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# Posthumous Voices in the Antología de la literatura fantástica: Santiago Dabove, Horacio Quiroga, and Edgar Allan Poe

Jose J. Alvarez

South Dakota State University, [jose.alvarez@sdstate.edu](mailto:jose.alvarez@sdstate.edu)

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## Posthumous Voices in the *Antología de la literatura fantástica*: Santiago Dabove, Horacio Quiroga, and Edgar Allan Poe

*Este artículo reconstruye el concepto de lo fantástico esbozado en el prólogo de Adolfo Bioy Casares a la Antología de la literatura fantástica y examina algunas de las inclusiones y omisiones más representativas de la colección. Debido a que Bioy incurre en imprecisiones y contradicciones al teorizar lo fantástico, este trabajo parte del análisis de un ejemplo concreto, "Ser polvo", de Santiago Dabove. Aunque Dabove emplea varias de las estrategias que Bioy condena y recurre a fuentes que la Antología no admite, su narración es ejemplar, especialmente cuando se compara con "Más allá", de Horacio Quiroga. El análisis de las estrategias textuales empleadas en ambos relatos y de sus vínculos con la estética sensacionalista de Edgar Allan Poe revela que lo fantástico es, en la Antología, un concepto plástico y utilitario que no se puede teorizar, pero que tiene un impacto tangible en la selección de textos. La inclusión de Dabove en la Antología y la exclusión de Quiroga - afamado precursor de lo fantástico - es el resultado de la aplicación de un concepto de lo fantástico en que las preferencias editoriales y los objetivos específicos de la Antología se cruzan con la polémica noción de "calidad literaria".*

In the 1968 prologue to *Nueva antología personal*, Jorge Luis Borges asserts that "Nadie puede compilar una antología que sea mucho más que un museo de sus 'simpatías y diferencias'" (3). This maxim reaffirms an idea expressed earlier, in the collective project known as *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (edited by Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, and Silvina Ocampo in 1940). At the end of the *Antología's* prologue - signed by Bioy - we read: "Analizado con un criterio histórico o geográfico [este libro] parecerá irregular. No hemos buscado, ni rechazado, los nombres célebres. Este volumen es simplemente, la reunión de los textos de la literatura fantástica que nos parecen mejores" (14). Though it is clear that Bioy's prologue speaks of the same sympathies and differences that Borges later describes, it is important to clarify that the *Antología* was more than a museum of preferences. As Annick Louis, Walter Carlos Costa, and others

have suggested, the collection marked a new era in Spanish American fiction. It changed the way in which texts were both written and read in Argentina and beyond (Louis 416; Costa 159).

The 1940 anthology not only turned Borges and Bioy into the most renowned practitioners and theorizers of the fantastic in Spanish America, but it also created a canon in which their names coexist with those of Silvina Ocampo, Julio Cortázar, Juan Rodolfo Wilcock, and José Bianco.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to understand the sources of the fantastic and to expand this initial canon, current scholars have convincingly argued that Juan Montalvo, Juana Manuela Gorriti, Rubén Darío, Eduardo Holmberg, Leopoldo Lugones, Horacio Quiroga, and others anticipated the fantastic and conceived of it in different ways.<sup>2</sup> To characterize this group as fantastic writers, most scholarly works demonstrate that the supernatural creatures, strange transformations, and uncanny occurrences depicted in their works challenge the stability of what we call the “real world.” In other words, critics frequently relate these writers’ fiction to variations of the definition proposed in Tzvetan Todorov’s famous book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*: “The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25).

Applying Todorov’s definition to the study of Spanish literature presents some challenges. One must keep in mind, for instance, that the 1970 treatise was based almost exclusively on French and Anglo-Saxon works, and that the Bulgarian philosopher saw Franz Kafka as the last fantastic writer. Scholars such as Ana María Barrenechea, Harry Belevan, Jaime Alazraki, and David Roas have pointed to these and other flaws, correcting and expanding Todorov’s ideas. Their research shows that there is fantastic literature in Spanish that precedes and outlives Kafka, problematizes the notion of genre, argues that the fantastic crosses generic and stylistic boundaries, and identifies it in forms other than prose.<sup>3</sup> Independent from these contributions, two correlated issues often go unnoticed: 1. Scholars feel compelled, at least in part, to re-insert prominent writers such as Quiroga, Holmberg, and Darío into the canon of the fantastic because they were not originally included in the foundational *Antología*, and 2. Resorting to Todorov for this purpose entails the significant risk of taking said writers out of their historical and geographical context. In other words, the preference of scholars for Todorov’s model often conceals the fact that the *Antología*, the document that marked the origin of the fantastic in Spanish America, offers us an obscure definition and confronts us with disquieting editorial choices that remain haunting.

Annick Louis and Pampa Arán deal with this obscurity and these omissions in a similar manner. Louis argues that “Si toda antología convoca una noción de *serie*, lo que aquí se intenta es el reemplazo de una *serie* por otra: la voluntad de desplazar una definición de lo fantástico y de imponer otra” (416; emphasis added). In spite of their popularity, writers like Darío, Holmberg, and Quiroga belong to this postponed series:<sup>4</sup> “Toda una *serie* de la tradición del fantástico rioplatense de vertiente naturalista que se iniciaba en Holmberg y culminaba en Quiroga y Arlt ... son excluidos [sic] del modelo que construye la *Antología*, cuya tensión no reside en convocar al monstruo sino en mostrar que la amenaza más refinada se esconde en el poder de la palabra” (Arán 17; emphasis added). While I basically agree with these claims, it is necessary to acknowledge that the *Antología* refers to the fantastic as a genre, and that the notion of “series” tries to harmonize tensions that the anthologizers chose to keep unresolved. After all, neither the 1940 anthology nor its prologue assert exactly what the editors understand by fantastic. In the end, the *Antología* does not distinguish between two different manifestations of the same genre (or two “series,” or even two different genres); it simply sketches an open and contradictory definition of the fantastic that can be used to include or exclude texts despite their similarities or differences.

To signal a departure from Todorov’s model and a deliberate return to the *Antología*, I use the term *fantástico* hereafter. Calling attention to the ambiguous and contradictory notion of the *fantástico* introduced in the *Antología’s* prologue - which will be outlined later - I also intend to highlight the local and historical specificity of both the 1940 collection and the works analyzed in this study. Also abiding by Bioy’s prologue, I circumvent the extensive scholarship on the generic condition of the fantastic (see Ceserani, Bessière, Jackson, and Hume, for instance) and simply refer to the *fantástico* as a genre.<sup>5</sup> In sum, the purpose of this study is to reconstruct the definition of the *fantástico* at work in the *Antología* by taking into account the hesitations, contradictions, inclusions, and omissions that mark this collective effort. Only if we understand the complexities of the collection can we explain the problematic position of certain writers in the canon that the *Antología* helped shape. To this end, I examine some of the main tenets of Bioy’s prologue and comment on the relationship between the prologue and the texts compiled in the volume. My analysis shows that in the process of defining and illustrating the *fantástico*, the *Antología* struggles to reject works that would otherwise have seemed appropriate. In other words, both the selection of texts and Bioy’s attempt to define the genre bring to mind undesirable examples of the *fantástico*. Despite demonstrating some of the genre’s crucial features,

these examples are quickly dismissed because they lack the quality to which the *Antología* aspires.

The question of quality, which arguably concerned the editors of the *Antología*, visibly troubles later scholars. In fact, when Louis, Arán, and others claim that the anthology tries to update a certain definition of the *fantástico*, or when they argue that the collection sets a model for more subtle horrors, they are implying something far less polite: the editors of the *Antología* knew that they had to deal with a formulaic genre, and they attempted to turn it into an acceptable artistic product. Richard Reeve makes this problem more explicit. He claims that Borges's concern with quality set the *fantástico* on a path different from the so-called "pulp fiction":

Al contrario de los Estados Unidos, donde gran parte de la literatura fantástica sale en las desprestigiadas 'pulp magazines', destinadas ... a las masas y a una juventud impresionable, en Sudamérica Borges da un prestigio enorme al género... ; quizá más que cualquier otro libro [la Antología] hace popular y aceptable la literatura fantástica. (250)

Borges and the anthologizers were not struggling specifically against U.S. pulp fiction, but they faced a similar adversary. In its quest for superior literary quality, the *Antología* aspired to surpass the popular and commercial literature that - engaging the same topics and themes discussed in the 1940 collection - crowded the pages of Argentinean periodicals such as *Caras y Caretas*, *La Novela del Día*, *La Novela de Hoy*, *El Cuento Ilustrado*, and *La Novela Femenina*. Unlike these publications, which offered entertainment for a growing urban middle- and lower-class readership, the *Antología* advocated a more accomplished literature.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, neglecting the traditional function of an anthology (to offer a representative catalogue of works/authors in a single, affordable volume) and dismissing some of the indisputable masters of the genre, the collection refused to acquiesce to the preferences of inexperienced periodical readers or to bow to market pressures. Instead, it contributed to create a "new, more global reader" who, in the context of Buenos Aires' increasing cosmopolitanism, demanded more sophisticated artistic products (Brescia 380).<sup>7</sup>

Because the *Antología* never defines the *fantástico* directly, and because the polemical notion of literary quality cannot be detached from this peculiar conception of the genre, I approach the struggles inherent to the collection through two concrete examples: Santiago Dabove's "Ser polvo" (1933, 1940) and Horacio Quiroga's "Más allá" (1925, 1935). Both tales explore the afterlife and are delivered through posthumous

disembodied voices. Moreover, both tales have a similar religious and scientific subtext, are inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's works, and aim at a similar public. Despite these and other commonalities, the anthologizers treated them differently. Dabove's tale came to represent, in 1940, the sophisticated and accomplished form of the *fantástico* that the *Antología* put forward. Contrary to "Ser polvo," Quiroga's tale embodied the unwanted influences the collection was designed to reject. Instead of comparing these two tales directly, I analyze them through Poe's aesthetics. Examining "Ser polvo" and "Más allá" in light of the two facets of Poe described in the *Antología* will allow us to problematize the notion of the *fantástico* at work in the collection.

For methodological reasons, I restrict my observations to the first edition of the *Antología* and focus exclusively on Quiroga.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, the *Antología* could not have accounted for every manifestation of the genre, but Quiroga's case is particularly striking for two reasons. First, the Uruguayan was not only renowned for his work on the same topics and tropes that the anthology explored, but he was also known for "El espectro" (1921) and "El vampiro" (1927), tales that thematically anticipate another landmark in the history of the *fantástico*: Bioy's *La invención de Morel* (1940).<sup>9</sup> Second, the *Antología* appeared scarcely five years after the publication of *Más allá* (1935), Quiroga's last collection of supernatural tales, and approximately three years after his death. Taking into account Quiroga's visibility at the time, as well as the extensive scholarship linking him with Bioy, Lugones, Borges and other prominent proponents of the *fantástico*, how should we interpret his exclusion from the *Antología*?<sup>10</sup> In "Borges en la constitución del canon fantástico," one of the few studies that explicitly addresses this question, Rafael Olea Franco argues that the Uruguayan was excluded from the *Antología* because the editors disliked his "estética efectista," because they decided to give the *fantástico* a different orientation ("perspectiva diferente"), and because Borges openly derided Quiroga, whom he regarded as a mediocre writer capable of inexcusable missteps ("Borges" 130-32). Instead of discussing that "perspectiva diferente," I propose to shift our attention to the polemical issue of quality. What if the problem went beyond Quiroga's different approach to the *fantástico*? What if he was excluded from the *Antología* because he was perceived as a bad writer who could only impress unsophisticated readers of periodicals? In other words, what if he was not included in the collection because his aesthetics was akin to the *fantástico*, but simultaneously incompatible with it? Before trying to answer these questions we need to clarify what the editors of the *Antología* understood by *fantástico* and what was the use of their definition.

The first component of the *fantástico* addressed in the anthology is the supernatural. Bioy begins the discussion by establishing a connection - which remains unclear - between the *fantástico*, the presence of ghosts, and the emergence of fear. Such a formula, he explains, is common to all traditions, but takes a peculiar shape in 19th century Anglo-Saxon literature. Bioy adds, "Por cierto, hay precursores; citaremos: en el siglo XIV, al infante Don Juan Manuel; en el siglo XVI, a Rabelais; en el XVII a Quevedo; en el XVIII, a De Foe y a Horace Walpole; ya en el XIX, a Hoffmann" (7). A cautionary footnote accompanies Walpole: "*The Castle of Otranto* debe ser considerado antecesor de la pérfida raza de castillos teutónicos, abandonados a una decrepitud en telarañas, en tormentas, en cadenas, en mal gusto" (7). Walpole, who Bioy needs to acknowledge once the prologue dives into ghosts and fears, is initially treated as a predecessor, but immediately becomes an unwelcome relation. His famous novel brings to mind elements that - Bioy suggests - belong to the early days of the genre, but are somehow incompatible with the notion of the *fantástico* that the *Antología* wants to present. As a result, Walpole is relegated to a footnote and subsequently expelled from the text.

This problem resurfaces later, when Bioy elaborates on the relationship between *fantástico* and supernatural:

Los primeros argumentos eran simples - por ejemplo: consignaban el mero hecho de la aparición de un fantasma - y los autores procuraban crear un ambiente propicio al miedo. Crear un ambiente, una "atmósfera", todavía es ocupación de muchos escritores. Una persiana que se golpea, la lluvia, una frase que vuelve, o, más abstractamente, memoria y paciencia para volver a escribir, cada tantas líneas, esos *leitmotive*, crean la más sofocante de las atmósferas. Algunos maestros del género no han desdeñado, sin embargo, esos recursos. Exclamaciones como ¡Horror! ¡Espanto! ¡Cuál no sería mi sorpresa!, abundan en Maupassant. (8)

The tone of Bioy's assessment creates false expectations. After reading that the simplistic plots, dreary settings, affected rhetoric, and overused horror props of the early days have become ineffective, the reader expects to learn how the *fantástico* overcomes these problems. Instead of proposing an alternative, Bioy refers to another variation of the genre, something he calls "tendencia realista en la literatura fantástica" (9). Improving the practice of the *fantástico*, he claims, later writers discovered that introducing a single incredible event into a perfectly credible universe had a stronger impact on the reader. But this does not grant success. From Bioy's perspective, this strategy can be easily exhausted: readers know too well that the normal anticipates the abnormal and that serenity announces catastrophes (8-9).

Slowly, the contours of a definition emerge: Bioy suggests that the *fantástico*, whatever it may be, produces some kind of fear or surprise by means of the supernatural (9). Unfortunately, his attempt to formulate a definition ends there. The discussion about surprise gives way to two examples that contradict the hesitant characterization sketched above. W. W. Jacob's "La pata de mono" and Max Beerbohm's "Enoch Soames," Bioy claims, offer little room for surprise, but constitute superb examples of the *fantástico*. Contradictions like this make it very difficult to extract a coherent definition from Bioy's prologue. In the end, every piece of information that could be used toward a characterization of the *fantástico* is complicated by some kind of objection or warning. The *fantástico*, Bioy suggests, requires some manifestation of the supernatural, but the supernatural is often simplistic - especially when presented through the formulaic images and moldy rhetorical conventions of Walpole and Maupassant.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the *fantástico* should surprise the reader, but interpolating an incredible event in a credible world does not work anymore. Furthermore, some of the best examples of the *fantástico* discard surprise beforehand.

If the *Antología* gathers, as Bioy asserts, "los textos de la literatura fantástica que nos parecen mejores" some questions need clarification: how are the pieces presented in the *Antología* superior? What are they superior to? How do they overcome the flaws that Bioy identifies? Because the prologue does not deliver the definition it promises, we can only answer these questions resorting to the examples suggested in the collection. In the *Antología*, each paradigmatic manifestation of the *fantástico* is measured against more or less concrete counterexamples - unskillful executions that the editors implicitly or explicitly reject. Bioy's contradictory judgment of Poe makes this procedure evident: "Poe - no, por cierto, en el límpido M. Valdemar - aprovecha los caserones abandonados, las histerias y las melancolías, los mustios otoños." (8). "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Tell-Tale Heart" are, one could venture, some of the unspoken counter-examples discarded in an effort to move away from the pathetic and sentimental elements found in Poe's fantastic tales (Balderston 221). In other words, Bioy's allusion entails a calculated critique: over-used horror props, stock characters, and gloomy scenarios may be frequent in the *fantástico*, but they also undermine its effectiveness. To purge the genre, Bioy identifies these devices first and dismisses them later, just as he acknowledges and dismisses Poe.

Because of its exemplarity, Bioy's allusion to Poe comprises the operations at work in the *Antología*. The *literatura fantástica* that Bioy rejects, much like the disdained facet of Poe, attempts to shock the reader by introducing the supernatural through predictable devices. Instead of



this failed *literatura fantástica*, the *Antología* presents us with paradigmatic works such as Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" and Santiago Dabove's "Ser polvo." Dabove's tale is particularly relevant to this discussion because it deals with the sensationalist side of Poe in a way that is acceptable for the anthologizers. Despite being attuned to the 1940 project, "Ser polvo" revisits two tales that would not have met the standards of the collection: "How to Write a Blackwood Article" (1838) and "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" (1849). Reading "Ser polvo" in light of a few key ideas presented in these two tales will allow us to review those standards and will help us picture the concrete effects of the otherwise elusive notion of the *fantástico* we have deduced so far.

Dabove's "Ser polvo" is a narrative in which the introduction of the supernatural (harking back to Bioy's definition) is meant to shock us. The tale situates the reader in a credible world in which one single incredible event takes place: the transformation of a man into a plant.<sup>12</sup> The story begins when an unnamed rider suffers a stroke and falls from his horse. Abandoned in a deserted path and semi-paralyzed, the man digs a trench for protection. Therein, the narrator's body is slowly absorbed into the surrounding soil and transformed into a paddle cactus. The story ends when the plant is severed by an axe and the man becomes dust. The transformation can thus be seen as a transitional stage in a journey from life to death to dust. In the end, the experience fulfills the prophecy announced in the title of the tale ("Ser polvo"), thereby hypostatizing the well-known biblical admonition "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:19).

Beyond describing a simple material transformation, "Ser polvo" portrays an unusual shift from the realm of the natural to the supernatural. This movement (which defines many of the pieces compiled in the *Antología*) is already announced in the opening lines of the tale:

¡Inexorable severidad de las circunstancias! Los médicos que me atendían tuvieron que darme ... varias inyecciones de morfina y otras sustancias para poner como un guante suave a la garra con la que habitualmente me torturaba la implacable enfermedad: una atroz neuralgia del trigémino...

Frente mismo a ese cementerio abandonado y polvoriento que me sugería la idea de una doble muerte, la que había albergado y la de él mismo, que se caía y se transformaba en ruinas, ladrillo por ladrillo, terrón por terrón, me ocurrió la desgracia. Frente mismo a esa ruina me tocó la fatalidad lo mismo que a Jacob el ángel de las tinieblas le tocó el muslo y lo derrengó, no pudiendo vencerlo. (149)

The juxtaposition of the illness, the accident, and the biblical story projected against the backdrop of a crumbling graveyard confound

mental disease, spiritual decay, and religious revelation.<sup>13</sup> The result is the creation of a dreadful mood favorable to the manifestation of the supernatural.

Notwithstanding its rhetorical efficacy, "Ser polvo" deals with the supernatural using the same devices that, according to Bioy's prologue, weakened Poe's prose. Dabove opens his tale with an affected interjection, offers the reader a hysteric protagonist suffering from a nerve disorder, and sets the action in a variation on the old houses and ruinous castles that Bioy censures: a graveyard. Disparaged in the prologue to the *Antología*, these devices belong to a literary tradition that Bioy connects to the *fantástico*, but dismisses along with Poe's less accomplished works. Furthermore, these elements turn "Ser polvo" into a formulaic piece and thereby into a perfect example of the sensationalist type of fiction that Poe theorized and mocked in "How to Write a Blackwood Article."

As its title indicates, "How to Write a Blackwood Article" illustrates a procedure and discloses a poetics. The tale explains through Mr. Blackwood - a fictional rendering of the famous editor of *Blackwood's Magazine* - the necessary steps to author one of the sensationalist pieces known as "bizarreries" or "intensities":

The first thing requisite is to get yourself into such a scrape as no one ever got into before. The oven, for instance ... [but] if you can not conveniently tumble out of a balloon, or be swallowed up in an earthquake, or get stuck fast in a chimney, you will have to be contented with simply imagining some similar misadventure. I should prefer however, that you have the actual fact to bear you out. (323)

"The Dead Alive," "The Involuntary Experimentalist," "The Diary of a Late Physician," and other titles accompany the "recipe," illustrating the orientation of these pieces and highlighting their penchant for bizarre experiences and near-death situations. Beyond providing concrete examples, Blackwood's list reveals that these unique accounts are utterly formulaic and repetitive.<sup>14</sup>

Even though the tale ridicules consumers and producers of intensities by exposing repetitions and highlighting common places, "A Blackwood Article" is also an exercise in self-recognition and self-mockery.<sup>15</sup> Poe used the themes and procedures outlined in this piece in several later tales, and his sensationalist aesthetics also influenced works like "Ser polvo."<sup>16</sup> It is even possible to claim that Dabove resorts to Poe's grammar of sensationalist fiction in an attempt to engage with the popular audience that read his tale for the first time in the pages of *Revista Multicolor* in 1933.<sup>17</sup> To entice these urban middle-class readers, Dabove offered more

than a simple supernatural tale. He presented them with a “scrape no one got into before:” the transition from human to vegetable. Leaving this radical novelty aside, “Ser polvo” can be seen as the site of a contradiction. On account of its inclusion in the *Antología*, the tale is simultaneously an exemplar of the *fantástico* and a repetitious sensationalist piece: it is yet another first-person account of a supernatural event, a bizarrerie closely resembling Poe’s “The Colloquy of Monos and Una.”

As it is known, “The Colloquy” features a dialogue in which Monos and Una - two deceased lovers reunited in the grave - recount their death and their transformation into dust. The connection between this tale and “Ser polvo” is thus evident: just like “The Colloquy,” “Ser polvo” uses a posthumous narrator to deliver a first-hand account of an experience that cannot be otherwise narrated. Unlike Poe’s tale, however, “Ser polvo” is presented in the form of a monologue.<sup>18</sup> In other words, not only does “Ser polvo” create an eerie mood through recognizable horror props, settings, and characters, but it also repeats, with some modifications, the formula of “The Colloquy.” In this light, one can hardly say that Dabove’s tale is truly a flawless exercise of *literatura fantástica* capable of shocking the reader. “Ser polvo” constitutes a variation of a well-known tale within the boundaries of the poetics of sensationalism outlined in “A Blackwood Article.” But the affinities between “Ser polvo” and “The Colloquy” run deeper. In both tales, the natural and the supernatural mix and confound in a similar way, always through the enigmatic posthumous speech.

“The Colloquy” offers, for instance, a detailed account on the way in which death changed Monos’s emotions and perceptions, confounding his senses and alienating him from his body. And yet, he is able to see: “All objects within the range of the visual hemisphere were seen with more or less distinctiveness; the rays which fell upon the external retina, or into the corner of the eye, producing a more vivid effect than those which struck the front or anterior surface” (337). The protagonist’s vision changes literally and metaphorically. As death erodes Monos’s body, it also frees his vision, elevating his speech: “But for the infected world at large I could anticipate no regeneration save in death. That man, as a race, should not become extinct, I saw that he must be ‘born again’” (335). Such meditation is only possible in death. Death raises Monos to a superior position and grants him access to forms of knowledge that exceed limited human intellect and sensibility. A similar process takes place in Dabove’s tale.

The progressive deterioration of the narrator’s body depicted in “Ser polvo” spiritualizes the protagonist and makes his understanding transcendental. Eventually, he realizes that futility and despair are inherent to human existence:

Por mucho que se valore la actividad, el cambio, la traslación humanos, en la mayoría de los casos el hombre se mueve, anda, va y viene en un calabozo filiforme, prolongado. El que tiene por horizonte las cuatro paredes bien sabidas y palpadas no difiere mucho del que recorre las mismas rutas a diario para cumplir tareas siempre iguales ... Todo ese fatigarse no vale lo que el beso mutuo, y ni siquiera pactado, entre el vegetal y el sol. (154)

The narrator's revelation is, in this context, the result of a penetration into the secrets of nature and into the realm of the supernatural. Much like "The Colloquy," though, "Ser polvo" suggests that the exploration of death depends on the decline of the body, a phenomenon that is narrated in a distinctive fashion: "Cosa curiosa: el cuerpo está atacado por las fuerzas roedoras de la vida y es un amasijo donde ningún anatomista distinguiría más que barro, galerías y trabajos prolijos de insectos que instalan su casa y, sin embargo, el cerebro conserva su inteligencia" (151).

Death, the process that both "Ser polvo" and "The Colloquy" narrate, has a natural and a supernatural dimension that resonate deeply in the posthumous speech. Whereas the supernatural component of both tales is presented emulating the ascending language of the mystical experience, the prophecy, and the revelation, the natural element of corporeal destruction is delivered through a rhetoric that mimics the detached language of certain technical reports.

Taking into consideration that the technical language displayed in both tales verifies the firmness of a preexisting natural world - a credible world, Bioy would say - which is disrupted by an incredible event, both tales can arguably be classified as conspicuous examples of the *fantástico*. Moreover, such characterization would easily conform to the most accepted definitions of the genre. As Cynthia Duncan asserts, most critics would agree that the fantastic "incorporates something into the narrative that may strike readers as supernatural or otherworldly, inexplicable or impossible, something that unsettles readers and makes them hesitate or doubt the nature of what they are reading" (2). However accurate it may be, this interpretation depends on distinctions - credible/incredible, possible/impossible, natural/supernatural - that Bioy refuses to clarify. From the perspective of the *Antología*, "Ser polvo" and "The Colloquy" can be taken either as tales that report a fantastic occurrence or as narratives that record and explain the supernatural, reducing it to the natural. This double interpretation is crucial because, according to Bioy's characterization, excessive reliance on the supernatural is as detrimental to the *fantástico* as excessive observance of natural explanations: "Esta posibilidad de explicaciones naturales puede ser un acierto, una

complejidad mayor; generalmente es una debilidad, una escapatoria del autor, que no ha sabido proponer con verosimilitud lo fantástico" (Bioy 13).

In sum, the sentient corpses featured in these tales open the door to the *fantástico*. They blur the distinctions that separate the natural from the supernatural, unsettling the reader and confronting him with the unknown. However, "Ser polvo" and "The Colloquy" also yield to a compulsion to rationalize the inexplicable. These tales approach the supernatural in a calculated manner, deploying some kind of technical language around it to produce knowledge. The knowledge they generate, which is concerned with abnormal situations and marginal experiences, has a particular use: it allows readers to imagine and rationalize conditions that are otherwise unthinkable.<sup>19</sup> Each interpretation has different implications. Whereas the former speaks of the hesitation, restlessness, and instability usually attributed to the *fantástico*, the latter is antagonistic to the effect of surprise that, according to Bioy, defines the genre.

To argue that "Ser polvo" belongs to the *fantástico* because it uses something inexplicable or supernatural to trigger surprise or fear is problematic. In the context of the *Antología*, the formula can easily be manipulated. Abiding by Bioy's prologue, for instance, one could object that "Ser polvo" relies excessively on the supernatural and falls into most of the commonplaces of Poe's horror tales. Similarly, one could claim that the tale reduces the supernatural to the natural, over-explaining it. Notwithstanding these objections, the editors of the *Antología* saw "Ser polvo" as a sophisticated expression of the *fantástico*: for the anthologizers, the tale was superior to some works by Poe and too many other bizarreries dealing with similar topics. What makes "Ser polvo" a paramount manifestation of the *fantástico* is something subtle that cannot be comprised in a definition: its quality. To bring this issue to the forefront, we may contrast Dabove's tale with a similar narrative, Horacio Quiroga's "Más allá."

"Más allá," which predates "Ser polvo" by eight years, depicts the encounter of two dead lovers in the afterlife, thus reproducing the basic narrative situation presented in "The Colloquy." Unlike Poe's tale, however, "Más allá" does not begin in the grave. Quiroga opens his tale with the suicide of the unnamed narrator and her lover and describes their encounter in the afterlife. The rest of the story revolves around the evolution of the love affair, its deterioration, and the return of the couple to the grave. Quiroga's tale therefore ends at the same point where Poe's story begins. In the closing lines of "Más allá," the lovers return to the

sepulchre where their corpses rest together to begin their journey toward dust.<sup>20</sup>

To put it succinctly, Quiroga - whom John Englekirk described as “one of the most successful adherents to the Poesque genre of the short story” (341) - writes a supernatural tale, using the aesthetics of Poe’s bizarreries.<sup>21</sup> Not only does he offer a first-person account of an extreme situation and deploys supernatural beings to startle the reader (like the “The Colloquy” and “Ser polvo”), but he also arrives through Poe to the formula described in Bioy’s prologue and executed in Dabove’s tale: Quiroga inserts a single supernatural event in a perfectly natural world. To reinforce this effect, he also alludes to a séance. The image of a plausible world in “Más allá” is conveyed through three markers inserted at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the tale: “dijo la voz,” “prosiguió la voz,” and “concluyó la voz.”

Beyond verifying the existence of a natural world, the séance foregrounds a question that “Ser polvo” and “The Colloquy” can afford to conceal: how do we access the posthumous experiences narrated in these tales? When Quiroga published “Más allá” in the newspaper *La Nación* in 1925, he needed an answer to this question. He was facing readers who were not necessarily familiar with the aesthetics of Poe’s bizarreries and who would not have accepted posthumous voices and ghostly revelations without hesitation. In other words, Quiroga makes the source of his tale explicit to seduce an audience interested in the supernatural but accustomed to the sensationalism and factualism of journalistic writing. The séance allows him to turn “Más allá” into a familiar exploration of the supernatural, providing readers with a semblance of objectivity. In fact, in Argentina in the 1920s, séances were often perceived as scientific endeavours. They were reported in newspaper articles, discussed in academic circles, and regulated by organizations such as the *Confederación Espiritista Argentina*.<sup>22</sup>

While “Más allá” deals with the supernatural in a conventional and familiar manner, the tale also recasts the encounter of the posthumous lovers from “The Colloquy” under a distinctive melodramatic light:

Ignoro lo que nos espera allá. Pero si nuestro amor fue un día capaz de elevarse sobre nuestros cuerpos envenenados, y logró vivir tres meses en la alucinación de un idilio, tal vez ellos, urna primitiva y esencial de ese amor, hayan resistido a las contingencias vulgares y nos aguarden.

De pie sobre la lápida, Luis y yo nos miramos larga y libremente ya. Sus brazos ciñen mi cintura, su boca busca mi boca, y yo le entrego la mía con una pasión tal que me desvanezco. (715)

In the last paragraphs of his tale, Quiroga resorts to everything the *Antología* derides: consuming passions that survive death, speaking ghosts, ill-fated lovers, and poisoned corpses are described in the most affected language and collapse into the conventional space of the grave.

As mentioned earlier, multiple similarities connect “Más allá” and “Ser polvo.” Both tales deploy posthumous voices to recount death and describe the afterlife. Both tales also use religious and technical languages and take place in similar settings. Furthermore, both tales offer variations of Poe’s “The Colloquy” and deal with the sensationalist aesthetic theorized in “A Blackwood Article.” Notwithstanding these and other resemblances, “Ser polvo” and “Más allá” are also very different. Each piece embodies a distinctive dimension of Poe, and the authors’ thematic and stylistic choices lead to a substantial difference in quality.

While the testimonies featured in “Más allá” and “Ser polvo” document the irruption of the supernatural into the natural world, from the perspective of the *Antología*, Quiroga’s use of the séance makes such irruption too evident, diluting the necessary surprise. Similarly, the settings in which “Ser polvo” and “Más allá” take place may be alike, but Dabove’s rendering is much more accomplished. He supplies his graveyard with a subsidiary death that, paradoxically, brings it back to life: “[un] cementerio abandonado y polvoriento que me sugería la idea una muerte doble, la que había albergado y la de él mismo, que se caía y se transformaba en ruinas, ladrillo por ladrillo, terrón por terrón” (149). Dabove also manages to renovate the old jarring interjections that Quiroga cannot avoid - “¡Horror! ¡Espanto! ¡Cuál no sería mi sorpresa!” - rendering them concise and eloquent: “¡Inexorable severidad de las circunstancias!” (149).

Even though “Más allá” and “Ser polvo” exhibit most of the characteristics of the *fantástico*, Quiroga’s tale combines those elements in a way that goes against the project of the *Antología*. This is not to say that Quiroga was rightfully excluded from the collection or that “Más allá” does not belong to the *fantástico*. Just as it is important to recognize that Quiroga’s adaptation of Poe’s rhetoric, themes, and settings turned his tale into an unsophisticated example of the *fantástico*, it is necessary to acknowledge that reading “Más allá” from the perspective of the *Antología* obscures its peculiar stylistic features and distorts its historical specificity. It also hides the specific motivations behind the 1940 collection.

When Quiroga published “Más allá” in 1925, he was not trying to write *literatura fantástica*. He was striving to find a middle ground between his literary interests and the interests of an audience largely composed of female middle-class periodical readers (Rocca 122-23). These readers, one

can imagine, did not care about Quiroga's project. They were interested in the deranged passions and emotions, persecuted innocence, and impossible marriages that the tale delivers in the familiar language of the *roman-feuilleton*, the *melodrama*, and the sensationalist novel.<sup>23</sup> In other words, "Más allá" can be seen as an attempt to harmonize certain aspects of Poe's aesthetics with the conventions of Quiroga's trade. The result is a tale that, in spite of its strong melodramatic chords, challenges the expectations of the average periodical reader. Instead of closing with eternal happiness in the afterlife, "Más allá" abruptly turns to "The Colloquy" and leans toward the supernatural. This shift thwarts the love story and confronts the reader with a somber conclusion. In "Más allá," like in "The Colloquy," love survives death, but the unity the lovers cherish is only attained in the dark void of the grave.

Unfortunately for Quiroga, periodical readers were likely to overlook his aesthetic pursuits and his dialogue with Poe. To make things worse, the tale appeared in the midst of the revisionary campaign led by *avant-garde* publications such as *Martín Fierro* (1924-1927) and *Proa* (1922-1926). To the new generation of writers, Quiroga was an old, consecrated author whose sensationalist work was meant to satisfy the spurious taste of paying customers (Sarlo, "Vanguardia" 228-29).<sup>24</sup> Aware of this criticism, Quiroga started commenting on the literary profession during the 1920s. "El manual del perfecto cuentista" (1925), "Los trucos del perfecto cuentista" (1925), "Decálogo del perfecto cuentista" (1927), "La retórica del cuento" (1928), among other essays, belong to this "reflexive" cycle. Something similar happens with "Ante el tribunal" (1930), where Quiroga explicitly addresses the attacks by the new generation:

Cada veinticinco o treinta años el arte sufre un choque revolucionario que la literatura ... siente más rudamente que sus colegas ... Hacia atrás, desde el instante en que se habla, no existe sino una falange anónima de hombres que por error se consideraron poetas. Son los viejos. Frente a ella, viva y coleante, se alza la falange, también anónima, pero poseedora en conjunto y en cada uno de sus individuos, de la única verdad artística. Son los jóvenes, los que han encontrado por fin en este mentido mundo literario el secreto de escribir bien. (414)

In a final attempt to keep up with the new literary projects, Quiroga re-edited "Más allá" in 1935 as part of a collection of supernatural tales that anticipates the thematic preferences of the *Antología*. By 1935, however, writing and reading practices had changed and Quiroga's book was received with indifference.<sup>25</sup> Everything that might have made "Más allá" an example of the *fantástico* - from the use of the supernatural to Poe's



manifest influence - distanced the tale from the emergent genre. This was later supported by Quiroga's exclusion from the *Antología*.

The *Antología* was, according to Pablo Brescia and Javier de Navascués, a projection of the endeavours of the *avant-garde*, and a call for renovation:

A diferencia de tantas otras selecciones, la de Borges, Bioy y Ocampo no busca acomodarse a un modelo prefijado. Por el contrario, como las compilaciones vanguardistas de las décadas anteriores, asume la superioridad de una estética sobre otra (la fantasía por encima del realismo) y discute con sus ausencias la autenticidad del canon anterior. (De Navascués 122-23)

If we understand the collection as a corrective project and as a belated *avant-garde* manifesto, the overall enterprise acquires a slightly different meaning.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond collecting literary pieces - with all the limitations inherent to such an exercise - the *Antología* outlined a canon of *literatura fantástica* in Spanish and enlisted new writers such as Julio Cortázar, Manuel Peyrou, and José Bianco in the project. Dabove occupied an exceptional position among these recruits. In fact, Borges's prologues to Bioy's *La invención de Morel* (1940) and to Dabove's *La muerte y su traje* (1961) describe the author of "Ser polvo" as an accomplished practitioner of the *fantástico* (*La invención* 90; *La muerte* 9).<sup>27</sup> But the problem persists: works like Dabove's may be summoned to illustrate the ideal high quality, sophistication, and refinement of the *fantástico*, but they do not help to theorize them. To bypass the issue, Bioy repeats Borges's strategy. His prologue outlines a minimal and ambiguous definition of the genre and illustrates it extensively, proposing examples and counter-examples while carefully pruning omissions. In the end, Bioy's definition - which vaguely links the *fantástico* with some manifestation of the supernatural, some notion of reality, and a certain will to surprise - is essentially instrumental and cannot be removed from its context. This definition needs not be exhaustive or precise, but only useful: it must allow the editors of the *Antología* to expel some undignified forerunners from the history of the genre (Walpole, Hoffmann, Le Fanu, etc.), to ignore some uncomfortable figures (Holmberg, Quiroga, Darío, etc.), and to justify some of their choices.

This revelation mandates a re-evaluation of the affinities between "Más allá" and "Ser polvo." As variations of Poe's "The Colloquy" and as inheritors of Poe's bizarreries, both tales revisit the same horrors, resort to a similar rhetoric, and feature similar characters and settings. In both tales, the supernatural also introduces elevated emotions, superior

knowledge, and unparalleled freedom. These characteristics also link both tales with the genre that the *Antología* calls *fantástico*. Despite these similarities, “Más allá” is not an appropriate example of the *fantástico*, for it lacks the attributes that Bioy praises in Borges, Beerbohm, or Kafka: “La ‘metódica imaginación’, el ‘estilo incoloro’, la ausencia pudorosa de elementos patéticos o sentimentales o ‘la invención elegante’” (De Navascués 124). What separates “Más allá” from “Ser polvo” is, in sum, its quality. Quiroga’s tale anticipates “Ser polvo,” but lacks the refinements attributed to Dabove’s tale.

From our current perspective, “Más allá” and “Ser polvo” may seem fantastic tales, but their quality turns them, from the perspective of the *Antología*, into very different products. For the anthologizers, “Más allá” does not represent the *fantástico* at all. It neither illustrates what the genre is in 1940 nor what it will become in the future. Instead, the tale embodies everything the anthologizers wish to leave behind. The Uruguayan’s prose gives away the artifice of the *fantástico*, returns to its undignified origins, and casts a glaring light on its shortcomings. The importance of the *Antología* thus goes beyond the popularization of a genre. The collection opens a decade in which - according to Donald Shaw - Spanish American literature experiences a qualitative leap and pairs a selected group of Spanish American writers with figures like Poe, Kafka, and Chesterton (19-20). Neither Quiroga nor “Más allá” fit well in such project.

Because the *Antología* is anxiously trying to prove that Spanish American writers can produce high-quality *literatura fantástica* capable of outshining their most conspicuous forerunners, Quiroga and his tales (“Más allá” and others) become an unrelenting problem. As a result, the anthologizers cannot simply expel Quiroga from the *Antología*; they need to “vanish” him. Even in 1977, Borges refused to see Quiroga as a real writer, arguing that he was simply “una superstición uruguaya,” and clarifying that “la invención de sus cuentos es mala, la emoción nula y la ejecución de una incomparable torpeza” (qtd. in Lafforgue xxxvii). Despite Borges’s intentions, Quiroga was never successfully “vanished.” He became a posthumous presence haunting the margins of the *Antología*, and threatening the prestige the collection claimed for the *fantástico*.

*South Dakota State University*

## NOTES

- 1 Works written between 1940 and 1965 by these and other four Spanish American authors were added to the second edition of the *Antología*. Cortázar became one of the most influential among these new contributors. See, for example, Alazraki's *En busca del unicornio: Los cuentos de Julio Cortázar*, Goloboff's *Julio Cortázar y el relato fantástico*, Martínez's *Julio Cortázar: Lo fantástico como provocación*, and Rodríguez-Luis's *The Contemporary Praxis of the Fantastic: Borges and Cortázar*.
- 2 See De Mora's "'Huitzilopxtli': Un cuento fantástico de Darío," Monet-Viera's "*Strange Forces*: Occultism and the Inauguration of the Fantastic Genre in Latin America," and Rodríguez González's "La fotografía y el cine como motivo fantástico en tres escritores latinoamericanos: Rubén Darío, Horacio Quiroga y Adolfo Bioy Casares."
- 3 Barrenechea calls attention to Todorov's narrow definition as early as 1972. Belevan incorporates the plastic arts into the discussion. Roas offers a brilliant summary of the discussion (7-14). For a more recent and comprehensive account of the phenomenon see Cynthia Duncan's *Unraveling the Real: The fantastic in Spanish-American Ficciones*.
- 4 The importance of these authors at the time makes their omission particularly striking: Darío was the celebrated founder of Spanish American *modernismo*. Quiroga, widely known as a short fiction author, was also a public figure and briefly held a diplomatic assignment. Holmberg, a renowned naturalist and scientist, worked on a collection (now lost) of tales entitled *Cuentos fantásticos* in 1904. In addition, Quiroga, Holmberg, and Darío shared many interests with Lugones and extensively collaborated with him between the 1880s and the 1920s. In spite of these connections, only Lugones made it into the *Antología*, and only after Borges changed his mind about his work sometime during the 1930s.
- 5 Ceserani and Jackson see the fantastic as a narrative or literary "mode" moving across genres and time periods (Ceserani 11; Jackson 7), and Hume describes fantasy as "any departure from consensus reality" (21). Bessière argues that the fantastic is not a genre, but the manifestation of certain attitudes under a distinctive thematic and formal logic (8). Barrenechea defines fantastic as "un tipo de discurso" ("El género" 77). In a later study Arán calls it a "hipergénero." This debate escapes the purview of my essay. The examples suffice to account for the complexity and instability of terms like "fantastic" and "fantasy."
- 6 Tales of gruesome crimes, inexplicable events, supernatural occurrences, and ill-fated lovers were common in these periodicals. The authors were paid contributors writing for the newly literate masses. Quiroga was one of the few professional writers among these dilettantes, and the new readership was instrumental in his professionalization (Sarlo, "El imperio" 3-7).

- 7 The *Antología* aimed at a public that started to grow during the 1920s. These readers were familiar with the *avant-garde* and were educated in the context of the massive immigration of European intellectuals resulting from the fall of the Second Spanish Republic and the beginning of World War II. Warfare and immigration, which negatively impacted European print culture, contributed to the creation of printing houses throughout Spanish America, and opened spaces to publish local authors and to export their work to other markets (Shaw 17).
- 8 The second edition of the collection also included a post scriptum by Bioy. Some texts from the first edition were removed, and new texts were added. The original organization was also altered: whereas the first edition organized titles by thematic affinities, later editions arranged them alphabetically (Balderston 128).
- 9 Much like Bioy's novel, these are tales in which spectral cinematographic images introduce the *fantástico*. For a more detailed discussion see Carlos Dámaso Martínez's "El cine y la literatura como una conjunción estética."
- 10 Many studies simply allude to Quiroga as practitioner or forerunner of the *fantástico*. There are, however, some works that specifically address the issue. See Olea Franco's "Horacio Quiroga y el cuento fantástico," Poulet's "Texto fantástico e ideología: La intertextualidad: De Quiroga a Cortázar," and Duncan's section on Quiroga, *modernismo*, and the fantastic (65-72). Cortázar also spoke of Quiroga as a writer of fantastic tales (103).
- 11 The *Antología* includes Maupassant's "¿Quién sabe?." The tale begins with those affected exclamations that Bioy derides: "¡Dios mío! ¡Dios mío! ¡Escribiré al fin lo que me ha pasado? ¿Podré? ¿Seré capaz? ¡Es tan extraño, tan inexplicable, tan incomprensible!" (Maupassant 270).
- 12 Bioy classifies "Ser polvo" as a tale "con metamorfosis" comparing it to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Ocampo's "Sábanas de tierra," and David Garnett's *Lady into Fox* (12).
- 13 The biblical story is "Jacob Wrestling with the Angel" (*Genesis* 32:22-32).
- 14 Passages from Samuel Warren's *The Diary of a Late Physician* appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1830; "The Dead Alive" was published in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1834; and "The Involuntary Experimentalist" was printed in *Blackwood's* in 1837. The inconsistencies of the list do not undermine Poe's criticism. *Blackwood's Magazine* is not the exclusive target of "A Blackwood Article." The tale mocks a literary style common to many periodical publications of which *Blackwood's* constitutes only an example.
- 15 For a discussion on the metaliterary aspects of Poe's tale, see Maria Filipa Palma dos Reis's "A reading of 'How to Write a Blackwood Article' as an Exercise in Irony, Authorial Self-Consciousness and Tuition for Creative Writers."

- 16 One of the most bizarre aspects of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” for instance, is a body stuck in a chimney. Similarly, the excitement of the adventures depicted in “Mellonta Tauta” and “The Balloon Hoax” comes from the constant risk of falling out of the balloon or crashing it.
- 17 “Ser polvo” appeared in *Revista Multicolor* on December 23, 1933. The magazine, co-edited by Borges at the time, was the Saturday supplement of the sensationalist newspaper *Crítica*.
- 18 Since the grave turns the lovers into dust and mixes them, Poe’s tale can also be read as a monologue. The etymology of the names Monos (from the Greek *μόνος*) and Una (from the Latin *unic-us*) verifies this communion and suggests that the protagonists are already one.
- 19 Dale Townshend attributes this same function to Gothic fiction: “[Gothic] participates in the discursive construction of the unthought in two other ways: through the presentation of dreams in the fiction, and through the construction of a narrative unthought or Other, a concealed textual repository of important narrative enigmas, mysteries, and truths” (32-33).
- 20 In “Poe en Quiroga,” Margo Glantz argues somewhat mistakenly that “Más allá” resembles Poe’s “Morella,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “Berenice” in its portrayal of consuming passions and its dramatization of the survival of love beyond death. The endurance of love is central to “Más allá,” but the tale does not deal with lovers who return from the grave. The tale is about lovers meeting again in the afterlife, like “The Colloquy.”
- 21 Alluding to Poe’s influence on Quiroga’s work, Abelardo Castillo writes: “Quiroga hizo antes que nadie, entre nosotros, lo que Poe haría en Estados Unidos: sistematizó el relato breve y lo elevó en la práctica a la categoría de género literario” (xxi).
- 22 Sarlo shows that there was a growing concern with séances and other forms of spiritism in the 1920s: “*Crítica* organiza campañas de difusión o de denuncia del curanderismo o la falsa videncia, que coexisten con presentaciones respetuosas del espiritismo y la parapsicología” (*La imaginación* 70). *The Confederación Espiritista Argentina* was founded in 1900 and many of its members were part of the Argentinean social and intellectual elite (Di Risio 100-01).
- 23 *Feuilletons* are serialized novels frequently published in newspapers. Melodramas usually feature emotionally exaggerated conflicts in which villains threaten purity and maidenhood. Sarlo demonstrates that these literary forms became extremely popular in Argentina and contributed to the professionalization of writers like Quiroga (“El imperio” 3-5). Alicia Torres expands on this topic alluding to what she calls Quiroga’s “historias de amor llorado” (115-16).
- 24 *Martín Fierro* published a faux epitaph for Quiroga in 1927: “Escribió cuentos dramáticos/Sumamente dolorosos/Como los quistes hidáticos ... La selva puso

- a sus pies/Hasta que un autor inglés/(Kipling) le puso al revés/Los puntos sobre las fes" (qtd. in Rodríguez Monegal 220-21).
- 25 The book *Más allá* did not receive good reviews in Argentina. It had a better reception in Uruguay, perhaps due to the favorable prologue written by the renowned critic Alberto Zum Felde. Curiously, *Más allá* was the only book for which Quiroga earned a literary prize. It was awarded in 1936 by the *Ministerio de Instrucción Pública* de Uruguay.
- 26 According to Brescia the anthology was "a soft manifesto for the fantastic in Latin America" (381).
- 27 In both prologues Borges refers to Dabové's works as "obras de imaginación razonada," which is one of the many ways in which he alludes to the *fantástico* in the prologue to *La invención de Morel*.

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