

## The twentieth-century short story in Spanish America

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*Story or history*

The existing accounts of the Spanish American short story consist almost completely of conventional literary history: the modern short story is said to have been born with Echeverría or Palma or Darío or Quiroga, to have been descended from earlier sources in the Spanish or indigenous or *mestizo* traditions, to have developed or matured or produced such progeny as Borges and Rulfo and Bombal. Attention is not usually called to the organicist metaphors at work in these accounts, the authors seeming to find them beyond question. The literary historian's task, as defined in the manuals by Leal, Menton, and others, consists of a taxonomy by movements (Naturalism, *mundonovismo*, *criollismo*, the fantastic, Neorealism), by generations (the Generations of 1930, 1938, 1940, 1950, and so on, depending on the history of the country in question, or the "first," "second," and "third" generations of writers of the Mexican Revolution), by country or region, or by the gender or ethnic origin of the writers; sometimes, indeed, an uneasy combination of all of the above forms the "history." There is no agreement between the different accounts of this supposed "history," and indeed no agreement would be possible, given the uncertain foundations on which these accounts are built. It is not even very certain that a "history" of the short story genre in Spanish America could be written: the notion of the short story as genre has been vigorously debated internationally, and in Spanish America the constitution and preservation of such a genre is problematized by the uncertain relations between the "short story" and the "costumbrista sketch," the "tradición," and the "crónica." Similarly, the frontiers between the "short story" and the "prose poem" and "novella" or "short novel" are uncertain, waiting to be adjudicated.

Instead, then, of giving an account of a history of something that perhaps never was and certainly resists being told as history, I have chosen

here to tell a very different kind of story, the story of the "diverse intonations of a metaphor" or series of metaphors (to paraphrase Borges from "Pascal's Sphere"). The images examined here have been variously proposed as metaphors for narration itself, and their appearances in diverse Spanish American texts have been collected here out of an interest in the poetics of prose.

### Circles

A paradigmatic situation: a fat old man tells a story about a place of death, a place that turns out to be the place of the speaker's own death. Within a series of nested narratives, the fat man tells stories, all ultimately variants of the same story. He uses an image to talk about his own storytelling:

For me reality is what is left when all of reality has disappeared, when the memory of habit has been burnt up, the forest that prevents us from seeing the tree. We can only allude to it vaguely, or dream of it, or imagine it. An onion. You peel off layer after layer, and what's left? Nothing, but that nothing is everything, or at least a stinging vapor that brings tears to the eyes.  
(*Moriencia*, 90)

The analogy between the onion and the story is repeated three more times. On the following page the fat man says of himself: "I myself talk and talk. For what? To peel off new layers of the onion" (p. 91). Later still, the narrator says of the fat man: "You never knew when he was telling a joke or remembering an anecdote, at what point one story ended and another one emerged from it, 'peeling the onion'" (p. 93). Finally, the narrator says: "He told various stories. Perhaps they were all part of the same one, letting go layer after layer and emitting its stinging and fantastic flavor" (p. 95).

Obviously, in this story the onion is a metaphor of the short story itself, and the story has a sort of onion structure due to the seeming divagations of the old man, whose abundant stories turn into variants of a single story. This essential story is told at the end "all at once, without any more interruptions or digressions" (p. 95). It goes like this:

A man saw the place where he was going to die in a series of dreams. At first he did not understand too well where it was. But the fat man, not in keeping with his usual practice, indulged at the end in a detailed description. He said that afterwards the man lived in fear of coming up in reality with the predestined fatal place. He told the story to various friends. They all agreed that he should not pay attention to dreams. He went to a psychoanalyst who only succeeded in terrifying him still more. He ended up shutting himself up in his house. One night he suddenly remembered the setting of his dream. It was his own room in his house.  
(p. 95)

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The ending, told by the young narrator, is brief: the fat man grows silent, his voice broken and his face ashen, one hand pointing to the empty space of a doorway. Those listening to him suddenly understand that "what the fat man had described point by point was the room where we were sitting" (p. 96). When the narrator and his friends look at the fat man once more he is dead, his eyes staring at them, with a sarcastic smile (p. 96).

The final story thus ends with the death of the fat man, the one who (within the story of the young journalist narrator) tells us the story of his own death, even if he does so in the third person (these are the dreams of "the man" in his stories). To finish telling a story is to die, which means that telling stories is life itself. All of his prior stories, then, put off the essential story, the story that can be told "all at once" because it leads to the end, to nothingness. The central conflict in the story between language and silence is thus part of a dialogue that involves not only the fat man and his interlocutor, our narrator, but also the author and the reader.

The problem set out by the story is the impossibility of uttering the sentence: "I die now, here." This sentence can be transposed into other grammatical persons or verbal tenses, and may be uttered figuratively, but never directly and literally. Thus the story involves the enclosing of an impossible declarative statement in a series of statements that repeat it with a series of differences, or the displacement of it onto the image of the nothingness at the heart of the onion (or the dropping of a hat in *Tristram Shandy*). On a temporal axis, the telling of the series of frame stories precedes the staging of the central anecdote, which is essentially non-narrative and nonverbal. The fact that the central episode requires the death of the speaker makes it impossible for it to be repeated and impossible for it not to be repeated: it is the ultimate story.

The story I have been talking about is by Augusto Roa Bastos (Paraguay, b. 1917), and is significantly called "Contar un cuento" (in *Moriencia* [1984 edn.]). It could easily be the work of a half-dozen other Spanish American writers of short stories. This paradigmatic story unites any number of the most common elements of a dominant tradition of the short story in Spanish America: the concern with the relation between life and death and the analogous concern with the relations between writing and silence, the use of nested narratives, the attempt to recover speech and memory in writing.

Of course, by privileging this story I am suggesting it as a paradigm of "the Spanish American short story," just as any other initial example would predetermine to some extent the categories of the subsequent discussion. I will later return to the question of whether this is one paradigm among many: suffice it to say for the moment that this Roa Bastos story has a number of elements that can be found in other important modern short stories from Spanish America, as for example

Jorge Luis Borges's "Abenjacán el Bojari, muerto en su laberinto," Juan Rulfo's "Anacleto Morones," Juan Carlos Onetti's "La cara de la desgracia," and Silvina Ocampo's "La furia," to name just a few. In all of these stories, the narration of a death is enclosed within a series of concentric narratives, though the image for this enclosure (onion, spider web, labyrinth, bicycle wheel, pile of stones, drum) may vary.

"Abenjacán el Bojari, muerto en su laberinto" (*El Aleph*, expanded edn. of 1952) ["Ibn Hakkán al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth"] is one of Jorge Luis Borges's classic detective stories, and the most famous of his stories to deal explicitly with the labyrinth image associated so often with his name. For Borges (Argentina, 1899–1986), the detective story derives its force from the human desire to know, and is most perfectly exemplified in tales of armchair detectives who learn the truth without a need to experience the world of crime directly. However, even the armchair detective must re-enact the crime (if only in the mind), and an odd complicity is established between the detective and the criminal (most notably in the story "La muerte y la brújula").

"Abenjacán" is a mystery story in a more conventional sense than are several other Borges stories that are sometimes considered examples of the genre – including "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" (1941, in *Ficciones*) ["The Garden of Forking Paths"] and "Emma Zunz" (1948, in *El Aleph*) ["Emma Zunz"]. Specifically, it is an example of the "problem of the closed room" alluded to by Borges in several of his essays on crime fiction. In the story, in fact, passing reference is made to Poe and Zangwill (p. 600), reference more specific than may first appear: Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and Zangwill's *The Big Bow Mystery* are both concerned with murders committed inside closed rooms, and hinge on the identity of those in the rooms. Furthermore, like the examples mentioned, this Borges story is a classic example of an armchair detective story in that Dunraven and Unwin do not have direct access to the crime except through prior narratives: the hypotheses ventured by Unwin are based not on new evidence but on new interpretation of the evidence. The murder itself was committed twenty-five years earlier, and the only access to it is through Dunraven's retelling of the events. What Unwin does in essence is fragment the story as told by Dunraven and then reassemble the parts in a different order. Significantly, Unwin is a mathematician and Dunraven a poet; the mathematical attention to detail and ordering ultimately provides a more adequate explanation than the poet's totalizing dramatic story.

One of the interesting features of "Abenjacán" is the nested story of the two kings and the two labyrinths, printed after the main story as a somewhat discrete entity, though with a note explaining that it is the text of the sermon spoken by Rector Allaby. The nested story takes up the

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same themes as the larger tale – simplicity versus complexity, the labyrinth as image of the universe – with a quiet ironic touch in that the Anglican minister refers to God as Allah. Borges had in fact already published this brief tale a decade before the composition of "Abenjacán": in his column in the family magazine *El Hogar* in June 1939, he publishes the story exactly as it will later appear in *El Aleph*, attributing it to "the notes that Burton added to his famous translation of the *Arabian Nights*." The tale is not, it seems, actually included in Burton, so it appears that Borges elaborated the longer story out of elements contained in the shorter original, later subordinating the shorter tale to the longer and more complex story.

The epigraph of "Abenjacán" comes from the *Koran*: "they are comparable to the spider, who builds a house." The Koranic original tells a parable of those who worship gods other than Allah, and the comparison to the spider's web turns on the flimsiness of the spider's house, that is, on the weakness of other forms of faith. The spider web image is repeated in the coiled snakes in Zaid's dream and in the labyrinth on the cliff above the sea in Cornwall, and the common element uniting the three images is death. For this to be true, the same "flimsiness" has to be erased from the Koranic passage, and weakness of faith replaced by the fragility of life itself.

Yet another erasure practiced in the story is the obliteration of the faces of the lion, the black slave, and the supposed Abenjacán. This erasure has a similar function to the mute gesture of death in the Roa Bastos story: death itself cannot be narrated here, except *a posteriori* (in the two young men's versions of the story) and *a priori* (in the narrator's implication that the two young men will soon be food for poppies on the battlefields of Flanders). The defaced bodies form an algebraic series which Unwin is professionally equipped to solve, though perhaps his name implies his ignorance of the fact that he too may perhaps soon be inscribed in that series.

"Continuidad de los parques" (in *Final de juego*) ["Continuity of Parks"] is one of the briefest stories by Julio Cortázar (Argentina, 1914–1986). It tells of a character sitting in a chair looking out on a large garden and reading a book about a character sitting in a chair looking out on a large garden. In the novel an assailant creeps up behind the man reading and kills him, just as an assailant creeps up behind the man in the story and kills him. The essential story is the same as the nested narrative of the old man in the Roa Bastos story discussed earlier. Here too the story is told in the third person (though here is an example where first person narration would be equally effective, especially since it would have to stop a moment before the death of the narrator). The circularity of the story is emphasized by the title, which implies that there is continuity between the garden

in the story and the garden in the novel (the story within the story). The Spanish phrase "solución de continuidad," usually used in the negative to discuss the lack of a break between one narrative and another, is appropriate for the "solution" here: the narrative "solution" (death of the character in the novel signifies death of the character in the story) implies the dissolution of the narrative itself, hence its brevity.

"La cara de la desgracia" (in *La cara de la desgracia*) ["The Image of Misfortune"] is one of Juan Carlos Onetti's finest stories, and has been termed a masterpiece of Uruguayan literature. Onetti (Uruguay, 1909–1994) often plays in his stories with the theme of dissolution, nowhere to more striking effect than here. The narrator of the story is mourning the death by suicide of his brother Julián a month earlier when a girl appears on the sands of a beach resort riding a bicycle. The two stories – that of the dead brother (and his final conversations with the narrator) and that of the girl on the bicycle – are intertwined in an uncertain way for most of the story. Near the end, after the narrator makes love to the girl, he confesses to her his fears of failure, of having been responsible for his brother's death, of the difference in age between them that may make their love impossible. It is only after the girl has been brutally murdered and the narrator has been charged with the crime that he learns that the girl he supposed was hearing his confession was deaf.

During the confession the narrator remarks: "the girl had turned into the main theme of my story" (p. 242). The uncertainty about the center of the story makes it unstable and circular. The bicycle wheels, the moon, the girl's face in silhouette against the moon: circular objects recur, marking the circularity of the story itself, its inability to progress. The difficulty of overcoming the death that marks the beginning of the story (symbolized here by the narrator's obsession with the newspaper clipping telling of his brother's death) leads finally to paralysis and silence. The story ends, in fact, with a mute gesture. When the narrator agrees to answer the policeman's question about whether he knew that the girl was deaf, he makes his answer conditional on the policeman's telling him whether he believes in God; the policeman ends the story by silently and rather scornfully making the sign of the cross.

Silvina Ocampo (Argentina, 1906–1993) is a prolific writer of poetry and stories whose prose is marked by an odd coexistence of cruelty and innocence. One of her best stories, "Tales eran sus rostros" (in *Las invitadas*) ["Thus Were Their Faces"], which tells of the transfiguration of a group of deaf children into something like angels, contains a phrase that is very telling of much of her work: "In reality we don't know whether it was horrible and then became beautiful, or whether it was beautiful and became horrible" (p. 9). This volatile mixture of cruelty and innocence is especially characteristic of her stories of childhood.

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Thus, the story "La furia" (from *La furia*) ["The Fury"] is somewhere on the uncertain edge between *grand guignol* and sentimental farce. The narrator, a young medical student, opens his account with enigmatic references to a drum, a child, and a house: if the child does not stop beating on the drum, he says, he could slit the child's wrists in the bathtub and hide the body under the bed. As it unfolds, the story is the conflation of two stories: the series of Winifred's stories of childhood and the story of her relationship with the narrator. Her ambiguous nature is perceptible in the horror and innocence of her childhood, above all in the episode in which she and her friend Lavinia are dressed as angels for a religious procession and she sets Lavinia on fire; as she says, "it was the happiest and saddest day of my life" (p. 115).

Winifred's relationship with Lavinia was marked by her desire to correct her defects: since Lavinia was scared of animals, Winifred would put live snakes and spiders, and dead rats and frogs, in her bed; since Lavinia was proud, Winifred would cut off part of her hair and pour perfume all over her. Winifred's relationship with the narrator is marked by the same unpredictable qualities: she warns him that she will be cruel to him, flees from his embraces, and when she finally accepts the idea of going with him to a hotel she leaves him alone in the room with the child he will murder at the end of the story.

The narrator comments early in the story, referring to himself and Winifred, "we repeated the same dialogue, with different emphases, one might almost say with different meanings" (p. 114). Near the end of the story the endless dialogue is reestablished, this time between the narrator and the little boy, Cintito. The narrator's problem, in fact, is a difficulty breaking out of the circular narration. He is ultimately forced to kill the child because he has threatened to do so, because of his verbal threat more than because of the pounding on the drum. He reflects at the end on the curious nature of his quandary: he committed the crime in order not to provoke a scandal. The pounding on the drum is maddening to him because he feels taunted for his passivity.

"Anacleto Morones" (in *El llano en llamas*) ["Anacleto Morones"] is a story of pride and jealousy, with a certain family resemblance to the rest of *El llano en llamas* (translated as *The Burning Plain*), the famous collection of stories by Juan Rulfo (Mexico, 1917–1986). In this story, as in "¡Diles que no me maten!" ["Tell Them Not to Kill Me!"] and Rulfo's lone novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955), the murderer (here the narrator, Lucas Lucatero) does not confess his crime directly, but the repeated references to the pile of stones serves to notify the reader of the place of rest of the body of Lucatero's father-in-law Anacleto Morones. The story begins with the arrival of a group of old women, Anacleto's disciples; after a while, Lucas takes refuge in his corral and begins scattering the stones which to him

look too much like a grave. They are large round stones from the riverbed, and their shape ("boludas") relates them to the eggs mentioned later (and to the narrator's testicles, which have been alluded to in the sexual double-talk between the narrator and the old women). Stones – eggs – testicles: the sequence alludes to the other story concealed inside this one, the story of the narrator's wife, Anaclero's daughter, who was pregnant with Anaclero's son (and grandson, because the incest confuses the generations). When the narrator says, "Inside Anaclero Morones's daughter was Anaclero Morones's grandson" (p. 128), the text itself turns uncertain, with some editions replacing "nieto" with "hijo." The nesting of the son/grandson inside the daughter mirrors the nesting of the daughter's story inside her husband's story (concealed in turn by the title, which nests the husband's story inside that of the father-in-law). The pile of stones concealing Anaclero's grave and holding in his ghost is an uneasy anticipation of the situation in *Pedro Páramo*: the novel ends with a reference to a pile of stones and concerns the restless souls in the Comala graveyard.

There are many other possible examples of nested narratives, in which the final story concludes not with the narration but with the enactment of a death. I shall consider but one more: Borges's "El hombre en el umbral" (*El Aleph*, 1952 edn.) ["The Man on the Threshold"]. Borges makes striking use of the theme of culture shock, represented spatially as well as psychologically. The initial note tells of the impossibility of telling the story: the British official errs when he cites a verse from Juvenal, Borges and Bioy Casares cannot know the truth of the official's story, and the telling itself is uncertain:

Among the stories he told that night, I will venture to reconstruct the following one. My text will be faithful: may Allah free me from the temptation of adding circumstantial details or of accentuating the exotic nature of the tale with interpolations from Kipling. (p. 613)

Dewey, the representative of the British Council, tells of his adventures looking for a missing colonial official he calls David Alexander Glencairn, believed kidnapped by religious extremists. Most of the story consists of a conversation he has with an old man sitting in a threshold, who tells him a story from his childhood of the impromptu trial of a cruel British official and of his condemnation to death by a judge who was quite literally insane; when the old man finishes his story and the crowd inside the house disperses, Dewey sees a naked madman dancing around the corpse of Glencairn. The old man's story, told as something far away and long ago, has been enacted before his unwitting eyes.

As in the Roa Bastos story discussed earlier, the frame tale told in the past and in the third person permits the completion of the present story.

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This relation is expressed spatially in the story: the house where Dewey interviews the old man consists of a series of enclosed patios, with the conversation taking place at the threshold to the final patio. As in the rest of the stories we have looked at so far, on beyond the threshold lies death; the story is only possible because the conversation between Dewey and the old man takes place outside the space of death.

The initial paragraph of the story, an account of a conversation that Borges and Bioy Casares have in Buenos Aires with Dewey, now of the British Council, restates the motif of the threshold. Just as Dewey could not see what is happening beyond the threshold, and can only reconstruct it afterwards with the benefit of a story that was told supposedly about another time and place, so his Argentinian friends are also on the outside trying to find their way into his story. However, full entry into the story is blocked by the first narrator's ("Borges's") perception of Dewey as an unreliable narrator, by the changes of name and place, and by the insistent use of nested narratives. Though the first narrator says that he is determined to reconstruct Dewey's story as best he can, even at the risk of error, because he feels it would be a shame to lose its "ancient and simple flavor" (p. 612), the simplicity is only apparent at the end when Dewey comes upon the corpse, and brings on the end (the death) of the story.

### *Lines*

In the stories of Horacio Quiroga (Uruguay, 1878–1937), death is also a matter of enclosure and limits in a seemingly open, boundless world. Significantly, in story after story, deaths – and the end of the narrative – are staged at spots where a path is crossed by a barbed wire fence. In the early story "El alambre de púas" the death is that of a bull; the darker later stories "El hijo" and "El hombre muerto" narrate instead the deaths of fathers and sons. Despite the thematic similarities between Quiroga's most important stories about life in the jungle area of Misiones and the stories discussed above, the different disposition of narrative space is a sign of a different concept of storytelling.

Perhaps the best-known set of prescriptive principles for the short story in Spanish America is Quiroga's version of the ten commandments ("Decálogo del perfecto cuentista," 1927). Quiroga's commandments frequently use the metaphor of a horizontal or vertical journey: "Take your characters by the hand and lead them firmly until the end, not seeing anything but the path you traced for them" (*Cuentos*, 308), "Don't start writing until you know from the very first word exactly where you are going" (p. 307). Two less well-known essays, "La retórica del cuento" (1928) and "Ante el tribunal" (1931) confirm the geometrical image, most clearly in the 1931 article, in which Quiroga writes: "I struggled for the

short story . . . to have but a single line, traced by a firm hand from beginning to end" (*Cuentos*, 317). Quiroga's practice, however, does not always adhere strictly to this linear model (a model derived, obviously enough, from Poe's "Philosophy of Composition" and the review essay on Hawthorne).

In "El hijo" (first published as "El padre" in 1928, then in its definitive version in *Más allá*, 1935) ["The Son"], for instance, the straightforward action of the story – the son goes out hunting, falls over his gun and kills himself at ten in the morning – is in tension with the ever more extreme hallucinations suffered by the father. These visions – from the first brief mention of the son's still body to the final joyous return of both father and son to the house in the clearing – disrupt the apparent simplicity of the action, and introduce a subject position that is radically different from the more distanced narrator who informs us of the son's death at the end. Even this narrator, however, at the same moment that he confirms the son's death ("the father goes looking for his son who has just died" *Cuentos*, 296) argues that we should cover our ears out of pity for the father's anguish, thus making explicit the tension between a completely cold and objective and a more partial telling of this story.

Quiroga experiments with narrative focalization in a more obvious way in "El hombre muerto" (1920, later collected in *Los desterrados*, 1926) ["The Dead Man"] and "Las moscas" (supposedly written in 1923, but not published until its inclusion in *Más allá*, 1935), two versions of the death of a man. In the first case the father of a family is crossing a barbed wire fence at the edge of his farm when he wounds himself mortally with his machete; the story focuses on his blurring consciousness as he dies, moments before his children reach him. In the latter story, explicitly termed a variation on "El hombre muerto," a man clearing a forest slips on a tree root and falls against a fallen tree, breaking his back in the process; in this version the focus is on the flies buzzing around him, and at the end of the story (when the man is dead) the narration is taken over by one of them.

The theme of limit-situations is often presented in spatial terms in stories of Hispanic life in the United States as well. José Luis González's important story of Puerto Rican life in New York, "La noche que volvimos a ser gente" (in *Mambrú se fue a la guerra*) ["The Night We Became People Again"], for instance, uses the crossing of a spatial limit as an image of a breaking through from atomized and oppressed individuality to a newly discovered solidarity. (Tomás Rivera uses a similar structure in his 1976 story of Chicano migrant farm workers, "Las salamandras.") González (Puerto Rico, b. 1926) creates a character whose broken Spanish and broken self are made whole by adversity experienced not individually but collectively. The story is constructed spatially in the

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same pattern of ascent as Neruda's "Alturas de Macchu Picchu": the blackout hits Manhattan while the narrator and his friend are in the subway, and continues as they climb out of the subway to the street, then up the stairs of the apartment building to the room where the narrator's wife has given birth to a son. The final ascent is to the roof of the building where the narrator discovers – at the same time that hundreds of other migrants to New York discover on the adjacent rooftops – that the same sky they know from home has been concealed behind the city lights. The darkness and the starlight serve to reconnect Nature and culture, and to reconnect the shattered community.

Julio Ramón Ribeyro's "La juventud en la otra ribera" (collected in *La juventud en la otra ribera*) is also about the act of crossing into another culture, but expresses much greater pessimism about the possibility of preserving humanity or even life in the process. This crossing is represented spatially in terms of physical borders, as well as narratively through the device of narratives that confuse the communication between native and other. Ribeyro (Peru, 1929–1994) takes as his subject the venerable literary construct called Paris. His protagonist is a Peruvian visitor, Dr. Huamán, who is so flooded with prior images of the city that he cannot see the city as it really is when he finally is able to take his grand tour at age fifty. His very literariness makes him gullible, the perfect victim for a group of skilled confidence men (and women). And, because "Paris" signifies "la vie de Bohème" as well as the "capital of the nineteenth century," the sordid and unsavory nature of the life of Solange and her friends makes perfect sense to Dr. Huamán. The Bohemian life is also constructed of cultural codes, and Dr. Huamán is admirably equipped to read them, though like Borges's detective Lönnrot in "La muerte y la brújula" this intellectual ability only makes him easy prey for literate criminals.

The title – and much of the early part of the story – hinges on Dr. Huamán's initial realization that at age fifty he has left his youth behind, that he has finally reached Paris as a stuffy bureaucrat, not a creative Bohemian. This division is represented spatially in the contrast between the bourgeois right bank of the Seine and the Bohemian left bank; when Dr. Huamán tries to go over to the other, Bohemian, side, thanks to his amiable Parisian guide Solange, he gets in trouble. Being able to read the cultural codes is not the same as being able to write them. Dr. Huamán is crippled by his ability to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, while the others prove skillful manipulators of fictions.

When Solange and her friends (all members of a gang led by Petrus Borel) have finally stolen Dr. Huamán's travelers' checks and obtained his signature, he is lured to his death. The place chosen is the forest of Fontainebleau, the favorite retreat of the impressionist painters (and a

literary subject for many writers including Robert Louis Stevenson). There, amid the autumn leaves that seem so exotic to this "hombre sincero de donde crece la palma," Dr. Huamán is shot, pushed across to that opposite bank of the river (of life).

Juan Rodolfo Wilcock (Argentina, 1919–1978), in his macabre and humorous story "El caos" (in *El caos*), parodies the existentialist notion that people will encounter their deepest selves when placed in "limit-situations" like those recounted in the González and Rivera stories (though the probable butt of the parody is Ernesto Sabato, whose existentialist novels were much in vogue when the story was written in the 1950s). The philosopher-prince of the unidentified country creates deliberate chaos in his realm so as to force his subjects out of their routine – and also in an attempt to "find himself" in some sense not determined by his role. Thus, he organizes masked balls – one of the most familiar topoi of the European tradition of the Grotesque – in which there are traps and wires set to trip up the revelers, surprising mixtures of sensual pleasures and religious exercises, and the license to play the part of anyone except one's habitual role. What surprises him is that society proceeds more or less intact, despite the fact that former politicians turn hair-stylists, libertines turn chess masters, garbagemen turn government ministers, and marquesses turn greengrocers. It seems ultimately impossible to create chaos: the new chaos so resembles the old order that the very distinction is called into doubt.

The best moments in the story are those reserved for the narrator's revelations of self. The first occurs when some gypsies seize him during carnival to be the King of Carnival, tie him to a long skewer, and proceed to roast him slowly during a hailstorm. The unfortunate prince, caught between fire and ice, resigns himself to his fate:

Luckily it hadn't occurred to them to pierce me with the skewer, the way it's done with chickens, and besides the coals of the open fire gave off a pleasant heat, which rendered more tolerable my complete nakedness, so inappropriate in all truth to the season of the year. A man with a great black beard, dressed as a gypsy, turned the crank of the skewer with a slow circular motion that allowed me to observe more easily everything that was happening around me. (p. 14)

The peculiar nature of the account is rendered all the more grotesque by the narrator's gratitude at being granted a panoramic view of his circumstances.

The second moment of epiphany occurs on a cliff above the sea where the narrator has been taken in his wheelchair. He has been practicing mystical exercises that promise an overcoming of the self. All at once the cliff gives way, sending narrator and wheelchair tumbling down toward

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the ocean: "Who would have imagined that at the very moment I thought I was finally detaching myself from the earth, it was the earth that was detaching itself from me!" (p. 20). The narrator of course does not die, since his account must be made to continue.

A variant on the same pattern is the well-known story "Viaje a la semilla" (*Guerra del tiempo*) ["Journey to the Seed"] by Alejo Carpentier (Cuba, 1904–1986). In this story, narrative time runs backwards, so that instead of coming up against the limit-situations (the death of the protagonist and of various members of his family), the story moves away from them. The limit-situation that haunts the end of the story is the disappearance of the protagonist into a different kind of limbo, that which existed before conception.

Borges's famous detective story "La muerte y la brújula" (in *Ficciones*, 1944) ["Death and the Compass"] also plays on the connections between spatial limits and existential or vital ones. The action of the story is arrayed in a rhombus shape over the map of a city that bears an uncanny relationship to Buenos Aires. However, as the detective and victim Erik Lönnrot correctly perceives at the end, the story is not really diamond-shaped but linear. The three dimensions of extensive space are superfluous; the essential story, the luring of Lönnrot to Triste-le-Roy, is a two-dimensional one. Indeed, the tension between the two models is reenacted in the contest, between Lönnrot and Treviranus, to give an adequate account of the events as they unfold, and also on another level in the duel of wits between Lönnrot and Scharlach. The struggle over the proper dimensions of the story is present also in a number of smaller details. The statue in the garden of the house at Triste-le-Roy is called a "two-faced Hermes" but also a "two-faced Janus": the image of Janus, looking both forward and backward in time, is being confused with those of Hermes the messenger and the boundary god Terminus, often represented in classical times by markers called herms. The conflation of spatial and temporal limits similarly informs the inscription of the message from "Baruj Spinoza" about the fact that the Jewish day begins at sunset on a map of the city emblazoned with an equilateral triangle. Finally, the restatement of Zeno's paradox at the end of the story restates the matter of limits in space and time from the two dimensions of triangles and rhombuses to the one dimension of "that labyrinth that consists of a single straight line . . . invisible, endless" (*Obras completas*, 507). The story plays, then, with the tensions between a simple story and the complex design of nested narratives studied earlier, and the two kinds of stories are explicitly identified with geometric shapes. Though Treviranus is right in seeing the simple story for what it is, Scharlach is a skillful reader of Lönnrot's more intricate plotting, and is able to draw Lönnrot into his own more direct and elemental design.

*Photographs, moving pictures*

Another well-known statement about the genre is Julio Cortázar's essay "Algunos aspectos del cuento" ["Some Aspects of the Short Story"]. Originally the text of a speech given in Havana in 1962, the Cortázar piece, like the Quiroga commandments, is prescriptive rather than descriptive. Cortázar seeks to persuade his revolutionary Cuban audience that writing short stories is an art with laws of its own, and that it is not sufficient simply to describe things as they are: he argues, then, against a naive kind of Realism. In fact, he says, ordinary people may be more interested in fantastic than in realistic fiction; he gives the example of some rural people whom he and some other writer friends in Argentina befriended, who proved more interested in a ghost story by W. W. Jacobs than in stories on autochthonous themes. (Oddly, Cortázar's speech anticipates the plot of Borges's later story "El Evangelio según Marcos" ["The Gospel According to Mark"] in *El informe de Brodie*, 1970.)

Cortázar's essay is perhaps best-known for the comparison made between the short story and the photograph on the one hand, and the novel and the film on the other. Particularly because Cortázar uses photography as a theme in stories like "Las babas del diablo" and "Apocalipsis en Solentiname," and includes references to the cinema in his novel *Rayuela* [*Hopscotch*], this comparison has seemed to critics to inform his own writing. In the essay, however, this comparison is only one of many; Cortázar also compares the short story to a magnet, the sun, the atom, and so forth. His more important point is that the short story should be endowed with what he calls "intensity," "the elimination of all intermediate ideas or situations, of all the filling or transitional stages that the novel permits and even demands" ("Algunos aspectos," *Casa de las Américas*, 10). This is a restatement of Quiroga's idea (derived from Poe, Stevenson, and others) that the writer of a short story should concentrate on building a single effect, though Cortázar's intention here (and his practice in his own stories) displays a much greater interest in narrative ambiguity than that sought after by Poe or Quiroga.

In any case, the photograph is a dominant image in Cortázar's own practice of the short story. "Las babas del diablo" (*Las armas secretas*) ["Blow-Up"] and "Apocalipsis en Solentiname" (*Alguien que anda por ahí*) ["Apocalypse at Solentiname"] both use the device of a photograph that shows a sharper truth than the one registered by an eyewitness narrator. "Las babas del diablo," which served as inspiration for the Antonioni film *Blow-Up*, begins with a discussion about whether the story should be told in the first or the third person, and this discussion prefigures the narrative problem later when it becomes increasingly likely that the narrator, Roberto Michel (a Franco-Chilean translator and

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photographer), is dead, and that at least part of the narration is being carried forward by his camera. The clouds, mentioned throughout the story but with increasing insistence toward the end, imply that the camera has fallen with its lens pointed up toward the sky, and their passing through the field of vision is presented in a completely impersonal and objective way, alien to the human emotion that pervades the story of the love triangle on the Ile Saint-Louis. The cold "camera eye" narration experimented with several decades earlier by Dos Passos and Isherwood serves here as a distancing mechanism that undercuts the melodrama on the island. The camera "casts a cold eye" on the story.

In contrast, the disembodied gaze of the camera in the later story "Apocalipsis en Solentiname" provides a passionate corrective to the narrator's human experience. The narrator has returned from a clandestine trip to Ernesto Cardenal's utopian community in Solentiname on an island in Lake Nicaragua, and when he shows his slides to his friends in Paris the slides reveal a terrible truth that the narrator had not suspected, that Solentiname has been destroyed by a Somocista attack.

Silvina Ocampo uses photographic images as leitmotifs in two important stories: "Las fotografías" (*La furia*) ["The Photographs"] and "La revelación" (*Las invitadas*) ["Revelation"]. "Las fotografías" is the story of a birthday party for Adriana, a girl of fourteen who has just been released from hospital after an accident that left her paralyzed. The story is organized around the eight photographs taken of Adriana and her family and friends by a photographer with the uncanny name of Spirito ("the letter killeth but Spirito giveth life?"). As the story progresses, two other matters increasingly distract from Adriana herself: the rivalry between the narrator and one of the guests, Humberta, and the discourses of self-sacrifice by the various members of Adriana's family. The narrator's ire against Humberta explodes when Humberta discovers that Adriana, whose head has slumped down like a melon, has died shortly after the taking of the eighth photograph: "How unfair life is! Instead of Adriana, who was an angel, that wretch Humberta could have died!" (p. 93).

Much of the power of the story derives from a series of tragi-comic displacements between the photographs and the characters themselves. For the third photograph, for instance, Adriana holds a knife as if to cut the birthday cake, while the guests banter with the photographer that she should stand for the occasion. Spirito replies to an objection that her feet may not look right in the picture by saying: "Don't worry . . ., if they don't look right I'll cut them off later" (p. 91), a sentence in which the cropping of the photograph and the medical interventions on Adriana's body are confused. Throughout the story the photographs are carefully posed to give the impression of happiness and love; the family and friends, and



Spirito himself, clearly understand that a photograph is a simulacrum of a lived experience, not the experience itself. One of the guests says, tellingly: "If this is the happiest day of her life, how can you fail to take her picture next to her grandfather who loves her so much" (p. 92), a phrase in which the "if" clause ranges from certainty to doubt as to Adriana's happiness, but in which her grandfather's love, though not itself subject to doubt, must be posed or staged.

When Adriana's head falls down and hangs from her neck like a melon, the guests are so caught up in their idea of a good time that no one suspects for a while that something is wrong. It is the narrator's rival Humberta who first notices that Adriana is dead, and that discovery brings an abrupt end to the party – and to the story. The photographs will of course remain a lasting tribute to the party that staged Adriana's death, but one imagines that the sadistic nature of the exercise will be lost on future viewers of the memorial album. Perhaps, as in "La furia" by the same author, they will say that this was the happiest and the saddest day of Adriana's life, but Adriana was not allowed to speak that day, and her speech was forever silenced. The staging of the photographs precludes speech to a large extent, and the later examination of them, though it may be occasion for the telling of stories, cannot recover the silenced speech of the protagonist.

In "La revelación," Ocampo uses the usual confidence that photography depicts reality as it is to provide an uncanny proof of a fantastic event. Valentín Brumana, the protagonist of the story and the narrator's cousin, though handicapped by mental and physical disabilities, is gifted with clairvoyance, which he uses to read the thoughts of his cousins (who are also his tormentors). On his deathbed, he asks his cousin the narrator to take a picture of him with "the lady" he is going to marry, "a star." The cousin dutifully takes a picture of Valentín and of an empty space where he insists the lady is. When the roll of film is developed, a blurry image of Death appears, in the guise of the star of the silent screen, Pola Negri. (Note that though Negri is mentioned in her role as film star, the ghostly image that appears has more of the promotional still photograph than of the cinema *per se*.) The twist given to the story is thus a double one: photography is used to prove that Death has taken a human guise, however that guise is associated not with the older stuff of myths but with the commercial world of the entertainment industry (even though Pola Negri is no longer a familiar name to the moviegoer). Miracles themselves, then, succumb to change in what Walter Benjamin calls the age of mechanical reproduction.

Onetti has a pair of stories that utilize photographs in different ways: "El álbum" and "El infierno tan temido." Onetti is known above all as the creator of the fictional city, Santa María, a place that persists in perpetual

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decadence through a series of short stories and novels since the late 1940s, above all in the major novels *La vida breve* (1950) [A Brief Life], *El astillero* (1961) [The Shipyard], and *Juntacadáveres* (1964) [Corpse-Gatherer]. Onetti's stories partake of the same fractured view of the universe. He proceeds through mordant irony and narrative ambiguity to deny his fiction any sort of transcendental meaning, yet the "certainty in degradation" that T. E. Lawrence discovered in the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is present in Onetti. Suffering serves as evidence of life.

His procedures are well exemplified in the story "El álbum" (1953, later collected in *La cart de la desgracia*, 1960) ["The Photograph Album"], in which Jorge Malabia, the son of a prominent Santa María family who dedicates his youth to the discovery of everything that has been repressed or silenced by his family and their milieu, tells of his sexual initiation. As occurs very frequently in Onetti, the story is deferred to the last pages with phrases like "The day before the story really began" or "The prologues to the story were . . ." Since here, as elsewhere in Onetti, the prologues to the story occupy the greater part of the narrative, it is important to inquire how Onetti is distinguishing "the story" from the rest of the narrative. In this case, for instance, Jorge Malabia's sexual initiation, his partner's remains outside the boundaries of "the story." "The story," here, is the narrative of Jorge Malabia's discovery that what he had taken for the fictions of an extraordinarily imaginative liar were in fact accounts of lived experience. The story, then, hinges on the discovery of the photograph album, the apparent proof of the truth of the woman's stories. Out of the multiplicity of stories (the woman's, Jorge's, others') comes the one story that matters, that she really was there:

Squatting, matured, trying to handle my pipe with obvious pride, I saw the photographs in which a woman – less young and more gullible as I furiously turned the pages – galloped in Egypt, smiled at golfers on a Scottish meadow, hugged movie actresses at a nightclub in California, had forebodings of death at the Ruan glacier, making real and defaming each of the stories that she had told me, all the afternoons I had loved her and listened to her.  
(*Cuentos*, 172)

What is more, the truth is infamous, for it takes away the magic of mendacity, of invention. The photographs come at the end of "the story," but in effect turn it back from story to mere incident. The truth constitutes a scandal for the young narrator because it dissociates desire and fantasy. It is interesting that it is precisely the photograph that is posited as the evidence of certainty, of lived experience beyond the possibility of telling stories about it. As Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag have reflected in their books on photography, the photograph has a paradoxical status as

the ultimate proof of "the real" (as in Euclides da Cunha's reference to the photograph taken of Antonio Conselheiro's corpse at the conclusion of the Canudos War in Brazil in 1897), yet it is a medium that is far removed from transparency, far from necessary or simple referentiality. Onetti's use of photography is quite different from Cortázar's. For Cortázar, the photograph is an image of the short story, brief, frozen in time; it is a discrete entity subject to multiple interpretations. For Onetti, the photograph is a narrative (like the stories in which it appears), but a narrative which is somehow final and determinate.

Similarly, in Onetti's "El infierno tan temido" (collected in *El infierno tan temido*, 1962) ["Hell Most Feared"], the breakup in Risso's marriage is confused, protracted, and uncertain, yet the photographs that his estranged wife, Gracia César, sends him, obscene photographs of herself with a series of men, have a fierce unambiguity. Yet, according to the narrator (who for a moment seems to visit the wife's mind), the obscene photographs are intended to allude to love, to Risso's reiterated declaration that their love will survive any test or trial. This is an even darker story of the power of photography than the other discussed so far, since the medium has the power to degrade the viewer even more completely than rumor or hearsay: the visual images of Gracia are bits of staged narrative dependent for their very power on being staged in the flesh for the camera.

"Cine Prado" (*Los cuentos de Lilus Kikus*) ["Park Cinema"] by Elena Poniatowska (Mexico, b. 1933) tells of a similar confusion in the mind of the viewer between reality and a narrative formed from visual images. Here, using the cinema instead of the still photograph, Poniatowska gives us an updated version of the episode in *Don Quixote* of Master Pedro's puppet show. The story consists of a love letter written from prison; it is only at the end of the story, with the introduction of a newspaper clipping into the narrative, that we learn that the letter is addressed to the French actress Françoise Arnoul and that the writer of the letter is in prison for having stabbed her cinematic image on the screen of the movie theatre that gives the story its title. The letter itself is the account of the writer's jealousy at seeing his beloved kiss another man with what looks to him like an unnecessary degree of passion. The perversity of the situation is heightened by the narrator's confession that he always insisted on going to the cinema with his wife; according to him, she shares his outrage at the behavior of the beloved actress, though her own account of her feelings as a spectator to her husband's voyeurism and eventual attempted murder is suppressed. Since the husband's perceptions of female subjectivity are so notoriously mistaken in his evaluation of the actress's behavior (whose acting he takes as indicative of her "real feelings"), the reader may

reasonably suspect that the wife's perceptions are anything but what the husband says they are.

Virgilio Piñera (Cuba, 1912–1979) was a prolific writer of plays, poems, short stories, and novels whose narrative fiction bears comparison with that of Kafka and Gombrowicz. In fact, he was the head of the translation committee responsible for the Spanish translation of Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* (1947), and his later work contains clear gestures of homage to the Polish master. A number of Piñera's early stories, written in Cuba in 1944 before his emigration to Argentina, have the hallucinatory quality associated with the later works of the literature of the Absurd. Piñera's stories are often told in a neutral monotone; they are disquieting because of the cold objective description of atrocious events. In his preface to *Cuentos fríos* (1956) [*Cold Tales*], Piñera writes: "These stories are cold because they limit themselves to the pure exposition of the facts" (p. 7).

"El álbum" (1944, later collected in *Cuentos fríos*, 1956) ["The Album"], for instance, is a masochistic ritual, experienced by (and through) a male narrator caught in the web of a series of women who are cruel in their very indifference to his existence. In this story, the young narrator rents a room. The first night he is unable to sleep because of the cries of the child next door. The next morning, as he is getting dressed to go to his first day at a new job, that of reader to the blind, he is interrupted by the doorman who announces that the best seat has been reserved for him in the session that afternoon when the landlady is going to show her photo album. The new arrival pays the doorman for the seat, only to be interrupted by Minerva, the woman who lives next door with the crying child. Minerva talks interminably of her life, and when she leaves another visitor, a "woman of stone," arrives to beg for the spot the doorman has reserved for the narrator. When the narrator finally goes down to the living room and takes a seat, the landlady opens the photograph album, and begins a description of a photograph from her wedding that will last for eight months. The spectators will sleep, eat, defecate, even die at their places, prisoners all to the expectation of what the landlady may show them.

The absurdly slow pace of the exhibition of the album is due to the digressive nature of the landlady's stories. She takes eight months to describe a photograph of herself cutting the wedding cake because she describes the baking of the cake, the story of the baker, the stories of the presents on the table, the details of the lace on the wedding dress, the story of the dressmaker. Often these stories are the stories of some terrible violence done to the female protagonists by men, and the landlady's stories (like those of Minerva and the "woman of stone") have elements of revenge. The women tell of past events when they were the victims and

spectators: Minerva, for instance, tells of the suicide of her husband, who shot his brains out in her presence, and describes her own mute cry of horror, a cry that can only be described in silence, through gesture. The landlady's own story contrasts dramatically with these stories of violence: utterly trivial, she dwells lovingly on such kitsch details as the stuffed puppy given her as a wedding gift by Mrs. Dalmau, a gift that has outlasted the giver: "Look: this is what is left of Mrs. Dalmau (and she put her finger on the point that was no doubt the image of Mrs. Dalmau)" (*Cuentos*, 80). Thus the photograph album, instead of being a means to remember the past, is itself the point of the exercise: the story returns at last to the image which seemed at first its pretext.

Though it has not been thought of in this regard, the famous Borges story "El Aleph" (*El Aleph*, 1949) ["The Aleph"] is also intimately concerned with photography. The story begins with a reference to the posting of new billboards with cigarette advertisements and with the narrator's remark on the relation between the new ads. and the death of Beatriz Viterbo: "the event caused me pain, because I understood that the unending and vast universe was already moving away from her and that that change was the first in an infinite series" (*Obras completas*, 617). It is thus an image (in all probability a photographic image) that sparks his reflection on time and infinite series. (Remember that when the narrator finally comes to see the Aleph, it is as an infinite series of images.) When he visits Beatriz's house he comes face to face with innumerable pictures of her, and says that he studies again and again the "circumstances" of those pictures: her Carnival mask, her first communion dress, her sometime husband, her companions at a lunch at the Jockey Club, her friends, her pekingese. Beatriz Viterbo comes to signify for him, then, not only herself but her circumstances, to paraphrase Ortega y Gasset's maxim, and the figure that produces her significance is metonymy. It is therefore not surprising that the visions provided by the Aleph later in the story should be a kaleidoscopic jumble of images that show the universe in its multiplicity and in its disorder. The famous "chaotic enumeration" ends:

in a desk drawer I saw (and the handwriting made me tremble) obscene, unbelievable, precise letters that Beatriz had written to Carlos Argentino, I saw a beloved monument in the Chacarita Cemetery, I saw the atrocious relic of what had once deliciously been Beatriz Viterbo, I saw the circulation of my dark blood, I saw the interlocking of love and the modifications of death, I saw the Aleph from all points, in the Aleph I saw the earth, and in the earth I once again saw the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth, I saw my face and my viscera, I saw your face, and I felt vertigo and cried, because my eyes had seen that secret, hypothetical object, the name of which is usurped by men, but which no man has seen: the inconceivable universe. (p. 626)

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Though this enumeration has the feel of a cinematic montage, it is a montage in which each discrete element is still: it is a montage of photographic images. What is surprising about the series is the aggressive fragmentation and mutilation of bodies (described so well by Lacan in his essay "On Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis"): first Beatriz Viterbo, then Borges himself, then the reader, are shattered, and out of the broken parts comes the idea of the universe. These images decompose the viewer, and the decomposition marks the death of the narrative.

### *Bodies, statues, dolls*

In a note written to be read aloud together with the text of one of his stories, Felisberto Hernández (Uruguay, 1902–1964) says: "my stories were made to be read by me, just as one might tell someone something strange that one just discovered, in the simple language of improvisation, even in my own natural language full of the repetitions and imperfections that are characteristic of me" (*Obras completas*, III: 277). He adds: "And my problem has been: to try to prune off the ugliest parts, without taking away what is most essential; and I am always afraid that the ugly parts of my writing are perhaps the richest in self-expression" (III: 277).

"Las Hortensias" (*Las Hortensias*, 1949) is Hernández's most important (and most disturbing) exploration of the problems of representation. The main character, Horacio, orders the creation of a series of life-size female dolls, called "Hortensias" after his wife, María Hortensia. His butler, Alex, stages *tableaux vivants* using the dolls in two glass-enclosed rooms. The *tableaux vivants* contain implied stories, but these stories when most effective are ambiguous – was the poisoned bride murdered or did she commit suicide? The stories Horacio imagines can then be checked against the "legends" that Alex leaves in written form. Horacio likes the scenes the best when the meanings are not explicit. Though he likes to guess right, he is often less pleased by those legends that confirm his hypotheses than by those that allow a freer play of the imagination.

The dramatic effect of the story is heightened when the boundaries are erased between the glass cases holding the *tableaux vivants* and the rest of Horacio and María's house and garden. First, María establishes a special relationship with the most important of the dolls, the first Hortensia. Then, Horacio has Hortensia modified so that the doll can serve his sexual pleasure, a modification that provokes María to violence. Finally, Horacio and his associates, sensing the commercial potential in the dolls, sell a line of Hortensias to solitary male citizens. In each of these stages, moral limits, and the limits between imagination and reality, are transgressed. That these transgressions are produced by the interpolation of life-sized dolls into the real world of men and women implies that visual and

narrative art serve to confound the limits set by the conscience and the rational mind in their vain efforts to exert control over the world.

Horacio goes mad at the close of the story (though for some readers he was never quite sane earlier on), and his madness has its correlative throughout the story in the noise of the machines from the factory next door to the house. Noise here is the sound of chaos that exceeds rational and artistic discourse, and Horacio's final movement toward the noise marks the failure of his project of a controlled economy of libido and imagination. Similarly, the artifice of the Hortensias is finally revealed as a futile attempt to replace the body, for the body can be represented in and to the mind only as absence and emptiness. The Hortensias, instead of being a mechanism for controlling and subduing frustration, ultimately increase it.

There have been at least two more recent versions of Felisberto's fable of the female body in Latin America. Rubem Fonseca's brilliant story "A Matéria do Sonho" necessarily falls outside the purview of this study (though its absence serves to remind us that a full discussion of the short-story genre in Latin America would necessarily also include Brazil). Rosario Ferre's "La muñeca menor" (*Papeles de Pandora*) ["The Youngest Doll"], however, may be profitably discussed here, since it is an evident reworking of the topos we have examined in the Felisberto Hernández story. (Ferre has published a brief critical book on Hernández, and the relationship between her project and his is obvious enough.) Ferré (Puerto Rico, b. 1942) rearranges the elements of the earlier story, so that now a maiden aunt makes dolls for her nine nieces, one for each year of their lives until they marry. The story focuses on the final doll made for the wedding of the youngest niece, and how that doll ends up taking the niece's place in the house thanks to the husband's inattention. Thus, instead of being a story in which men control women through the manipulation of dolls, this is a story of female vengeance, wreaked through the simulacra of the dolls. Also, since the niece's husband is the son of the doctor who failed to cure the maiden aunt of the parasite that encrusted itself in her leg, the act of revenge is simultaneously that of aunt and niece.

One of Cortázar's most renowned stories is "Final del juego" (*Final del juego*) ["End of the Game"]. The children playing statues by the train track in a slum neighborhood in Buenos Aires (by the train line that goes to the elite northern suburbs) live for fantasy: dreams, readings of adventure books like those about Rocambole, and the postures and statues they assume for the benefit of the passengers on the train. Their game consists of two possibilities: "attitudes," usually abstractions like envy or apathy or indecision (for which no costumes or ornaments are necessary), and "statues," in which the girl chosen is dressed and

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decorated by the other two and then has to find an appropriate pose. The two games are opposite in kind: the one emphasizes abstraction, the second, individuality.

The narrator of the story has a great deal of intellectual curiosity and some artistic pretensions. She speaks for instance of the "Venus del Nilo," criticizes commonplaces (the example of the scalded cat) for their inaccuracy, and reveals a knowledge of the composition of granite and other information gleaned from the Argentinian children's encyclopedia, Estanislao Zeballos's *Tesoro de la juventud*. She even criticizes the handwriting of Ariel, the young man on the train.

Spatial positioning reflects social class in the story, and the curve of railroad track is described in a way that recalls an amphitheatre, with the actors (the narrator, Hortensia, and Leticia) on a stage enclosed by the curve of the track. Oddly, though, the audience in this case is mobile and the actors are static. Ariel, the boy on the train, is perhaps the (elite) youth of Latin America to whom José Enrique Rodó dedicated his famous essay in 1900, and the spectacle that is arranged for his benefit is one of savagery dressed up as civilization.

The game is an affirmation of the self and the group: the place where it is played is called "nuestro reino" ["our kingdom"] perhaps in echo of the concern in Rodó and Dario for an inner realm of the (elite) psyche preserved from the clutter and confusion of the social world. Rodó's inner realm here, however, has become the province of lower-class girls, and the speaking statue of the master's voice in the Rodó essay has grown mute, replaced by the fantastic contortions of the girls. Leticia may well be the finest "statue" of the three because of her partially paralyzed spinal column. In any case, her defects are considered privileges by the other two girls, envious of the special treatment she is accorded. Her real authority, however, derives from the mute pain she expresses in her statues.

J. R. Wilcock's story "La engañosa" (*El caos*) shows the female body as an infernal machine. The narrator of the story, a young man who keeps the books in an olive plantation near the Andes, falls in love with a sensuous Spanish farmworker named Conchita. (Her name in Argentinian Spanish signifies the female genitalia.) The narrator's attempts to possess Conchita's body, however, are frustrated by the discovery that her breasts come apart when touched, that her buttocks are riddled with little holes surrounded by sharp teeth, and that her genitalia are protected by electrified rabbit traps. When the narrator decides to cease and desist from his courting, it is with the regretful admission that the adventure was one which, though exciting, would have been dangerous to pursue any further (p. 127).

Wilcock's representation of the male body is no less bizarre. "La fiesta de los enanos" (*El caos*) tells of the disruption of the cozy household in

which Doña Güendolina lives with her dwarves Présule and Anfo by the arrival of her nephew, Raúl, with whom she initiates an affair. The dwarves, suddenly excluded from the paradise of her table and her company, plot to avenge themselves by poisoning Raúl, but Güendolina takes the poison instead and they are reduced to attacking Raúl and torturing him to death. The description of this event, which occupies much of the story, is orgiastic, since at the same time that the dwarves mutilate the young man's body they indulge in forbidden foods and drink that excite their carnality. The description pauses over the amputation of Raúl's nose, kneecaps, fingers, Achilles tendons, yet the dismembering of his once handsome body is recounted with sensuous glee, as the narrator is infected with the dwarves' enthusiasm. The culmination of the feast tells of their opening several cans of fish: "Delight exalted them beyond the suffering of the flesh, beyond present and past, to a future that might well prove eternal; the fish resolved the contradictions of reality" (p. 63). The mystical language is tinged by its physical substratum: "las miserias de la carne," for instance, is both the religious "sufferings of the flesh" and the all too material suffering of Raúl's flesh.

A sadistic ritual of a different kind is that practiced by Eréndira's heartless grandmother in García Márquez's well-known "La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada" (in the book of the same title) ["The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother"]. When Eréndira at age fourteen inadvertently burns down the grandmother's house, valued at a million pesos, the grandmother insists that she pay back the debt by selling her sexual favors at fifty pesos per client. Though much of the story focuses on the festive atmosphere that surrounds the tent where Eréndira lies in a small town in the desert, there are sudden revelations of her experience when she complains, for instance, that she feels as if she had glass in her bones (p. 112). Thus, though the story is presented largely from the outside looking in at Eréndira in the tent, her voice is heard intermittently, asserting that she is a person who feels, not a doll to be used. Her humanity is called into question, however, by the ending, when she flees from her lover Ulises after they have killed the grandmother; when she runs off into the desert and disappears, the narrator says that nothing was ever heard again of her misfortune (p. 163): her misfortune has become her identity, and the loss of one means the loss of the other.

Silvina Ocampo's "Icera" (*Las invitadas*) ["Icera"], finally, is the story of a body that aspires to the condition of a doll. The protagonist, little Icera, is a child whose mother cannot afford to give her a doll, but who so insistently admires the dolls' clothes and furniture in the window of a toy store that the salesman gives her one item after another, culminating in the gift of the box in which a doll was delivered to the store. Icera chooses to

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sleep in the box, and years later it appears that that decision has stunted her growth: when she returns to the store with her mother, now an old lady, the salesman thinks that the old woman is Icera and the younger one her daughter. It is a scandal to his sense of time that Icera has not grown up.

### *Mirrors*

Mirrors are abominable, says Al Moqanna in Borges's version of the story of the Masked Prophet, because they multiply and reaffirm the world (but also because they reflect his own leprous face). This truth, reaffirmed by the heresiarchs of Uqbar, is the belated rejoinder to the biblical injunction "Be fruitful and multiply" (and indeed the Masked Prophet and the heresiarchs are as fearful of copulation as they are of mirrors): in a world of mechanical reproduction, the work of art (and the self) aspires to an older kind of unity, a decorum of wholeness and purity, a freedom from contamination or prostitution. Yet the other fear is also a modern (post-romantic) one: the fear of publicity. *Divulgar*: the verb means to divulge a secret but also to make something known, to spread information, to publicize. As with the laundresses in the Anna Livia Plurabelle sequence of *Finnegans Wake*, who labor by the river to make HCE's private laundry public, there is a transgression of the (always imaginary) border between the private and the public. The mirror challenges the notion of a limit between outside and inside, and opens the face (and the body) to unspeakable inquiries. Moreover, if the individual mirror reveals some of the limits of individuality, the hall of mirrors, with its infinite regression, annihilates the self (as so often in Borges).

"La busca de Averroes" (1947, later included in *El Aleph*, 1949) ["Averroes' Search"] is one example of a story in which the encounter with a mirror brings on the annihilation of the protagonist and the death of the narrative. Borges's narrative focuses on Averroes's attempt to write a commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*, frustrated by his lack of experience of theatrical representation and his consequent ignorance of the meaning of the words "tragedy" and "comedy." It is the story of an impossibility, then, and one in which Averroes's impossible search for Aristotle is paralleled by the narrator's impossible search for Averroes. That the two impossibilities are the same is dramatized in the story when Averroes looks at himself in the mirror and his world (and self) dissolves; the narrator explains that the story depends on a sort of vicious circle in which to tell the story he had to be the character and that to be the character he had to tell the story (*Obras completas*, 588). His own belief in his project vanishes along with Averroes's image.

Elena Garro's "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas" (*La semana de colores*)

["It's the Fault of the Tlaxcaltecas"] is a story of doubles: Laura, a middle-class housewife in modern Mexico City, discovers a shadowy other Indian self when she encounters a bleeding Aztec warrior, her first husband. The story then wobbles back and forth in time as she suffers through the misunderstandings of her modern husband and the accusations of treachery by her Aztec husband. The links established between the two time periods in which the action of the story takes place are not temporal but spatial. Thus, for instance, when Laura goes to the Café Tacuba the scene shifts abruptly to the Tacuba causeway during the final battles between Aztecs and Spaniards for the possession of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. To picture this double and conflictive world, Garro makes frequent use not only of temporal and spatial doubling but also of mirrors.

When Laura returns home, for example, she notes: "When I returned home, I was assaulted by the furniture, pitchers, and mirrors, and they left me sadder even than I was before" (pp. 16-17). Later she (now the Indian self) looks at the eyes of her first (Indian) husband, and they serve as mirrors: "I remembered that I was in front of my father's house, that the house was burning and that there behind me my parents and little brothers and sisters were all dead. I saw it all pictured in his eyes" (p. 22). The images Laura sees of herself also contain all of those others, yet the unstable context in which she finds herself makes her self-image itself highly fluid.

Garro's later story "La primera vez que me vi" (*Andamos buyendo Lola*) again plays with the mirror image. The "mirror stage" recalled in the title of the story is of a discovery of identity, all right, but the subject of that discovery is not a human being but a little green frog. The frog, who is the narrator of the story, begins the story with an account of a Good Friday when the women were dressed in black and the men wore black ribbons, of a time that some say was a better time though the narrator knows better: "there are no times that are better or worse, all times are the same time although appearances may try to deceive us with their optical illusions" (p. 33). (The frog is a very literate frog, referring with ease to the beginning of *A Tale of Two Cities*.) The frog enters the house of the Valle family (during the period of the struggle between the Emperor Maximilian and Benito Juárez for Mexico) and hides in a bedroom; there it discovers a deep and dangerous lake, "a pool made prisoner on a wall" (p. 34). When the frog tries to bathe in the pool it discovers that it cannot enter the water, but simultaneously discovers a beautiful figure: itself. Later, during the Mexican Revolution, the frog enters the National Palace and on seeing itself in the many mirrors there "I turned green, so to speak" (p. 40). The story continues with abrupt changes of time and place: late in the story the frog is even deported from the United States as an illegal alien. The one constant is an uneasy contemplation in mirrors - at the

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deportation office the frog sees a little girl weeping when she sees herself in the mirror, and moments later in the Waldorf Astoria the frog and the little girl see a woman plucking her eyebrows by a large mirror (p. 51).

Garro's use of mirrors is peculiar in that a number of these events occur not when the characters see themselves in the mirror but when they watch others looking at themselves in the mirror, and this vicarious gaze is linked with the frog's (and the other Mexican characters') problematic sense of self. Like much of Garro's later writing, this story is implicitly parodic of Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950), which is also concerned with the discovery of identity through difference.

Cortázar's story "Axolotl" (*Final de juego*) ["Axolotl"] again uses the conjunction of an amphibian and a sheet of glass, though in the Cortázar story the glass is the transparent pane of an aquarium, which serves as a mirror only because the narrator chooses to recognize himself in the axolotl. The axolotl is a Mexican amphibian something like a salamander; the aquarium is in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris; the narrator is a Latin American in Paris vexed by the same amphibious nature that troubles Roberto Michel in "Las babas del diablo." The story plays, then, with the "amphibious" nature of Latin American identity, with the uncertain relation between self and other.

The climax of the story is the moment of transformation of the narrator into axolotl:

From very close up I could see the face of an axolotl holding still next to the glass. Without transition, without surprise, I saw my face against the glass, instead of the axolotl I saw my face against the glass, I saw it outside of the tank, I saw it on the other side of the glass. Then my face drew off and I understood. (p. 166)

The delicate play of possessive pronouns here tells the story. The "I" of the narration is constant, but its links to a body and a consciousness shift. The story tells of an odd new "mirror stage" in which the encounter with the self in the mirror simultaneously also becomes an encounter with the other.

"Sombras suele vestir" (*Sombras suele vestir*, 1942) ["Shadow Play"] by José Bianco (Argentina, 1909-1986) is punctuated by two mirrors. The first, when Jacinta Vélez looks at herself in the mirror on the night of her mother's death, is described in these terms:

And there she was herself in the mirror, her face composed of shifting, mobile surfaces, her features innocent and fine. Still young. But her eyes, of an uncertain gray, were old before the rest of her person. "I have the eyes of a corpse." (*Ficción y reflexión*, 113)

On a second reading of the story this description can be taken as a description of the moment before Jacinta's suicide: according to Maria

Reinoso and Doña Carmen she killed herself the day of the mother's death by taking digitalis, mentioned (along with a glass and a pitcher of water) in the passage just before the one quoted. Even if this reading is not accepted, however, the description is disconcerting. This description is preceded by the reference to digitalis and followed by allusions to a Shakespeare sonnet and a Carpaccio painting: Jacinta Vélez is not herself, is anything or anyone but herself. The mirror serves to accentuate the strangeness of the revelation.

The second reference to a mirror is at the very end of the story. Sweitzer, who has been trying to decipher what has happened to his partner Bernardo Stocker and is even more perplexed by the desire to know what has become of Jacinta, catches sight of himself when he gets up from bed to turn out the light:

When he passed the wardrobe he saw himself reflected in the mirror, shorter than usual because barefoot, his double chin quivering. He rejected this far from seductive image of himself, turned off the light, felt his way back to bed in the dark; then, hugging his shoulders through the nightshirt, he tried to sleep. (p. 149)

Sweitzer's function in the story is that of an astute reader who tries to decipher the story of his partner Bernardo Stocker and of Stocker's magnificent obsession, Jacinta Vélez. His unsatisfactory vision of himself in the mirror, which serves to bring the story to a close, is a recognition of his failure and – since he stands for the reader – of the reader's failure to find a coherent, simple story. Sweitzer's rejected mirror image, like Jacinta's estranged vision of herself as a corpse, undermines the very notion of personal identity. Since "Sombras suele vestir" provides for (at least) two mutually exclusive interpretations, the characters' sense of a lack of identity with themselves is in turn mirrored in the reader's experience of estrangement and uncertainty.

Finally, Felisberto Hernández's "El acomodador" (1946, later included in *Cuentos*, 1968) is the story of an usher in a cinema who discovers that his eyes emit a sharp light like that of a flashlight. The initial realization takes place before a mirror – as in many tales of vampires and other monsters – when the narrator looks at himself in a dark room and sees himself with his own light. He sees his own face "divided into pieces that no one could have put together or understood" (*Obras completas*, II). The revelation makes him faint and he resolves never to look at himself again in the mirror. His little world then turns into a sort of mirror, because the amount of light emitted by his eyes varies according to the amount of curiosity he feels. He is witness, then, to the workings of his own imagination. The materiality of much of what he sees in the latter part of the story, particularly that of his host's daughter, is uncertain; no other

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character in the story verifies the figments of the narrator's imagination. Near the end of the story the narrator's eyes, "like two worms that moved freely inside my eye sockets" (p. 90), see the daughter as a skeleton, "and her facial bones had a spectral glow like that of a star seen through a telescope" (p. 90). Here an identification takes place between self and other, but it is the realization of the death of the self through the death of the other.

### *Copies*

The final device to be explored here is that of the proliferation of copies of a written text, a theme that plays with the materiality of the printed word as well as with the repeatability of oral narrative, and with the very different relations of the two kinds of narrative to "originals." Once again, several interesting examples have to be excluded here for lack of space, including Adolfo Bioy Casares's "El perjurio de la nieve," Roa Bastos's "El pájaro mosca," and Manuel Ramos Otero's recent "Vivir del cuento" and "Descuento."

Elena Poniatowska has been most active as a journalist, and several of her books are collections of eyewitness accounts of events like the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968 (in *La noche de Tlatelolco*, 1971) or the Mexico City earthquake (*Nada, nadie*, 1988). Rather like Oscar Lewis, with whom she worked briefly in the preparation of the oral interviews for *Pedro Martínez*, she seems to place equal weight on letting her informant speak and on having that speech fit into (or even validate) ideas she is trying to express. This form of mediate discourse, like other forms of the testimonial, is terribly fragile: it works only when the reader feels the writer's presence but not too much. The dangers posed by this sort of writing are inauthenticity if the voice of the writer can be too strongly heard, awkwardness and indirection if the informant's words are transcribed too faithfully. In her short fiction Poniatowska plays with the ambiguities of testimonial writing by casting some of her stories as official reports, most notably in "Cine Prado" (discussed above) and "De noche vienes" (*De noche vienes*) ["The Night Visitor"].

"De noche vienes" is a pastiche of the report of a court stenographer, ending with the ritual formula of the Mexican Revolution, "Sufragio Efectivo – No Re-elección." Throughout the story, the judge reproaches the narrator/court stenographer for not making the requisite ten copies of the reports and for omitting the revolutionary slogan. The ironic subtext is that his obsessive bureaucratic concern for precise copies leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of the issues at hand in the case. The accused, Esmeralda Loyden, is married to five husbands, all living and all present in the courtroom. The judge repeatedly asks questions that imply

a belief that the five husbands must be carbon copies of one another for Esmeralda; she repeatedly insists that each one is very different for her, as different indeed as the days of the week when she visits them. This misunderstanding – a masculine bureaucratic assumption of sameness versus a feminine assertion of difference – is soon reflected in the court proceedings themselves, as the female employees (including the narrator) come to feel solidarity with Esmeralda and frustration with the judge's rigidity. Instead of carbon copies the story conveys the sense of the characters as unique originals.

Poniatowska's authorial irony is perceptible in the insistence on the Mexican revolutionary slogan about effective suffrage and no reelection. This slogan, adopted by Francisco Madero in his opposition to Porfirio Díaz in the elections of 1910, was pilfered from Díaz himself, who used it to ride to power in the elections in 1876. The slogan too is a copy, and a degraded one at that: its institutionalization as one of the articles of faith of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has in the decades since the Revolution come to sound increasingly parodic, as the PRI has used all sorts of means to prevent effective suffrage and to promote the election of one after another of its own party bureaucrats.

The solidarity of the human individuals against the bureaucratic obsession with copies is expressed in the next to last sentence of the story, in which all the parties in the case wish that the judicial action had never gone forward:

Nonetheless a new case could not be made because accusers and accused, judge and witnesses had repented of having brought the first action, number 479/32/875746, page 68, and everything remained written in the so-called book of life that is very silly and precedes the one now used to record the facts, which has a very ugly name: computer certification. (pp. 230–1)

Thus even the notion of telling stories and writing documents is dependent on copies of the accounts "written" in the "so-called book of life," an unwritten book which all are condemned to write and rewrite. Copies of a lost original, Poniatowska's stories bear humorous witness to the repetition compulsion at the heart of narrative itself.

Borges's "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" (1939, later collected in *Ficciones*) ["Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*"] deals with the theme of the copy in a very different vein. Menard, a minor provincial French writer heavily influenced by Symbolism, decides to rewrite Cervantes's novel, and to rewrite it exactly, word for word. When the narrator of the story begins to explain Menard's project with high seriousness (after the burlesque introduction, which concludes with a rather peculiar bio-

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bibliography of Menard), the project sounds quite reasonable, even interesting. For most readers, the moment of scandal comes when a twenty-nine-word phrase from Menard is compared with the corresponding twenty-nine-word passage in Cervantes, and the reader discovers that the passages are indeed identical, even down to their punctuation. This of course is precisely what the narrator has been telling us all along, but the encounter with the instance of deliberate plagiarism often evokes not just surprise but moral outrage.

The story plays, in fact, with the theme of the writer's social and ethical commitments; the narrator is only too willing to excuse Menard's lapses or his own, but is unforgiving of those of the rest of his circle. What he terms "deliberate plagiarism" and "erroneous attribution" (*Obras completas*, p. 450) may be celebrated for their ludic qualities, but the substrata of the story, the celebration of arms over letters and the violent appropriation of others' lives and works, shed a sinister light on Menard's intellectual games. The story is dated 1939 and the narrator's Fascist inclinations are never in doubt, though the full political implications of Menard's projects are certainly open to debate.

A groundbreaking story by a younger writer, Ricardo Piglia (Argentina, b. 1941), further explores the ethical issues involved in telling (and retelling) stories. Piglia is best known for his novel *Respiración artificial* (1981), widely considered one of the most significant works written from inside the terror of military dictatorship. Piglia's earlier collection *Nombre falso* concludes with a long story/essay called "Homenaje a Roberto Arlt," followed by a supposed Arlt story about a prostitute, "Luba." The frame story tells of the narrator's acquaintance with a friend of Arlt's, Saúl Kostia (mentioned in Onetti's memoir of Arlt), his acquisition of the supposed Arlt manuscript of "Luba," and then of the publication of the manuscript by Kostia before the narrator can publish it himself. A potential pitfall to many early readers of the story was to read with the assumption that "Luba" is in fact a story by Arlt, whereas it might equally be thought that the story is by Piglia or by someone else. (In fact, the story is by the Russian writer Andreyev, who is mentioned several times in passing.) The error is instructive. In the lack of certainty about the authorship of "Luba" it would be better to venture hypotheses, not offer definitive interpretations (much as Wolfgang Iser was ill-advised to venture a "definitive" interpretation of Onetti's *Los adioses*, and why Onetti had some fun at his critic's expense). The question of truth in narrative has been carefully bracketed by Piglia: the narrator is obsessed with finding "the truth" but writer and reader may well prefer to be skeptical about the possibility (even the desirability) of doing so. The "death of the author" in "Homenaje a Roberto Arlt" is that of Arlt



himself, yet – as Barthes and Foucault describe in their essays on the theme – what is really being narrated is the death of narrative authority as a unifying principle.

### *Conclusions*

The images I have studied – concentric circles, lines, photographs, dolls, mirrors, copies – are all duplications. This is not by chance: since storytelling involves either the mirroring of reality (mimesis) or the invention of a separate reality, narration is invariably involved in repetition. The dogma originally espoused by Al Moqanna, the Masked Prophet in Borges's *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935), that "The earth we live in is a mistake, a clumsy parody. Mirrors and paternity are abominable, because they multiply and reaffirm it" (*Obras completas*, 327), and later echoed by Adolfo Bioy Casares in the opening of Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (*Obras completas*, 431), is a futile protest against narrative itself, a futile assertion above all because it implies endless stories to justify it.

If this essay has been marked by a refusal of the history of narrative, a refusal to tell the story of the so-called evolution of a disputed genre, that is due to my skepticism that the short story has a "history" in Spanish America, since history would imply continuity and change. I have fragmented my account and traced a variety of paradigms and images, but if there is a story to be told about them I cannot tell it. The initial paradigm provided by Roa's "Contar un cuento" made telling a story impossible (because it leads to death), but makes it possible to talk around a story. Metanarrative, so characteristic of modern fiction in Spanish America, is thus more possible than narrative itself: paradoxically, representation is perhaps only possible when its difficulties are inscribed in the text by the devices we have studied here.