

Tales in the Time of Novellas

Spanish-American Literature  
The Short Story--Hilary 2017

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Short stories, with their sharp and precise form, maintain a closer link to oral presentation than the gigantesque and labyrinthine structure of novels. The differences are partly technical. It is simply more feasible to memorize and recite a short story; the size limitations of the genre restrict storytellers to recounting incidents that are quickly recognizable to auditors. Short stories are suitable for telling at social occasions such as party gatherings, fireside chats, and lengthy train rides, whereas novels bring to mind the image of a solitary reader, the study bathed in the silence of another world. Their lighter build also allows short stories to serve as impressionistic sketches for novels that are never written or as the germ seed of a towering narrative that overshadows our very perspective on reality. But short stories, and the fate of poetry is also instructive, have begun to adopt the silence of novels. Their presentation in anthologies imposes an equivalence in which short stories mimic chapters of a larger work, even mimic the page count of novellas, if not novels, and requires an editorial voice to give unity to disparate plotlines, images, characters, and conflicts. When short stories are written and not told, it is reasonable to forget that different genres fill different niches. While novels seek to deploy and develop details about imagined landscapes that amount to a parallel universe, short stories rely on immediate context, on the unsaid to give meaning to what is said. The need for context in short stories has survived the transition from spoken word to written page and places new demands on the part of writers to fill in the storyteller's role. In this way, while short stories may indeed appear to be novels without padding, stripped-down to the core, it is more constructive to consider short stories as a distinct literary genre whose hallmark is rapid exposition and frugal expression. For Latin American short stories, in particular, the narratives incorporate folkloric anthropomorphism intertwined with a theory of *le mot juste* to construct a literature out of an oral tradition.

The short story anthology *Cuentos de amor, de locura y de muerte* by Horacio Quiroga consists of fifteen separate works that treat the three titular motifs by telling various episodes of the Southern Cone countryside. Within the anthology, the short story *A La Deriva* blends a man's experience of death with the mythological attributes of the *yararacusú* that poisons him. The narrator announces, "El hombre pisó algo blanduzco, y enseguida sintió la mordedura en el pie" (39). From the opening line, Quiroga develops focused imagery, the tactile contrast between *algo blanduzco* and *la mordedura*, to bring the narration very close to the experience of an unexpected bite. Quiroga achieves this contrast not only through the tactile imagery, but also through the narrative ambiguity of the indefinite pronoun *algo* that seems soft against the definite article *la mordedura*. The narration gives further evidence of painstaking word choice with the

resonance of the abstract noun *El hombre* in the symbolism of *la mordedura en el pie*, whereby the story points to literary tropes of Achilles' heel in Homer's *Iliad*, of the poet's feet in the prologue to Dante's epic and foreshadows the fact that the protagonist's injury will impede him as he sets out for medical attention in the city Tacurú-Pucú. The condensation of meaning in prose form allows the work to succinctly reveal its premises as it develops the main conflict between the protagonist's determination to live and his body's deterioration from the snake poison.

The narrator also gives minute details about the shape of the *yararacusú* bite with the repetition "dos gotitas de sangre [...] las gotitas de sangre [...] Un dolor agudo nacía de los dos puntitos violeta, y comenzaba a invadir todo el pie" (39). The metonymy of blood, associated with both a person's life-force and his or her kinship relations, suggests that the protagonist has experienced a double wound, just as the twin fangs of the *yararacusú* make a double mark on the body of the protagonist. A final attribute of the bite is the lethal speed of the poison's effects. Quiroga illustrates the poison's lethality by subtly juxtaposing the time when the protagonist begins his journey "cinco horas a Tacurú-Pucú" against the time when he dies in his canoe "antes de tres horas estaría en Tacurú-Pucú" (40-41). This detail, spanning eight paragraphs, gives an indirect designation of time, that the protagonist died within two hours of the *yararacusú* bite, by relying on an ellipsis that compactifies the significance of the narrative.

As the story develops, Quiroga intertwines the portrait of the *yararacusú* and the protagonist. His interactions with his wife and his former boss unveil a double wound in his social relationships reminiscent of the twin fangs of the *yararacusú*. When the protagonist stumbles back to his ranch and orders his wife to supply him with *caña* in lieu of water in order to simultaneously quench his thirst and numb his pain, he tastes the alcohol and shouts, "¡Te pedi caña, no agua!", to which *la mujer espantada* replies "¡Pero es caña, Paulino!" (39). The interaction between man and wife, in which the protagonist completely terrorizes the woman over the course of his three requests for *caña*, betrays an underlying mistrust, perhaps aggravated by domestic violence and alcoholism, that unseals wounds in the relationship at the critical moment before death. Just as the *yararacusú* bit the protagonist and died under a machete blow earlier in the narrative, the protagonist himself strikes out before expiry. Quiroga accentuates this aspect of the protagonist's similarity to the *yararacusú* by revealing his name through the woman's panic-stricken cry *Paulino*, an interjection that ironically places the supposed intimacy of matrimony in high relief to the actual suspicion that the husband bears towards the wife.

Likewise, the protagonist worries that upon arriving in Tacurú-Pucú, “Acaso viera también a su ex patrón, mister Dougald, y al recibidor del obraje” (41). Identifying Dougald as the *ex patrón*, Quiroga emphasizes that the protagonist had a past city life, after which the protagonist mysteriously resettled five hours upstream in the countryside and encountered the *yararacusú*. When the protagonist, “pensaba entretanto en el tiempo justo que había pasado sin ver a su ex patrón Dougald. ¿Tres años?”, Quiroga confirms the notion that the protagonist left Tacurú-Pucú in bad blood with his former employer. Thus, the protagonist’s relationship to Dougald resembles a fang wound of the *yararacusú* in much the same way that his relationship to his wife does. An ultimate parallel between the protagonist and the *yararacusú* is Quiroga’s designation of time. The narrator only gives specific time stamps to two events of the story, the first being the period in which the snake poison will take effect, and the second being the protagonist’s interactions with Dougald. The protagonist in fact dies in the middle of a meditation on which day he met Dougald, “¿Viernes? Si, o jueves [...] Un jueves...”, so that Quiroga’s short story becomes a double thread that ostensibly tells of the two hours in which a man dies from a *yararacusú* bite, but also relates a deeper tale about a man’s isolation from society, a man who is *A la deriva*, as a result of poor social relationships. Quiroga is able to present this multi-layered narrative by synthesizing *le mot juste* with the mythological identification of man and animal.

Quiroga’s short story *Yaguaí* carries the folkloric elements of the *cuento* one step further, in the sense that the narrator does not merely associate the protagonist with an animal, but explicitly identifies the main character Yaguaí as a fox-terrier. The narrator begins, “Yaguaí olfateó la piedra –un sólido bloque de mineral de hierro– y dio una cautelosa vuelta en torno”, which implicitly characterizes the protagonist as a dog through the word choice *olfateó la piedra* and *una cautelosa vuelta en torno* that would be highly unusual descriptions for a human (83). Having prepared the revelation that Yaguaí is a fox-terrier, the narrator tacks on the detail at the end of a periodic sentence with a practiced casualness, “Bajo el sol a mediodía de Misiones, el aire vibraba sobre el negro peñasco, fenómeno éste que no seducía al fox-terrier”. The apparent casualness of the narrator serves to compress the exposition of the short story. Quiroga not only relies on pronoun-antecedent agreement to identify the fox-terrier as Yaguaí, but also specifies the setting by using the prepositional phrase *a mediodía de Misiones* instead of devoting the main clause to this detail. In fact, the main clause emphasizes the subject *el aire vibraba*, a vivid visual image of the daytime heat, that foreshadows Yaguaí’s misfit as an English breed in the natural environment of rural Argentina and the basis for his death by a shot from his master

Cooper while scavenging at night. Hand in hand with the narrator's casualness, Quiroga immerses the narrative in the fox-terrier's little world and point of view. When the narrator describes, "El instinto combativo del fox-terrier se manifestó normalmente contra las hojas secas; subió luego a las mariposas y su sombra, y se fijó por fin en las lagartijas", the sequential syntax replicates the manner in which the fox-terrier discovers its surroundings and thereby renders the dog's mindset more accessible (84). The details of miniature objects, ranging from *las hojas* and *su sombra*, to *las mariposas* and *las lagartijas*, also emphasizes the small scale of the fox-terrier over the conventional metric of human beings. Overall, the exposition of the short story features fastidious word choice that summarily integrates the main persona into a non-human form.

The equivalence between fox-terrier and protagonist raises concerns about loyalty and subordination that often arise in the folklore about dogs. Quiroga, for example, introduces the humans of the story with a short dialogue focusing on the usefulness of the fox-terrier to its master. In response to a *peon* who slights the fox-terrier for being little more than a bug-catcher, "El dueño de Yaguaí lo oyó: –Tal vez –repuso–; pero ninguno de los famosos perros de ustedes sería capaz de hacer lo que hace ése [...] Cooper, sin embargo, conocía bien a los perros de monte y su maravillosa aptitud para la caza a la carrera" (84). By first identifying Yaguaí's master as *El dueño*, the narrative trains a spotlight on the relationship between superordinate and subordinate as the main interest of the plotline. Quiroga employs the same technique of pronoun-antecedent agreement that gives the name of *El dueño* as Cooper, a semiotically rich proper noun that in English denotes a barrel or casket craftsman and carries an aural association to the phrase chicken coop. These linguistic facets of the name Cooper foreshadow the outlines of his relationship to the fox-terrier, as the barrel metonymies Yaguaí's state of captivity under the master, the chicken coop is the setting of the fox-terrier's death, and the casket symbolizes the final scene where the master finds and buries the dog's body. The reported dialogue of Cooper and a *peon* also reveals an intricate dynamic that links Yaguaí to his owner. Even though the master defends the fox-terrier against the disparaging remark by the *peon*, Cooper predicates his response with the locutional adverb *Tal vez* that admits the accusation that Yaguaí has the quirk of being a bug-catcher, and the narrator immediately reports at the end of the dialogue that the master is aware of the fox-terrier's inferiority to the other dogs with respect to hunting ability. In this way, Quiroga sets up the short story as a tale about a superordinate's half-hearted defense and partial neglect of a loyal subordinate.

Cooper's relatively careless treatment of Yaguaí initiates a conflict between the folkloric characterization of dogs as loyal animals and the possibility that the fox-terrier would be better off escaping from captivity to the Argentine wilderness. The second and third reported dialogues of the short story echo the master's neglectfulness evident in the first dialogue. During the second dialogue, Cooper exposes Yaguaí to the unnecessary risk of being shot by mistake when he sends the fox-terrier out to follow a deer-trail on a night when "No hay luna" (84), just as, during the third dialogue, Cooper feels the scarcity caused by the drought and finally gives in to Frago's request to temporarily take the fox-terrier off the hands of the master, to "enseñar bien a usted" (86). These signs of neglect create suspense and grim portents by clashing against the legendary relationship of loyalty between man and dog. By the fourth and final reported dialogue of the short story, Quiroga reveals that the fox-terrier died from its master's bullet and heightens the pathos of the tragedy with the response of the master's children, one of whom exclaims, "¡Pobre Yaguaí! [...] ¡Qué hiciste, papá!" (92). The child's expression of shock and outrage, which employs the intimate designation *papá* in a manner reminiscent of the wife's invocation of the name *Paulino* in the short story *A la deriva*, lays bare Cooper's unjust treatment of his subordinate and indicates his shortcomings in reciprocating Yaguaí's loyal social relationship. Throughout the presentation of the superordinate's neglect and the subordinate's loyalty, Quiroga relies on preexisting mythology about dogs that allows him to encapsulate the short story's main conflict in four brief dialogues.

Mario Vargas Llosa, writing his short story anthology *Los Jefes* several decades after Quiroga's time, would deploy the same folkloric lexicon of canine loyalty in his titular *cuento* about four schoolboys Javier, Raygada, Lu, and the narrator who attempt to pressure the principal Ferrufino into publishing the final exam schedule by staging a student strike. Vargas Llosa initiates the short story with a rapid exposition that centers on the outrage of the students, as "La tensión se quebró violentamente, como una explosión" (1). The narrative, drawing on a detonation as a simile for student outrage, shocks the reader to attention and associates protest with various images of terroristic social revolutionary activity, of a rupture in social continuity that typically precedes regime change. Following upon Javier's outcry and the detonation simile, the narrator indicates, "Los de cuarto y tercero habían salido antes, formaban un gran círculo que se mecía bajo el polvo. Casi con nosotros, entraron los de primero y segundo [...] El círculo creció. La indignación era unánime en la Media". With the image of *El círculo*, Vargas Llosa draws upon an archetypal representation of the power coup carried out by an elite circle and highlights the hierarchical relations that underlie the student movement, which, although united

in hatred for the principal, are fractured into *Los de cuarto y tercero, los de primero y segundo*, and *nosotros*. These divisions provide a broad sketch of the conflicts among student groups that, later in the short story, form the basis for the ultimate failure of the student strike when the younger students, breaking through the pickets of the older students, go to school five minutes before the morning bell. The opening of *Los Jefes* reveals the same preoccupation with *le mot juste* in Vargas Llosa's work that characterized those of Quiroga's short stories.

Unlike Quiroga, however, who developed the folkloric elements of his fiction as part of the omniscient narration, Vargas Llosa employs canine legend in an intradiegetic manner. The first reference to this mythological aspect appears as the narrator reflects to himself, "¿Me miraban los coyotes?" (3). With repeated reference to *los coyotes*, in, for example, Lu's outcry, "¡Conmigo los coyotes!", it becomes clear that the phrase *los coyotes* operates as a signifier for the narrator's *nosotros*, for the student group that will direct the attempted strike against Ferrufino. The motifs of loyalty and subordination associated with canines interact with the plotline of the short story, in particular the power struggle between Lu and the narrator for the position as lead wolf to the pack of *los coyotes*. By inserting the folklore directly into the character action and dialogue, Vargas Llosa is able to structure his meditations on power relations by using multiple viewpoints. The most important of these is the narrator's perspective on Lu's usurpation of power. During the first confrontation between Lu and the narrator, Vargas Llosa reports that the narrator bitterly reflected, "ahora [Lu] tenía el mando y [los coyotes] lo admiraban, a él, ratita amarillenta que no hacía seis meses imploraba mi permiso para entrar en la banda" (5). The narrator loses the confrontation with Lu and Vargas Llosa thereby reveals the history of betrayal and double-dealing in the inner intrigues of *la banda*, a microcosm that elucidates the instability and rapid regime change of Latin American dictatorships in the twentieth century. Vargas Llosa reinforces Lu's portrayal as a mini-dictator who achieves power by treachery and power coups with a second confrontation in which Lu "Estaba parado en la baranda, bajo las ramas del seco algarrobo: mantenía admirablemente el equilibrio" whilst the narrator and Javier attempt to remove Lu from his pedestal (8). Even though the narrator expresses cynicism about Lu's rise to leadership of *los coyotes*, the repetition of the word *admiraban* and *admirablemente* suggests that, from the perspective of the other students, Lu has the qualities of a respectable and worthy statesman who is helping them to rectify a real injustice.

Vargas Llosa introduces a third perspective on Lu's leadership with the confrontation between Ferrufino and Lu in the principal's office. When Ferrufino dismisses the students' protests and forbids them from mentioning the final exam schedule again, Lu persists and forces

the principal to exclaim, “¡Cállate! [...]¡Cállate, animal! ¡Cómo te atreves!” (7). Through the epithet of *animal*, Vargas Llosa illustrates that Ferrufino’s perspective on Lu’s leadership consists of disgust and abhorrence at his unnatural insubordination, his complete disrespect for established authority. The narratorial comment that Lu and Ferrufino “Son iguales, pensé. Dos perros” clarifies, however, that the dispute between the two leaders amounts to nothing more than a power struggle, and certainly not to a dispute over abstract notions such as the virtue of loyalty. Thus, in the switch from *los coyotes* to *dos perros*, the narrator substitutes the folklore of dogfights for the folklore of the united wolf pack. Through the three perspectives on Lu’s leadership, that of the narrator, the other students, and the principal, Vargas Llosa puts forth permutations of canine mythology that parallel various aspects of actual Latin American dictatorships, that is, the treachery among potential leaders within the revolutionary movement, the blind admiration that the masses have for revolutionary leaders, and the contempt of established power for the rebel leaders, the fundamental elements of the birth of a regime.

Given the works by Quiroga and Vargas Llosa, it would be more accurate to characterize Latin American *cuentos* as the synthesis of two strands, of an oral tradition featuring anthropomorphic folklore such as the *yararacusú* and the *coyote* and a written tradition built on the theory of *le mot juste*, to create a unique literary genre with its own rules of expression, than to analyze the *cuento* as a miniature or stripped-down version of the novel. Furthermore, the symbolic density of Quiroga and Vargas Llosa’s short stories, ranging from social relationships to political organization, suggest that the *cuento* not only holds its own against the novel, but also represents a culturally legitimate heir to oral traditions, one that enriches human life and allays the fear, as expressed in the myth of Theuth from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, that the invention of writing might substitute the simulacrum of the text for true wisdom. The silence of tales in the time of novellas, then, is a modern development that we perhaps might embrace, the spoken spirit of our assemblies and gatherings that we once knew and recognize anew.



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