y sólo yo puedo salvarme" ("forgiving is what someone else does, and only I can save myself"). His "Fragmentos de un evangelio apócrifo" contains two statements of this same idea: "Yo no hablo de venganzas ni de perdones; el olvido es la única venganza y el único perdón" ("I don't speak of vengeance and pardon; forgetting is the only revenge and the only forgiveness"), and "Feliz el que perdona a los otros y el que perdona a sí mismo" ("Blessed is he who forgives others and he who forgives himself"). We also see these ideas worked into the fiction of *El informe de Brodie* (1970). In "El indigno" we find: "Mientras dura el arrepentimiento dura la culpa" ("As long as any trace of remorse remains, guilt remains"). In "La intrusa" the murderous rivals are reunited by the death of the girl they have loved (whose murder is their mutual sacrifice of forgiveness) and are bound by "la obligación de olvidarla" ("their common need to forget her"). Forgetting — *el olvido* — is a fundamental activity of the characters in many of Borges' more famous short stories; e.g., "La lotería en Babilonia," where forgetting is a necessary part of the early lottery; "Funes el memorioso," where the horrible inability to forget is fatal; and "El Zahir," where the unforgettable coin drives the narrator mad. In general, memory is related in Borges' fiction to insomnia and lucidity and is a misfortune which prevents "dream" — art.

The four fundamental devices of fantastic fiction enumerated by Borges are at once literary artifices and metaphysical rebellions against the rational.¹⁰ They are (1) a literary work within a work (a work's self-allusion), which implies the confusion of levels of reality and of the reader with the characters, (2) the contamination of reality with dream, in which the dreamer creates the world of which he himself is a part, (3) the voyage in time, which renders time plastic and breaks the relationship between cause and effect, and (4) the double, which dissolves human personality and makes it subordinate to archetypal actions and forms. All these devices imply a regression to a world-view ruled by the notions of Destiny, reality as fluid and kaleidoscopic, and the identity of thinker, thought, language, and outward object. The fact that these four devices are both intellectual absurdities and literary artifices (having a function in direct relation to the text as well as to reality) points to the very nature and purpose of fantasy, which is to approach head-on the question of art itself; fantasy is a kind of art about art, and art is an autonomous, believable world. Like Poe's necessarily purposeless poetry (art for art's sake), the fantastic cannot comprise a long text; it reaches its goal straightway, while realism and romance take a slower road in order to keep the reader thinking he has not left reality. Art's appeal is to the philosophical and religious consciousness, and even when it has itself for a subject it is not without purpose.

But because it seems purposeless by nature, there is a tendency nowadays, when critics are confronted with a fantastic text in which a commitment is visible — some intention to convey a philosophical or social message — to reclassify it as realism (the only broad category of fiction apart from fantasy). Realism, especially in Spanish America, implies both a narrative method and, incorrectly, an author's intention to speak seriously about the problems of the real world — therefore, a double intention to stick within the rational mode of intelligence and to avoid that meaningless "esthetic" stuff. But the fact

is that realism does not have to be committed to anything, and that fantasy can be, if it wants to. The fantastic can be used as a subordinate ingredient in a realistic story or can be dominant in the story and have a realistic implication without losing its identity or its power to invoke the archaic life-feeling. For example, in Horacio Quiroga's "Juan Darién," where a pathetic, Christ-like boy is really a tiger, his tigerness serves as an irrational symbol of his difference from other people. Quiroga could have made him a Negro, an Indian, or a persecuted Jew and stayed within realism, but the story would have to be longer and more detailed and would lose its universality. Besides shortening the text and expanding its appeal, the resort to fantasy furthers the allegorical and symbolic purpose; the boy's dual existence as human and tiger helps to equate him with Christ, who is God and man. But apart from these interior functions, the fantasy in itself produces its natural consequence; even while the reader is in the terribly real world where the Crucifixion is repeated in the torture of the boy, he is also in an archetypal, mythical world. The repetition of the Crucifixion makes it present and eternal, beyond the linear flow of history, like the symmetrical death of the gaucho in "La trama." The story is finally very realistic but is also powerfully symbolic of a reality transcending reason. Perhaps it skirts the edge of myth and comprises what Suzanne K. Langer has called a genuine semantic beyond the limits of discursive language, "sacred" because it is "a figure of thought, not merely of speech" and is "pregnant with an unformulated idea."¹¹

We should not, therefore, be too quick to appeal to such categories as "magical realism" to account for committed or "realistic" fantasies — those of Cortázar, for example, whose existential preoccupations are so often taken as whole explanations of his stories. These stories can be purposive, parabolic, allegorical or symbolic and still be fantastic. A case in point is his startling and neurotic "Carta a una señorita en París" (*Bestiario*). The protagonist of this otherwise realistic story has the queer habit of vomiting rabbits. These little beasts are symbolic of the protagonist-narrator's rebellion against his unauthentic existence. In a secondary sense they are symbolic of his rabbit-like inability to get out of his rut. But the rabbits are more than irrational symbols; somehow, because they are fantastic, they make us feel that the solution to the narrator's problem is beyond his *way of thinking*, in some different order of being.

The heresy of the fantastic does not lie on the superficial plane in the breach of facts, conventions, or religious dogmas, but in the total suggestion that all of the consequences of a rational world-view are momentarily suspended. Art is amoral and a-religious, and the fantastic is blatantly so because it is a short-cut. Quiroga has done no violence to the story of Christ, from the intellectual standpoint, in "Juan Darién," and has even corroborated it by making it eternal and universal; but in making it archetypal he has removed it from linear history and put it into the heavens as a cosmogonic event. In that position it cannot escape its concomitant: man's ritual conformity, determined by destiny and not by human will. Quiroga's story denies, in effect, the divine incarnation as a singular intervention in human history; it describes a religious and moral state of human affairs that calls for contemplation and lament, and if a pious reader is moved to a moral or religious response it is only because he transfers the "corroboration" back into linear time. If that happens, the story ceases to be art and becomes a sermon.

Cortázar's story, typical of its author, is a different case. Strangely, Cortázar does not intend to depart from the implications of reason when he

employs the fantastic. He believes that reality itself is absurd or irrational. His heresy consists in the fact that he radically metaphorizes the real as he sees it, which is not the way the ordinary reader sees it. Fernando Alegria has remarked that Cortázar bleeds while Borges wrinkles his brow.¹² He struggles with absurd reality without choosing an alternative to it. In "Carta a una señorita en París" he rebels against the consequences of linear time but stays within it. In using the fantastic for a symbolic purpose, he alludes (inevitably) to the other life-feeling without believing in its power. Unlike Borges, he cannot place his spirit in the world of art and smile or knit his brow, being "in but not of" the real world. Consequently, in Cortázar's work we do not find the momentary relief that renews us for work on Monday morning; we glimpse the other world but find no real exit from this one. Quiroga's seemingly orthodox story is more heretical than Cortázar's, despite the fact that Cortázar's is devoid of lip-service to moral, religious, or rational ideas. Cortázar's work tends to extremes of frivolity and pessimism; as he bleeds, he also giggles and frowns.

The heresy inherent in the fantastic is often overlooked because of the misclassification of some fiction that is not fantastic at all. In the same way that Dario's fairytale kind of fantasy misses the mark for lack of a really skeptical viewpoint, Leopoldo Lugones' legendary-Biblical tales are pale because they scarcely suggest an alternative to the cold, rational world; they corroborate orthodox religious and moral ideas which in effect deny that alternative. In Lugones' "La lluvia de fuego" — a good story, but not a world-disintegrating fantasy — the wicked city Gomorrah (or one like it) is destroyed by a fiery rain, as it is in Genesis; there is nothing heretical about that. In "La estatua de sal," also based on Genesis, Lot's wife, whom God turned into a pillar of salt, is restored to life and confirms orthodox legends about the fulminating power of divine or infernal revelation. The base side of human character, brought out by permissiveness and luxury, is depicted as spoiled, rebellious animals in "Los caballos de Abdera," and they are subdued by Hercules, the destroyer of monsters, who comes as the incarnation of reason and goodness. Such stories have no power to suggest a believable, autonomous world; Todorov would classify them, correctly, as merely marvelous, but only because they do not make us vacillate between a natural and a supernatural explanation on the intellectual plane.

The fact that so much present-day Spanish American fiction combines fantasy and realism and at the same time shows philosophical-metaphysical preoccupation (such novels as Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo*, Fuentes' *La región más transparente*, Asturias' *Hombres de maíz*, and García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*) is further testimony to the power of the fantastic to point to reality of a different kind, to transform the real — hence the term "magical realism" to denote this type of narration which attempts to impart the enchantment of the unreal without seriously deforming the rational order. Properly seen, this kind of fiction is an overcompensation for nineteenth-century realism — a vigorous return to a kind of art that does not give reason a monopoly on truth. The fantastic, as a door to a believable, autonomous world, is likely in the future to pervade all fiction to a much greater degree than it has in the last couple of centuries. This can only enlarge our conception of art, making us expect that literature will show us how to "dream against the world" even while we live in it.

Despite elaborate and reasoned "definitions," anthologists will go on collecting fantastic short stories by a simple criterion; they will include short

texts which, without reasoned explanation and for whatever purpose, violate our commonsense realities and our practical metaphysical conventions.

NOTES

¹Buenos Aires: Editorial Tiempo Contemporáneo, 1972; originally published as *Introduction à la Littérature Fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).

²"Tigers in the Mirror," *The New Yorker*, June 20, 1970, p. 119.

³"Rubén Darío and the Fantastic Element in Literature," trans. Anne Bonner, *Rubén Darío Centennial Studies*, ed. Miguel González-Gerth and George D. Schade (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970).

⁴Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (vols. I and II) and *Language and Myth*; Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return and Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*; Sir James Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*; Suzanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key and Feeling and Form*; Tito Vignoli, *Myth and Science*; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*. Cassirer and Eliade are primary sources. Cassirer's "mythical life-feeling" is dealt with in many places; see vol. II, 69-70.

⁵Cited by Ana María Barrenechea, *La literatura fantástica en Argentina*, with Emma Susana Speratti Piñero (México: Imprenta Universitaria, 1957), p. 43. The source is probably Fernández's *No toda es vigilia la de los ojos abiertos* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1967). Trans. mine.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 103, 105.

⁷*Language and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), chap. XIV, 685-729. Urban deals with the Greco-Christian metaphysic, a late-mythic or early-rational conception of the world, Platonic in essence; Plato, according to Eliade, codified the ideas of prelogical man.

⁸From an interview cited by Robert Lima in his appendix to Ana María Barrenechea's *Borges the Labyrinth Maker* (New York: N. Y. University Press, 1965), p. 151.

⁹Parentetical translations are those made by Borges and Norman Thomas di Giovanni, except those from "Fragments," which are mine: "Legend" and "A Prayer," *The New Yorker*, Feb. 20, 1971, pp. 41-42; "The Unworthy Friend" and "The Intruder," *Doctor Brodie's Report* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972).

¹⁰Given by Borges in a lecture, commented by Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "Jorge Luis Borges y la literatura fantástica," *Número*, vol. 1, no. 5, November-December 1949, 448-455.

¹¹*Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 81.

¹²*Historia de la novela hispanoamericana*, 3rd ed. (Mexico: Andrea, 1966), p. 247.