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Philology Department

DOCTORAL THESIS

**The Narrator's Vocation
in Latin American Short Story
and Novella**

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2010

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CHAPTER PRESENTATION

This work, *The Narrator's Vocation in Latin American Short Story and Novella*, is meant to be an investigation into the vast range of the story's multiple manifestations. As an archetypal literary form that holds a privileged place in narrative theory and displays a poetics valid for the other genres of the epic (novella or novel), the story achieves perennial consecration in the cultural space of Latin America.

The present endeavor finds its justification in the absence of similar studies within the spectrum of Romanian literary criticism (despite the huge number of translations from Latin American literature in the recent years). Thus, this study aims to serve as an x-ray look at the story's evolution in South American literature, as well as at its current state. The foundation is formed by a comprehensive few years of research conducted in the United States, at the generous archive of The University of Georgia Library.

The focus is primarily on the contemporary period, beginning with the middle of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the introductory part underlines the importance of the originary epic series, which have generated an infinity of narrative approaches and were transformed into the most important fabric of Latin American literature (Chapter 1).

Chapter 2 opens the way for an evaluation of the moment when the New World imposes itself on the international literary scene with the emergence of magical realism and the explosion of the novel, a phenomenon prefaced by Borges' "Ficciones." The first section concentrates on the coordinating force imposed by Borges on modern literature. His work, be it poetry, prose, or essays, obsessively returns to the theme of creation, viewed as directly linked to the one of reception. In order to insist on elucidating the mechanisms of the poetics of reception, revealed by the inter- and intra-textuality of

Pierre Menard, author of Quijote, the study traces initially the relation between essay and fiction.

The second section is dedicated to a series of emblematic texts by the established authors of the *Boom* period: Marquez, Vargas Llosa, Cortazar, Fuentes. They are the architects of several canonical landmarks of the modern novel, authors who have repeatedly expressed their creativity under the guise of the short story as well. The commentary on the modalities of diegetic construction (plot, narration, epic history, succession, time, space, narrative voice, points of view, embodiments of the narrator or the implied reader) in the case of several stories less-known to the Romanian audience, strives to outline the relevance of this literary form in the context of the larger and unified creation belonging to writers such as Marquez and Fuentes, to Varga Llosa (as a “laboratory of creation”), or to Julio Cortazar (as a new rhetoric of the genre).

Chapter 3 follows a few tendencies manifested after the 1960s in direct connection to the establishment of post-modern poetics, with its *Post-Boom* expression in Latin America. The first analyzed text, De donde son los cantantes by Severo Sarduy, comprised out of the linkage of several symbolic narratives, represents the response to the *Boom* era. At the same time, this work serves as a confirmation of the search for new formulas in regard to the genre of the novel. The quest is based on structuralist and post-structuralist theories about language, situated by Sarduy in the Latin American and neo-baroque context. The next examples are taken from Argentinian short-story writers (Giardinelli, Piglia, Saer) and a Mexican counterpart (Arreola). The analysis is conducted to demonstrate the heterogenous character of the postmodern short story, as well as the variety of styles and the fusion of genres and literary species.

A special segment is dedicated to fiction by female Latin American writers and to the conditions that led to their increasing prominence. The research starts with the Stories of Eva Luna by Isabel Allende. These creations are discussed and analyzed from the perspective of Allende's entire body of work and of Eva Luna, the author's preceding novel, which illuminates and reinstates the ritual of classic serial storytelling. Thus, a new major name gains notoriety, along with a new literary formula: "magical feminism." The other two examples, Luisa Valenzuela and Cristina Peri Rossi, round up the consolidation of a discourse which reveals feminine subjectivity and creates an alternative to phallogocentrism by undermining the pre-established order. The selected short-story volumes, as well as the ideas retrieved from essays, serve to underline a conscience of differentiation, free from all constraints in terms of language and thematic.

The final chapter reinforces the Latin American literary preference for the short-story genre at the start of the 21st century. Among others, this section tracks the conditions that have fostered the genesis and proliferation of a recent form of short stories, the *minicuento*, as well as the effort to approach this sub-genre from a theoretical perspective. Ultimately, the *minicuento* is perceived to be a symbolic expression of the ideological and social re-articulation of contemporary Latin America.

The conclusions of this study define the particularities of South American literary evolution, given the territory's consolidation through contrast and as an answer to European tendencies. Significant energy is spent on evaluating the extraordinary moment when epic creation definitively imposes this part of the world on the universal conscience.

All translations into Romanian of original texts found at the bottom of pages, which have not been previously translated, belong to the author of the study.

SUMMARY

Throughout history, this complex territory full of contradictions, where the most varied aspects of a paradoxical reality are entwined, has impregnated its inhabitants with the need to define their essential identity. While 20th century Western thought utilized, often abusively, the scientific, empirical approach to reality (to the detriment of the analogue, sapient approach) and thus enhanced the transfer of the sacred realm of epiphany toward the subconscious and its consolidation inside non-actualized mythological forms, the fictional worlds proposed by the works of Latin American writers reactivate precisely those magic-mythic ways of knowledge and launch the possibility of recuperating the shattered Whole.

The series of historical coincidences that has existed serves to explain, in part, the blissful cohabitation of Reason and Myth on this territory. The sacred, magical element retrieved within the Indo-Afro-Hispanic roots through a process of “transculturación narrativa,” as described by Angel Rama is joined by the realist element inherited from the Renaissance tradition, which flourished in the 17th century. This latter inheritance permits the awareness of these defining features that belong to the cultural phenomenon known as *mestizaje*.

The roots of the South American “cuento” blend with the ones of mythology and are to be found in the pre-Columbus cultures: the Maya narrative (*tzolkan*), the Inca storytelling (*huahuaricuni*), and the Aztec oral tradition (*tlatolli*).

While Christianity was still in the very early stages, Central America invented its calendar and its writing, organized its gods in a unique mythology, and created an oral literature to be discovered later on in codices and documents. A thousand years later, when the Spanish arrived, they encountered an elaborate indigenous pantheon which, despite the constant threat of the Catholic Church, managed to survive in the collective memory along with old narratives. Some of the European newcomers studied the languages of the indigenous populations patiently and passionately, in order to grasp them and to ultimately rewrite in *nahuatl*, *maya*, or the Inca *runa-simi* the millenary tradition of the predecessors.

The Myth of the Five Suns (Los Cincos Soles), Chilam Balam, or the memorable sacred book of the Maya-quiche Indians (Popol Vuh), all develop epic, lyrical, philosophical, and historical themes that are also present in the art of the great European and Asian civilizations: the Greek, the Hebrew, the Scandinavian, or the Hindu. Love, death, life, the singular character of certain daily acts all open limitless paths of exploration and ultimately benefit literature.

The absence of written texts among the Incas solidifies their oral tradition, as the spoken narrative continues to this day to be the most cherished by the members of this collectivity. Thus, it is not surprising that the raconteur of Llosa's El Hablador roamed from tribe to tribe, instituting in each case a ceremonial of storytelling. At the same time, Márquez confesses that he writes "using the oral storytelling techniques of his grandmother..

Men of this space embrace the spoken word; they love stories, communicate, recreate, or invent them. As parts of this cycle, tales gain more color and power within

enriched versions. Initially recorded by Spanish, *mestizos*, or Indian chronicles – such as Garcilaso de la Vega’s compilations, Comentarios Reales - the legendary material generates infinite narrative modalities, which eventually morph into the fundamental ingredient of Latin American literature.

From the simple adaptation of legends into collections of stories (José María Arguedas), to the much more refined reinterpretation of cosmologies (Miguel Ángel Asturias, Hombres de maíz), or to the presence of African folklore within the narratives of several authors in Cuba (Lydia Cabrera, Cuentos negros), Brazil, or Puerto Rico, a specifically Indo-American modality of expression becomes crystallized. Beginning with the 20th century, Latin America starts to express its universe by using the revealing instrument of its magical reality.

Concepts like *magic realism*, *syncretism*, *transculturalization*, or *hybridization*, categories such as the *myth* (Asturias) or the *archetype* (Carpentier), they all shape a discourse of *differentiation*. As early as 1930, Andres Bello’s pronouncements underline the desire for cultural emancipation based on rejecting “cultured” Europe in favor of a “primitive” America. While at the outset such differentiation (*nativismo*, *negrismo*, *indigenismo*, *mundonovismo* – the New World regionalism) belongs to the “wonderment of the place,” soon after it is labeled as provincial by the cosmopolitans of the avangarde movement. Ultimately, it is magic realism that reestablishes the importance of this differentiation and imposes it globally, within the process of perfecting the European tradition.

Consequently, Latin America becomes the focal point of the 60s, during the so-called “*Boom*”, characterized by the explosion of the novel (Fuentes, Llosa, Cortázar,

Márquez, Carpentier, Asturias, etc.) and by such essential works as Borges' Ficciones (1944), Cortázar's Bestiario (1951), or Juan Rulfo's El llano en llamas (1953). The novels belonging to this period seem to respond to the need for "difference," not as an escape to an exotic space, but as an alternative vision often entitled "magic realism."

The aspiration toward the total novel flourishes along with the new fictional universes proposed by the creations of this moment, while the contract-like bond between writer and reader becomes a major preoccupation. Fuentes' La Muerte de Artemio Cruz (1962), Cortázar's Rayuela (1963), Llosa's La Casa Verde (1965), and most importantly Cien Años de Soledad (1967) by Márquez are classic landmarks of the modern novel. It is critical to stress that all of these authors also wrote short stories: Fuentes as early as 1950; Llosa building "a veritable laboratory of creation" in Los Jefes (1959), a short story collection that preceded his novels, and also using his fiction, essays, or interviews to elucidate the mechanisms of prose writing and the functions of storytelling; Cortázar, whose stories emphasize a new rhetoric of the genre, outlined obsessively in his non-fiction writings; Márquez, with his Macondo ("Latin America's microcosm"), the place inaugurated yet unnamed in some of the author's earliest short-length prose, a location that serves to underline the unity of his entire creation.

The "*Boom*" phenomenon initially brings forth a group of male writers, yet it coincides with an international awakening of interest for women's voices. Should the reader approach the complexity of the Latin American space through the writings of the authors mentioned above, he or she would also grasp feminism's potential for individual or collective acts upon reading the books of Isabel Allende. These volumes do not shine solely due to their humanist and militant tone, but mostly because of an extraordinary

storytelling gift and the capacity to build an ample narrative that relates to current or past historical moments and constructs individual figures of the utmost authenticity.

While Borges perfects a metaphysical fictional style defined by a series of hallucinating visions that trace the absurd in the human fate, while Cortázar embraces a surrealist realm which holds a precarious equilibrium between reason and the subconscious, Allende's stories are anchored primarily in social and political realities. Cuentos de Eva Luna display not only a writer's alter-ego. They also justify their author's fame as "Latin America's Secherezade."

The Hispanic continent's tradition of discourse has always related the literary "Voice" to the RHAPSOD-POET, owner of the power of the Word, the individual with the ability to transmit ancestral stories, awaken hidden desires, and speak in the name of the dispossessed.

The last decades of the 20th century brought a radical change in this sense, as a powerful group of feminine writers consolidates. These authors proceed to investigate and reinterpret events such as the Mexican Revolution, the ideals of Law and Order that sustain the institutions of authority, and the restrictive patriarchal social conventions of their societies.

The writers' voices opt for adopting the marginal positions of the oppressed. The desire to formulate a Latin American theory that accurately reflects women's subordinate condition in the private and public sphere, and foremost, the continent's cultural diversity, becomes more evident. Within this context, the writings of Elena Poniatowska and Luisa Valenzuela are representative in terms of independent criticism. Poniatowska's strategy is to use intertextuality in order to offer an alternative to the official discourse

and to synthesize the voice of the oppressed. Valenzuela believes in the existence of a distinctly feminine form of expression, inadequately revealed and previously marginalized. Hers and Poniatowska's elaborated poetics regarding the production of language (viewing language as the result of the conflict against the dominant force of patriarchal organization) are ultimately complemented by Cristina Peri Rossi. In this case, Rossi deliberately adopts a masculine narrative voice, striving to provoke the reader and to undermine gender prejudices.

Thus, the mid 70s mark a turning point in South American literature. A new generation, labeled "*Post-Boom*," and viewed as an extension of a tendency that had existed as early as the outset of the *Boom*, starts to define itself to a certain extent in terms of what it rejects. As mentioned, this trend had manifested itself before, was obscured and finally regained.

The shifting from the observation of reality to the creation of it, from *mimesis* to myth, typical to the *Boom* phenomenon, ceases to be a prominent trait. At the same time, the prose of probing and interrogation gives way to the so-called deliteraturization ("*desliteraturización*") of the novel, defined by less sophisticated narratives that facilitate the reader's identification with the events. The text is not as demanding anymore since its delivery is non-symbolic, with a familiar setting and obvious references to the popular culture of the moment. This new type of literature is primarily characterized by accessibility. There is renewed trust in the reader's ability to observe and picture daily reality, as well as belief in the referential power of the language.

Increasingly, critical studies tend to emphasize that the *Post-Boom*, in some of its embodiments, can be considered a "local" (South American) form of postmodernism.

Although postmodern theoreticians devote little attention to the study of the short story as a form, largely due to the fact that they do not operate with distinctions between genres and categories, their stipulations can also apply to this shorter-length literary type of expression. The postmodern short story is complex in form and content, featuring a variety of styles that includes parody, the introspective fiction, the grotesque, or fantasy.

The establishment of an unconventional manner of writing (the neo-baroque of Severo Sarduy in De donde sont los cantantes), the elimination of the narrative element, or the expressive condensation that connects it in larger measures to the lyrical (the concept of “pure story” by Juan Jose Saer), determines literary criticism to reconsider traditional categories that serve to identify the short-story genre and even to elaborate new strategies of its interpretation.

The greatest contribution in this direction is provided by specialized Latin American publications: El Cuento in Mexico, Puro Cuento in Argentina, Zona Franca in Venezuela, Hueso Humero in Peru, or the Cuban Casa de las Américas.

Analyzing various moral, historical, or political problems of the late 20th century, the authors also warn about a crisis of language, which has determined many to experiment with fragmentation or with the austerity of narrative devices, often to the point of excess. The *mini-cuento*, recently defined as a sub-category of the contemporary South American short story, is the expression of a non-conformist attitude toward the orthodox construction of the traditional story. It requires a new type of reader, one capable to deviate from the simple tracking of the fable and from the necessity to have a clearly-defined structure. It is also up to this reader to establish correspondences within the framework of an associative type of discourse that is surprising to a large degree.

The fragmentary nature of contemporary culture leads some of the writers most receptive to this condition to acknowledge the force of narrative as a way to communicate. Consequently, they not only use daily language but, most importantly, the journalistic tone. Therefore, in many instances it is difficult to distinguish between story and chronicle, confession and fiction, or between literature and the demonstrative prose of specialized argumentation.

In their search for new modalities of expression, current postmodern writers and theoreticians investigate epistemologically the validity of the real and the authenticity of linear historical time. Since the plunge into virtual reality, the line dividing the real and the postmodern illusion has become almost invisible. In such a context, the inexhaustible and vast resources of the short story form, a category that Latin America has unceasingly favored, continue to answer the individual's need to define his or her place in the Universe.

ABSTRACT

Latin America defines its essential identity at the intersection of Reason and Myth, where the sacred, magical element retrieved within the Indo-Afro-Hispanic roots is joined by the realist element inherited from the Renaissance tradition.

The roots of the short story blend with the ones of mythology and are found in the pre-Columbus cultures. This legendary material is recorded initially in chronicles or compilations, later adapted into collections of stories, further refined, and ultimately reinterpreted by the works of contemporary writers.

It is magic realism that re-establishes the importance of this discourse of differentiation and imposes it globally, within the process of perfecting the European tradition.

The so-called “*Boom*” period, characterized by the explosion of the novel (Márquez, Llosa, Fuentes) was prepared by several essential short story collections like Borges’ **Ficciones** or Cortázar’s **Bestiario**. Also, all the accomplished novelists of this period wrote short stories and were preoccupied to elucidate the mechanism of prose writing and the function of storytelling.

The “*Boom*” phenomenon coincides with an international awakening of interest for women’s voices, that will consolidate more in the last decades of the 20th century (Isabel Allende, Luisa Valenzuela, Elena Poniatovska).

The “*Post-Boom*” generation is considered to be a “local” representative of postmodernism, and introduces a new type of literature that is primarily characterized by accessibility. The postmodernist short story features a variety of styles: parody, introspection, grotesque, or fantasy, and determines literary criticism to elaborate new strategies of its interpretation.

The “mini-short story,” defined as a sub-category of the contemporary South American short story, becomes the image of a nonconformist attitude toward the orthodox construction of the traditional story.

Keywords

Latin American Short Story/ History and Criticism

Magic Realism

Feminism

“*Boom* and “*Post-Boom*” prose fiction