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## A “Superior Magic”: Literary Politics and the Rise of the Fantastic in Latin American Fiction

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# A “SUPERIOR MAGIC”: LITERARY POLITICS AND THE RISE OF THE FANTASTIC IN LATIN AMERICAN FICTION

## ABSTRACT

Writers in Latin America have theorised about literature throughout the twentieth century, frequently intervening in the literary debates of the times. What happened to fantastic literature, a major mode of literary expression for Latin American literature, in this context? This essay argues that between 1930 and 1950 two major writers, the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges and the Mexican Juan José Arreola, actively engaged in a promotion of the fantastic, a reading and writing code that deviated from the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth-century realist paradigm. The articulation of this convention entailed not only the practice of fiction but also reflection and dissemination in a variety of forms such as essays, prologues, lectures, etc. I call this under-studied process “literary politics”, referring to interventions in favour of a specific way to approach the literary, which, in turn, determined the place and influence of fantastic literature in Latin American literary historiography.

*Keywords:* Latin America; fantastic, the; realism; literary politics; 1930–1950; aesthetics; narrative strategies; *Book of Fantasy*, *The*; Bioy Casares, Adolfo; Borges, Jorge Luis; Arreola, Juan José

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### *The fantastic in Latin American literary history*

IN THE PROLOGUE to the influential *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (translated into English as *The Book of Fantasy*), compiled by the Argentine writers and friends Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo and Adolfo Bioy Casares in 1940, Casares declares: “As old as fear, fantastic tales predate written literature.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars will recognise in these words an echo of the opening sentence in H. P. Lovecraft’s 1927 work *Supernatural Horror in Literature*: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”<sup>2</sup> As these quotes demonstrate, the anthologists absorbed many of Lovecraft’s ideas and supplemented them with their own. This selective importation, imitation and intertextual dialogue about literature became part of a process that turned the fantastic into an original mode of expression for twentieth-century Latin American literary history.

How did such a process come about? The fantastic, understood as a literary genre, mode or language,<sup>3</sup> is often associated with unsettling events or entities that have an effect of estrangement on the perceiver, be it characters in a story,

the reader or listener, or both. A full history of the avatars of the fantastic in Latin American culture and literature is yet to be written and exceeds the objective of this essay. Nonetheless, it could be argued, however briefly, that the combination, or clash, between pre-Hispanic cosmogonies and belief systems and the European colonisers' mix of Medieval moral groundings and Renaissance enterprising attitude captured the imagination of many storytellers and writers in colonial times. From Chaac, the Mayan god of rain and thunder, to the New World "sirens" seen by Christopher Columbus, oral tales and written documents constituted an archive for the fantastic, which in the nineteenth century subsequently also incorporated the supernaturalism of Gothic fiction and the European Romantics' interest in the occult and the strange. When, in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, writers and readers began recognising distinct thematic patterns and narrative strategies, the literary fantastic became codified,<sup>4</sup> circulating mainly in newspapers. However, the fantastic at this point existed only at the margins of the social, political and literary forces – the Realist and Naturalist novel – that were shaping emerging national and cultural identities.

Nineteenth-century fantastic production, with tales by the Ecuadorian Juan Montalvo (1832–1889), the Argentines Juana Manuela Gorriti (1818–1892) and Eduardo Holmberg (1852–1937), the Mexican José María Roa Bárcena (1829–1908), and the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío (1867–1916), among others, was the antecedent to the fantastic texts produced in the early decades of the twentieth century by the Argentine Leopoldo Lugones (1874–1938) and the Uruguayan Horacio Quiroga (1878–1937). Nevertheless, the fantastic remained marginalised from canonic literary production and reception. This is because by the beginning of the twentieth century, late nineteenth-century realism and Naturalism in Latin America had been transformed into a new paradigm: regional or telluric fiction, with novels such as Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* [*The Underdogs*] (1915), José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine* [*The Vortex*] (1924), Ricardo Güiraldes' *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926) and Rómulo Gallegos *Doña Bárbara* (1929).<sup>5</sup> However, starting around the mid 1930s and continuing for the next two decades, the literary fantastic became the preferred agency used by some Latin American writers to challenge canonical modes of reading and writing such as telluric fiction.

*The Book of Fantasy* clearly marked a watershed in this development. For the editors of the anthology, the fantastic provided above all a *way of reading* (and not only of reading fiction) that allowed for the presence of many genres, locations and periods in history. Also, and taking into consideration the increasing cosmopolitanism of Buenos Aires, the editors wanted to produce a new, more global reader. The index of the volume reveals that the fantastic could include examples from a very broad scope, extending well beyond the Argentine national border to include fictions not only from European literatures, but also from the Middle and Far East. Curiously enough, canonical figures such as Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant and H. G. Wells rub shoulders with other

more unlikely choices such as James Joyce and Leo Tolstoy, as well as with the social anthropologist James Frazer. This unusual “mix and match” approach to the mode and to literature in general became a trademark of Borges’ work and of the compilers’ reading preferences, which at times could be in conflict even with the fantastic canon (E. T. A. Hoffmann, for instance, was not included). As we shall see, writers in countries such as Mexico also followed this eclectic taste. Borges would later declare in “The Argentine Writer and Tradition” that the patrimony of Latin Americans was the universe and that the the writer at the periphery could afford to be irreverent with the literary canon of the West. In other words, a Latin American writer could read, appropriate and play with traditions and genres without feeling the guilt or the weight of an established tradition.<sup>6</sup>

The prologue to the anthology did not explicitly speak of an aesthetic programme, although, as we shall see, twenty-five years later, in a new edition, Bioy Casares acknowledged the unintended programmatic consequences of the publication of the book. However, the introduction discussed briefly the “primal” nature of the fantastic, its literary history and technique from a writer’s point of view. On the one hand, we have a universal fantastic. Human beings regard the unexplained as an essential part of experience, and thus we have been telling strange stories since the dawn of time. On the other hand, “in Europe and America, fantastic literature as a more or less well-defined genre is born in the nineteenth century in English.”<sup>7</sup> This is the literary fantastic considered as a genre or mode.<sup>8</sup> The compilers were also aware of the role of readers in the ever-changing form of the literary: “If we study surprise as a literary effect or plots, we see how literature transforms readers and how they, in turn, demand a continuous transformation of literature.”<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, *The Book of Fantasy* would become a “soft” manifesto for the fantastic in Latin America.

This essay argues that between 1930 and 1950 two writers who sprang from vigorous literary traditions, Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) and Juan José Arreola (1918–2003), engaged in an under-studied process which we can call “literary politics”, articulating an original reading convention that would in turn provide new pathways for writing. Borges’ role as an anthologist for *The Book of Fantasy* and his prologues, essays and lectures promoted the dissemination of the fantastic just as much as his fiction did. In the case of Arreola, a reader of the anthology, the innovative nature of his fiction and his influence on his contemporaries and on later generations were essential to the rise of the fantastic in Latin America.<sup>10</sup> By intervening in favour of a specific way to approach the literary, both writers determined the place and influence of fantastic literature in the continent.<sup>11</sup>

*Borges: the aesthetics of thematics*<sup>12</sup>

In Borges’ “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940), the narrator declares that for the philosophers of Tlön, “metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy”.<sup>13</sup> Borges even guides us towards a specific reading code. In the

prologue to *Fictions* (1945), he says that, except for “The Garden of Forking Paths”, the other stories “are tales of fantasy”. In the epilogue to *The Aleph* (1949), he employs the same strategy: “Aside from ‘Emma Zunz’ [...], the stories in this book belong to the genre of fantasy.”<sup>14</sup> The nature and functioning of the fantastic in Borges’ stories and poetics have been given ample consideration.<sup>15</sup> However, the means by which he became a “messenger” for fantastic literature in the Argentine and, as we shall see, in the Latin American field, have been less examined, in spite of being fundamental to the literary politics of his time. Rather than seeing whether Borges’ works fit a specific fantastic tradition or theoretical model, our purpose here is to address what he understood fantastic literature to be and why he campaigned in its favour.

In August of 1926, in the newspaper *La Prensa*, Borges reviewed the anthology *Cuentos del Turquestán* [*Stories from Turkistan*]. In this little-known text, he stated:

The fact that an Argentine can write about a German version of a Russian translation of stories imagined in Turkistan speaks about the superior magic of these tales. It emphasises the multiplicity of time and space and is almost an invitation to metaphysics [...].<sup>16</sup>

The review lays bare the type of reading Borges wants to promote: from Turkistan to Argentina, filtered by a Russian and a German reader. This reading code must be *international* (and not only referring to the European canon), *open* (so it can be used as a starting point in debates about poetics) and *hedonistic* (emphasising subjective pleasure as a plausible criterion for judging textual value). It also anticipates Borges’ interest in the multiplicity of times and spaces that will populate his own fantastic pieces.

In this review, what is most relevant for Borges’ practice and conceptualisation of the fantastic is the attraction to what he calls “magic”. He says:

The marvellous and the everyday intertwine, and it is obvious that, for the narrator, no distance or hierarchy separates them [...]. Magic is an example of causality like any other.<sup>17</sup>

This 1926 review may be seen as an early draft of “Narrative Art and Magic”, a foundational essay for his poetics written in 1932. There, Borges uses Frazer’s law of sympathy, in which “things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy”, so as to distinguish two causalities: “the natural, or incessant result of endless, uncontrollable causes and effects; and magic, in which every lucid and determined detail is a prophecy.”<sup>18</sup> The precise articulation of dissimilar events brought about by “magic” causality becomes for Borges a platform for a literary strategy, as he sees in magic a narrative method which he will later associate with fantastic literature.

From early on, Borges was interested in the philosophy of literary form and saw fantastic literature as a site in which to explore the problems of narrative construction and causality (detective fiction would be the other genre chosen). In the 1930s, Borges participated in the local version of literary debates by

reviewing two books of short stories written by his friend Bioy Casares. In 1936, when discussing *La estatua casera* [*The Household Statue*], he argued:

It would not surprise me to find in the Universal Library of the Fantastic only a Lewis Carroll volume, a couple of Disney's films, a poem by Coleridge and [...] Manuel Gálvez's *Opera omnia*.<sup>19</sup>

Besides the swipe at Gálvez, an Argentine writer representative of the realist tradition, Borges implies that, in the end, there might not be much fantastic literature after all because even realist literature is fantastic, or, rather, an artifice. This emphasis on the artificial nature of literature – a creation of a world and not a replica of the world – will become a pillar of Borgesian poetics. He then goes on to discuss the function of endings. Bioy Casares, according to Borges, believes that to finish a fantastic story with the “it was all a dream” technique is a sign of cowardice. For Borges, the criticism should not be moral: “what repels us is the gross facility”.<sup>20</sup> This proves that Borges and Bioy Casares can disagree on technical matters; more importantly, it also serves to underline the attention paid to narrative strategies derived from the fantastic.

By the time Borges writes about Bioy Casares' *Luis Greve, muerto* [*Luis Greve, Deceased*] in 1937, he is ready to take on the hegemony of the realist-regionalist paradigm by equating fantastic literature with the best literary “procedure” for Argentine literature at the time:

The fantastic tradition is lacking in our literature. Our laziness prefers the amorphous *tranche de vie* or the mere accumulation of events. This is the reason why Bioy Casares's book is unusual [...]. [I]n its best pages, imagination answers to a particular order.<sup>21</sup>

These writers' engagement with fantastic literature leads to a rigorous conception of the literary that emphasised an autonomous causality distinct from how things function in the real world. Thus, a particular situation must be resolved within the text's own internal laws and this resolution will give the plot solidity, elegance and a lasting quality.

Together with *The Book of Fantasy* and the aforementioned “Narrative Art and Magic”, Borges' most visible contributions to the campaign in favour of fantastic literature come in his oft-cited prologue to Bioy Casares' novel *La invención de Morel* [*The Invention of Morel*], also from 1940. Here, based on plot construction, Borges underlines the differences between the “adventure story” – which, for him, is frequently inscribed in the fantastic mode – and the “psychological novel”: the latter is “formless” and “wants to have us forget that it is a verbal artifice”; whilst the former is “an artificial object, no part of which lacks justification”.<sup>22</sup> In something of a Formalist turn, Borges means that if we define fantastic literature as an artificial object that refers to itself, then all literature is necessarily fantastic. What, then, is Bioy Casares' contribution? According to Borges,

In Spanish, works of reasoned imagination are infrequent and even very rare [...]. *The Invention of Morel* (the title alludes filially to another island inventor, Moreau) brings a new genre to our land and our language.<sup>23</sup>

In a way, in a translation exercise we find the core value of the fantastic for Borges: first, the vindication of a genre worthy of reading and writing in Argentine literature; second, an emphasis on the practice of “reasoned imagination” by following the text’s own internal causality; and third, an inclination toward the adventure narrative, which focuses more on plot and less on the “psychology” of characters.

The other main element in Borges’ renewal of Latin American fiction through the fantastic is in the field of thematics. The Prologue to *The Book of Fantasy* discusses precisely this aspect of fantastic literature.<sup>24</sup> It begins by explaining how in the nineteenth century the setting used was essential in order to instil fear. In contemporary times, however, the fantastic is based on the introduction of an incredible event into a believable fictional world.<sup>25</sup> A list of classic fantastic motifs follows: ghosts, time travel, the three wishes, the descent to hell, dreams, metamorphoses, parallel plots, immortality, metaphysical fantasies, vampires and castles. The introduction concludes by classifying the “fantasticness” of the story according to possible explanations for the strange event: a supernatural being, an explanation based “on syntax”, and an open-ended oscillation between a natural and a supernatural explanation.

Borges explicitly underlines the main themes of the literary fantastic in two lectures dedicated to the topic. In the first, given in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1949, he identifies the text inside the text, reality vs. dream, time travel and the double as the basic forms of fantastic fiction.<sup>26</sup> In the second, delivered in Buenos Aires in 1967, he mentions these again along with others, almost echoing the list from the prologue to the 1940 anthology. The variety of examples Borges uses to exemplify the fantastic is striking, as he cites *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, Henry James’s *The Sense of the Past*, Poe’s “William Wilson”, Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, H. G. Wells’s *The Invisible Man* and *The Time Machine*, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, Chuang Tzu’s “The Dream of the Butterfly”, and ancient tales from India, Norway and Ireland. In these two talks, Borges reaffirms his reading of fantastic literature by using it as a magnifying glass – thus *Don Quixote* and *Hamlet* are fantastic texts – and by displaying his knowledge of a literature that “has no other limit than the imagination”.<sup>27</sup>

The thematics of the fantastic were well codified by the end of the nineteenth century in Europe but remained a subterranean tradition in Latin American fiction. This “minor”, non-canonical status began to change in the 1940s when Borges and Bioy Casares established themselves as expert readers on the subject and asserted their authoritative criteria, even at a time when they had yet to attain the fame they would later enjoy.<sup>28</sup> This, in turn, firmly instituted the fantastic as a viable model for literature which provided, on the one hand, a method of composition, and, on the other, a source of literary themes and motifs.

Between different “literary procedures” (the natural, mimetic, psychological and realist on the one hand, and the magic, artificial, imaginative and fantastic

on the other), the choice for Borges and company is clear. Firstly, fantastic literature has “seniority”. Borges explains in his lecture from 1949: “The idea that a literature may coincide with reality is quite new and may disappear; but the idea of telling fantastic events is old and will survive for many centuries.”<sup>29</sup> For Borges, fantastic literature is more open to the imagination while the “realist” procedure is a rather new tradition, younger than the age-old mythologies, philosophies and religious systems that gave form to “reality”. The genius of Borges makes him rely on tradition to dethrone the reigning tradition of realism.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, the idea of “imagined reasoning” explains the anthologists’ poetics of reading. In the second edition of *The Book of Fantasy*, from 1965, Bioy Casares offers an illuminating postscript to the 1940 prologue, in which he recognises a “well-intentioned sectarian will”:

At the time and in our land, the anthologists believed that the Novel had a fundamental weakness in plot construction, given that writers had forgotten the primary purpose of the profession: to tell tales. [...] [W]e attacked psychological novels accusing them of deficiencies in plot, which was limited to a sum of episodes [...]; the invention of such episodes had no other procedure than the whim of the novelist, given that psychologically everything is possible and even believable. As an alternative, we recommended the fantastic tale.<sup>31</sup>

This allusion to the literary context of 1940s Argentina proves that the anthologists were keenly aware of their aesthetic agenda at the time. They believed that in order to speak of a commitment to a writer’s own material without pre-conceived ideologies or a nationalistic bent, they needed to read and write against the grain – that is, against the realist model of the late nineteenth century, transformed into telluric fiction in the twentieth.

Lastly, we find an awareness of, and sensibility to, the accusations of escapism often directed towards fantastic literature. In his lecture from 1967, Borges says:

[Fantastic tales] are enchanting because they are not arbitrary inventions, since, if that were the case, their number would be infinite. Being fantastic, they are symbols of ourselves, of our lives, of the universe [...].<sup>32</sup>

Borges thus decided to campaign in favour of the literary fantastic, a mode that scrutinises the complexities of the text and the world and tries to reap, as the 1940 prologue from *The Book of Fantasy* says, “the golden fruits of imagination”.<sup>33</sup>

### *Arreola: the meteorite effect*

The stories of Juan José Arreola defy rationality and logical causality. This challenge situates his work close to the destabilising effect often attributed to fantastic literature, a mode with which he has frequently been associated.<sup>34</sup> Unlike Borges, Arreola was not a writer-critic; nevertheless, his role was essential for the development of the literary fantastic in Mexican and Latin American literature.



Arreola's literary politics with regards to the fantastic is largely related to the effect his fiction had on the Mexican literary field in the 1940s. It was as if a strange object had landed unexpectedly and produced a considerable impact. From 1910 onwards, the narrative of the Mexican Revolution, tied to historical realities and preoccupied with national and political identities, became the primary literary discourse of the times. When Arreola's first collection of short stories, *Varia invención* [*Various Inventions*], was published in 1949, a new horizon of literary expectations was slowly beginning to make itself felt. In an important essay about the fantastic tradition in Mexican literature, Augusto Monterroso – a contemporary of Arreola – mentions two distinct events that changed the panorama for his generation. One was the publication of *The Book of Fantasy* in Mexico; the other was the publication of Kafka's texts in translation, both in the 1940s. According to Monterroso, thanks in part to such books, Mexican literature "began to free itself from the traditional attachment to realist literary themes circumscribed to rural problems and Revolution, and began to search for the more complex spaces of the city and the imagination."<sup>35</sup> The globalisation of reading practices achieved by the introduction of Borges, Bioy Casares and Ocampo's literary catalogue and the works of Kafka renovated Mexican literature and, says Monterroso, Arreola was the writer best tuned to "the signal that came from the South".<sup>36</sup>

Arreola began reading Borges around 1943–1944, and from then on combined the fantastic tradition with his own worldview and syntax. Very much like Borges' role with regards to Argentine literature, Arreola's oeuvre claimed the right for Mexican writers to gain entry to world culture based on the aesthetics of reading proposed by fantastic literature: universality, mixed genres, imagination and a syntax that kept its distance from mimesis. For Monterroso, however, unlike the canonical narratives of the nineteenth century, the fantastic in Arreola did not depend on horror or an outrageous event but preferred instead "incursions into the strange and plunges into resentment, doubt or the complexity of relationships".<sup>37</sup>

Some critics and writers perceived this thirst for a dialogue with universal culture to be a serious defect at the time, a sign of an unauthentic literature colonised by foreign genres. In an interview in 1972, Arreola summarised the criticism he received – "‘French-like’, ‘a cosmopolitan tendency for the cultural nouveau riche’" – but nevertheless defined himself as a very Mexican receptor of all the "universal fluids" that travel in the world.<sup>38</sup> René Avilés Fabila, one of his disciples, remembers that such accusations were born out of Arreola's cosmopolitan ideas and also out of his taste for, and practice of, the fantastic, which was alien to the literary agenda of the 1940s in Mexico. According to Avilés Fabila, his master's most important lesson was the freedom to read, and that is why "Arreola has no precursors in Mexico."<sup>39</sup> This commentary is indicative of the literary battles of the period; Arreola's affinities lay far from the documentalist tendencies of regionalism and realism and closer to the playful

possibilities of imagination, but without rejecting social or political commitment.

Like Borges, Arreola makes use of the archive of traditional fantastic themes and motifs. A good example is “Un pacto con el diablo” [“A Pact with the Devil”] (1942), a text that works with both the dream vs. reality and text-within-a-text schemes. The protagonist goes to see a movie and finds himself in the same situation that is being acted out on screen: the devil offers seven years of riches in exchange for his soul. The end is ambiguous: either he had an encounter with the devil or he dreamt it. Besides the use of such traditional fantastic themes, there are obvious intertextual references to Stephen Vincent Benét’s story “The Devil and Daniel Webster” (1937) and to the movie of the same name (1941), which in turn both refer the reader back to Washington Irving’s “The Devil and Tom Walker” (1824) and to the myth of Faust. This juxtaposition of cultural objects will become frequent in Arreola and can be considered another example of how re-appropriation and re-writing defined the fantastic in Latin America.

Another fantastic theme is the presence of a mysterious animal that instils fear or puzzlement. In “La Migala” (1949) [“The Bird Spider”], the first sentence tries to produce that effect: “The bird spider scuttles freely about the house, but my feeling of horror does not diminish.”<sup>40</sup> Yet Arreola also experiments with humour in “Pueblerina” (1952) [“Small Town Affair”], where Don Fulgencio wakes up one morning to find “a sharp certainty” (horns) on his head. Arreola combines the popular and the cultured here: horns are a popular symbol bestowed on a victim of adultery, but the reference to Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* is equally relevant.<sup>41</sup>

Arreola’s inclination to mix and match cultural references and styles, times and locations, genres and texts became distinctive of his style and relates to the fantastic in so far as the mode was for Arreola an invitation to free the imagination from the quotidian, create unexpected resonances, and often take the reader to faraway lands and times. The Mexican writer moved well in Antiquity (“Nabonides”), the Middle Ages (“La canción de Peronelle” [“The Song of Peronelle”]), the Renaissance (“El discípulo” [“The Disciple”]), the Baroque (“Los alimentos terrestres” [“My Daily Bread”]), the period between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (“El condenado” [“The Condemned One”]) and the twentieth century (“En verdad os digo” [“I’m Telling You the Truth”]); he combined the personal diary (“Hizo el bien mientras vivió” [“He Did Good While He Lived”]), with the interview (“Interview”), the letter (“Carta a un zapatero que compuso mal unos zapatos” [“Letter to a Shoemaker”]), the ballad (“Corrido” [“Ballad”]), the biography (“Sinesio de Rodas” [“Sinesios of Rhodes”]), the fable (“El prodigioso miligramo” [“The Prodigious Milligram”]), the parable (“Parábola del trueque” [“Parable of the Exchange”]), and the advertisement (“Baby H.P.”), all stories published between 1941 and 1953. By reading and writing across categories, Arreola set universal history and literature as new contexts for literary production in Mexico, carving out a niche for

fantastic literature and placing it alongside the realist paradigm that had ruled until that time.

Arreola's originality may perhaps lie in his penchant for imagining "possible worlds", in a manner that enacts Leibniz's idea that the actual world is but one of several possible worlds. Arreola rejects, however, the conclusion that the actual world must be the best of all possible worlds. This framework, close to the fantastic mode because it opens up to an imagining of unexpected situations, stems from Arreola's interest in technology and its preoccupation with the future of humanity. As a writer he acts as an obsessed scientist, taking an idea to its logical conclusion and leaving the reader to ponder it. Thus, a fragment of a text, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (*Matthew* 19.24), is decontextualised and becomes a hybrid of biblical parody, newspaper article and scientific announcement ("En verdad os digo" ["I'm Telling You the Truth"], 1951); or the energy of children is converted into electricity ("Baby H.P.", 1952) to power appliances; or God becomes human, with disastrous consequences ("Pablo" ["Paul"], 1952).

Arreola's stories can also be inscribed into the fantastic through his tendency to follow a coherent absurdity that oscillates between different patterns of organising existence. Arreola's view needs this conflict, informed by hyperbole and humour, to build tension and to focus on the idea of limits. Pushing the boundaries of perceived reality and verisimilitude produces a destabilising effect that also calls attention to narrative mechanisms in the text itself; at times this strategy even questions the authority and origin of the text itself. This becomes a principle of composition for Arreola. He explains in an extended interview:

I locate my work on the opposite side of a literature that resembles a "human comedy" and exhibits its characters like in the films in which actors go from one place to the other, doing their business, satisfying their ambitions. That type of literature is a useless repetition of life.<sup>42</sup>

His poetics avoids recording daily events or psychological musings and, like that of Borges, looks to create a text that, at the same time, establishes its autonomy and – perhaps even more than the Argentine's stories – undermines its own authority and voice.

In 1962, when Arreola was already established as a canonical writer in Mexican literature, José Emilio Pacheco, another product of his literary workshops, synthesised what the fantastic meant for Arreola and his followers:

All "fantastic literature" is generally deemed "evasive", but in essence represents a critique of reality, an attitude that does not negate the quotidian but recognises and unravels it, attempting to go beyond appearances either to create a unique and non-transferable reality (like Kafka or Borges) that is the opposite of a utopia given that the essential horrors of life are represented through a different vision; or to go beyond the common predicament of man [...] through a process which paradoxically takes him away from his daily actions and in doing so makes those actions more real [...]. To

oppose imagination to the opacity of the world, to use a worldview that uncovers the richness of the world in our daily lives, is to aspire to be free, even within the limits that art imposes on itself.<sup>43</sup>

The word and the world, for Arreola, were fragile and free. The best way to explore this freedom, to work with allegory and symbols, to moralise and become a satirist, was to write his own kind of fantastic literature and, in the process, renovate the Mexican literary landscape.<sup>44</sup>

### *The unexpected hour*

In engaging in the literary politics of the times, Borges and Arreola favoured a new way of reading and writing oriented towards fantastic literature, deviating from the referential function that modern realism had ascribed to literary discourse. Their use of the fantastic renewed and amplified themes and, by emphasising the structure of the text, became synonymous with a method of composition that gave priority to autonomy and self-referentiality, paving the way for the Boom narrative of the 1960s. This essay has investigated the ways these writers intervened in the literary field: Borges through anthologies, reviews, lectures and his stories, which have been abundantly interpreted; Arreola, by influencing a generation of writers<sup>45</sup> and by expanding the reading horizon with his own “brand” of the fantastic, far less studied. It is no coincidence that Arreola spoke about Borges as “my teacher” and that Borges, when preparing prologues to the volumes of his *Biblioteca personal* (1988), or “personal library”, wrote an enthusiastic one for Arreola’s *Cuentos fantásticos*. Trying to capture the essence of Arreola’s literature, he spoke of “the freedom of an unlimited imagination, ruled by a lucid intelligence”.<sup>46</sup>

In a note to the edition of his *Obras completas* (1974), later suppressed, Borges invents his own entry in an imaginary *South American Encyclopedia* from 2074: “Argentine prose did not go beyond diatribe, satire or chronicle until Borges elevated it to the fantastic.”<sup>47</sup> Even in this lighthearted context, Argentine literature has been *elevated* to the fantastic thanks to Borges, and this is a clear sign of the place he wanted for himself and for fantastic literature. As for Arreola, he declared in another interview: “The realist novel and short story will lose their prestige and efficacy [. . .]. Any media [newspaper, radio, film and TV] is more effective.” Fantastic literature, on the other hand, is for him the art of the possible. Later in the same interview, he adds to the idea: “I will write at the unexpected hour.”<sup>48</sup>

From 1940 to 1965, Latin American literature blossomed into what can be called the golden age of the fantastic. The fiction of Borges, Bioy Casares, Ocampo and Julio Cortázar in Argentina; Felisberto Hernández in Uruguay; Arreola, Amparo Dávila, Carlos Fuentes and José Emilio Pacheco in Mexico, and Virgilio Piñera in Cuba, among others, became part of, whilst also innovating, the fantastic tradition. By the 1970s, critics of the fantastic were using Latin American texts to exemplify their claims.<sup>49</sup> Thirty years before, Borges and

Arreola made sure the “superior magic” of the unexpected would not go unnoticed in Latin American literature, thereby becoming the main agents in the legitimation of the literary fantastic.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. L. Borges, S. Ocampo & A. Bioy Casares (eds.), *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, 1st edn 1940 (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1965), p. 7. All subsequent translations from Spanish are mine, unless the books cited have been published in English. Quotations from the prologue to the anthology come from the 2nd edition in Spanish. The English translation of the book omits the introduction and contains instead a prologue by Ursula K. Le Guin. See *The Book of Fantasy* (New York: Viking, 1988). It is important to note that, even though the prologue is signed by Bioy Casares, both this introduction and the anthology itself are a product of Borges and Bioy Casares, with some help from Ocampo. For more on this, see A. Louis, “Definiendo un género: la *Antología de la literatura fantástica* de Silvina Ocampo, Adolfo Bioy Casares y Jorge Luis Borges”, *Nueva revista de filología hispánica* 49:2 (2001), 409–37.

<sup>2</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, 1st edn 1945 (New York: Dover, 1973), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Critics agree to disagree in this respect. For Tzvetan Todorov, the fantastic is a genre (*The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 1st edn 1970 [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975], p. 3); Eric Rabkin calls it a “quality of astonishment” belonging to the genre of Fantasy (*The Fantastic in Literature* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976], p. 41); Rosemary Jackson believes it to be “a literary mode from which a number of related genres emerge” (*Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* [London & New York: Methuen, 1981], p. 7); Rosalba Campra speaks of an “isotope of transgression” in which language gets subverted semantically, syntactically and discursively (“Il fantástico: Una isotopia della trasgressione”, *Strumenti Critici* 15:45 [1981], 199–231); Christine Brooke-Rose says the fantastic is an “evanescent element” (*A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], p. 63); Renato Ceserani defines it as a mode and a “textual tradition” (*Lo fantástico*, 1st edn 1996 [Madrid: Visor, 1999], p. 18); Nancy Traill considers it a “universal aesthetic category” (*Possible Worlds of the Fantastic: The Rise of the Paranormal in Fiction* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996], p. 7); Pampa Olga Arán distinguishes between the “historical” fantastic, an epistemological category across time, and the “literary” fantastic, referring to an anti-realist rhetoric (*El fantástico literario: Aportes teóricos* [Córdoba, Argentina: Naravaja, 1999], p. 13). I tend to side with the idea of the fantastic being a literary mode; I also agree with Lida Aronne-Amestoy who defines the fantastic as “the strategy through which the text affirms its autonomy over the realist model”, even though the term “real” needs appropriate contextualisation. See “Lo fantástico como estrategia básica del cuento”, in: *Teoría cuentística del siglo XX (aproximaciones hispánicas)*, ed. C. V. de Vallejo (Miami: Universal, 1989), pp. 251–60.

<sup>4</sup> Nineteenth-century fantastic Latin American literature is beyond the scope of this essay. For excellent forays into this territory, see O. Hahn, *El cuento fantástico hispanoamericano en el siglo XIX* (México: Premià, 1982), and I. König, *La formación de la narrativa fantástica hispanoamericana en la época moderna* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the realist model in Latin American fiction in the first half of the twentieth century, see R. Xirau, “Crisis del realismo”, and J. Adoum, “El realismo de la otra realidad”, in: *América Latina en su literatura*, ed. C. Fernández Moreno (Mexico & Paris: Siglo XXI & UNESCO, 1972), pp. 185–203 and 204–16 respectively.

<sup>6</sup> J. L. Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. E. Weinberger, trans. E. Allen, S. J. Levine & E. Weinberger (New York: Viking Penguin, 1998), p. 426. This explains in part the idiosyncratic choices of the anthologists. Le Guin recognises that it is “completely eclectic” (Prologue, *The Book of Fantasy*, p. 11).

<sup>7</sup> *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> I borrow the term “literary fantastic” from Neil Cornwell. See N. Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothea von Mücke’s work on nineteenth-century American and European fantastic fiction is worthy of mention here because of her intraliterary approach which “seeks to understand the fantastic tale as an implicit aesthetic and poetic program that, though hardly addressed in theoretical texts about the fantastic, nevertheless constitutes an integral element of fantastic fiction itself.” Ultimately, says von Mücke, “the generic innovation of the fantastic tale can be understood in light of how it intervenes in the cultural history of reading.” The idea of the cultural history of reading, applied in this case to a specific group of readers – writers and critics in 1930–1950 Latin America – is a useful tool to study the process being referred to here. See D. von Mücke, *The Seduction of the Occult and the Rise of the Fantastic Tale* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> I am well aware that critical discourse on the literary fantastic has had to contend with magical realism, a term that became globalised with the sanctioning of Fredric Jameson and Homi Bhabha among others, but which has also begun to be rejected by several writers as the purported primary mode for Latin American literature; see, for example, the anthology *McOndo*, ed. A. Fuguet & S. Gómez (Barcelona: Mondadori, 1996). Borges and Arreola have been considered by some critics to be magical realist writers: see A. Flores, “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction”, *Hispania* 38 (1955), 187–92, and S. Menton, *Historia verdadera del realismo mágico* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998), among others. In Latin American literary criticism, the polemics is a long and confusing one, with the marvellous real, magical realism and the fantastic jousting for position and critics trying to set boundaries and sometimes using the terms interchangeably. In the case of the fantastic and magical realism, for instance, if we take the latter to be – as the term is quite often understood – a worldview that involves a strategy in which the supernatural is narrated as natural and the natural is narrated as supernatural, it is clear that the fantastic may fulfil the first part of the definition but it almost never fulfils the second. In this essay, I focus on writers who did not use the term “magical realism” to refer to their works or the works of other writers. But they did use the term “fantastic literature” not only to define their texts but also to talk about a type of literature and promote a specific view of the literary. For more on the topic, see *Otros mundos, otros fuegos: Fantasía y realismo mágico en Iberoamérica*, ed. D. Yates (Pittsburgh: Michigan State University, 1975); A. Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* (New York: Garland, 1985); *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. L. P. Zamora & W. B. Faris (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995), and *A Companion to Magical Realism*, ed. S. M. Hart & W. Ouyang (Woodbridge, UK & Rochester, NY: Tamesis, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> I have also discussed some of the ideas in this section in “Los (h)usos de la literatura fantástica: notas sobre Borges”, *Escritos* 21 (2000), 141–53.

<sup>13</sup> *Collected Fictions*, trans. A. Hurley (London, New York etc.: Penguin, 1998), p. 74. Pampa Olga Arán offers an extremely interesting take on the tenets of *The Book of Fantasy* being ciphered in this short story. See “La literatura de Tlön”, in: *Borgesíada*, ed. S. Romano-Sued (Córdoba, Argentina: Topografía 1999), pp. 107–35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67, p. 287. Borges uses the Spanish “fantástico” to refer to his stories; this gets translated as “fantasy” (“fantasía” in Spanish), a word Borges does not use. Consequently, “fantastic” is a more accurate description of his tales.

<sup>15</sup> The best analysis of Borges’ poetics in relation to fantastic literature is still E. Rodríguez Monegal, “Borges: Una teoría de la literatura fantástica”, in: *Revista iberoamericana* 42:95 (1976), 177–89. An adequate overview of Borges’ positions and analysis of some stories is found in J. Rodríguez Luís, *The Contemporary Praxis of the Fantastic: Borges and Cortázar* (New York & London: Garland, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> *Textos recobrados 1919–1929* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1997), p. 260.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Selected Non-Fictions*, pp. 80–2.

<sup>19</sup> *Borges en Sur* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1999), p. 130.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>22</sup> *Selected Non-Fictions*, pp. 243–5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>24</sup> Critics who have worked on *The Book of Fantasy* and its prologue include: Louis, “Definiendo un género”; Arán, “La literatura de Tlön”; D. Balderston, “De la *Antología de la literatura fantástica* y sus alrededores”, in: *Historia crítica de la literatura argentina*, Vol. 9: *El oficio se afirma* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2004), pp. 217–27, and R. Olea Franco, “Borges y la *Antología de la literatura fantástica*”, in: *Variaciones Borges* 22 (2006), 251–76. All of them have valuable insights. Louis’s article is the closest to my approach and to what I have discussed in “Los (h)usos de la literatura fantástica”.

<sup>25</sup> The term “neo-fantastic” has been proposed to distinguish fantastic fiction in the twentieth century from that of the nineteenth century. Jaime Alazraki explains: “In contrast to the nineteenth-century fantastic fiction in which the text moves from the familiar and natural to the unfamiliar and supernatural [...] the writers of the neofantastic bestow equal validity and verisimilitude on both orders. They have no difficulty in moving with the same freedom and ease in both [...]. The unstated assumption declares that the fantastic level is just as real (or unreal, from a realist standpoint) as the realist level. If one of them produces in us a surreal or fantastic feeling, it is because in our daily lives we follow logical notions similar to those that govern the realist mode.” See *The Final Island: The Fiction of Julio Cortázar*, ed. J. Alazraki & I. Ivask (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> “Sobre ‘La literatura fantástica’, disertó ayer Jorge Luis Borges”, in: *El Uruguay de Borges: Borges y los uruguayos (1925–1974)*, ed. P. Rocca (Montevideo: Universidad de la República, 2002), pp. 181–7.

<sup>27</sup> *La literatura fantástica* (Buenos Aires: Olivetti, 1967), p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Louis rightly points out that the editors did not have a univocal conception of the fantastic and so theirs is a complicity of readers, not of writing practices. “It is not a question,” says Louis, “of illustrating or creating a genre but of disseminating a precise idea of literature” (“Definiendo un género”, pp. 415–16).

<sup>29</sup> “Sobre ‘La literatura fantástica’”, p. 189.

<sup>30</sup> For the idea of inventing traditions, see *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. J. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger, 1st edn 1983 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). In the introduction, Hobsbawm indicates: “Sometimes new traditions could be readily grafted on old ones” (p. 6).

<sup>31</sup> *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>32</sup> *La literatura fantástica*, p. 19.

<sup>33</sup> *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> Arreola has been classified within the fantastic and magical realist modes. In a 1954 article, “Rulfo y Arreola”, Emmanuel Carballo says that Arreola’s writing belongs to the “realist tendency in fantastic literature”; see *El cuento mexicano del siglo XX (Antología)* (Mexico: Empresas Editoriales, 1964), p. 66. By 1986, in her introductory study to Arreola’s works, Carmen de Mora classifies as fantastic “*Parturient montes*”, “I’m Telling you the Truth”, “The Bird Spider”, “The Switchman”, “Small Town Affair”, “The Prodigious Milligram” and “A Tamed Woman”, stories published between 1949 and 1954; see *Confabulario definitivo* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1986). Surprisingly, there has not been a dedicated study of the relationship between Arreola and fantastic literature. The most extensive work on the subject is Ana Belén Caravaca Hernández’s *Juan José Arreola: fragmentos de una escritura trucada* (Valencia, Spain: Tirant lo Blanch Libros, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> A. Monterroso, “La literatura fantástica en México”, in: *El relato fantástico en España e Hispanoamérica*, ed. E. Morillas Ventura (Madrid: Siruela, 1991), p. 180.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>38</sup> F. Campbell, *Conversaciones con escritores* (México: SEP/Setentas, 1972), p. 45.

<sup>39</sup> R. Avilés Fabila, in: V. Manuel Pazarín, *Arreola, un taller continuo* (Guadalajara: Ágata, 1995), p. 91. Other critics have spoken of Arreola’s lineage in Mexican literature, thereby contradicting Avilés Fabila’s claim. Carballo speaks of an “imaginative tradition” represented by Julio Torri, Alfonso Reyes and Mariano Silva y Aceves, among others; see *Protagonistas de la literatura mexicana*, 1st edn 1965 (Mexico: Porrúa, 1994), p. 457.

<sup>40</sup> *Confabulario and Other Inventions*, trans. G. D. Schade (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>42</sup> *Protagonistas de la literatura mexicana*, p. 463.

<sup>43</sup> J. Emilio Pacheco, "Un gran prosista", in: *La Cultura en México*, supplement to *Siempre!* 10 (1962), p. iv.

<sup>44</sup> For the metafictional qualities of Arreola's writings, see F. Vázquez, *Juan José Arreola: La tragedia de lo imposible* (Mexico: CONACULTA, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes & Verdehalago, 2002), pp. 91–115. Schade says about Arreola's satiric inclination: "Arreola jabs at complacency and ruthlessly exposes pompous and hypocritical attitudes" (ibid., p. viii).

<sup>45</sup> For the importance of Arreola's workshops, see my "Juan José Arreola, mecánico literario", in: *Hispanismo: Discursos culturales, identidad y memoria*, ed. N. Ma, F. de Fernández & S. P. Israilev (Tucumán, Argentina: Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, 2006), Vol. 1, pp. 174–84.

<sup>46</sup> *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1996), Vol. 4, p. 510.

<sup>47</sup> *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974), Vol. 1, p. 1144.

<sup>48</sup> *Protagonistas de la literatura mexicana*, p. 464.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Irène Bessièrè on Cortázar, in *Le Récit fantastique: La Poétique de l'incertain* (Paris: Larousse, 1974).