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Horacio Quiroga, a Writer on the Limits

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Nada puede decirse más allá de los límites de este mundo: esos límites son los mismos límites de todo decir que pretende poseer sentido. Más allá del mundo no hay nada o hay sólo nada. O no hay sentido; o no puede decirse nada con sentido.¹

Introduction

Posterity has been kind to Horacio Quiroga. Despite Jorge Luis Borges' gibes about his poor literary style, today Quiroga is widely read and his fame as the founder of Latin America's modern short story (Lafforgue 7) remains untouched. Critics, such as Fernando Aínsa and Leonor Fleming, consider him the Latin American writer who best illustrates the conflict between man and the forces of nature and, therefore, an essential precursor to the *novela de la tierra*. Much has been said about nature in Quiroga's works. A common observation, for example, shows the jungle of his stories

¹ Eugenio Trías, *Lógica del límite*, 526.

as a representation of the primitive.² At the same time, critics traditionally tend to focus on Quiroga's experiences in the rural province of Misiones as the main source of inspiration for his literature. In fact, in his canonical biography, Emir Rodríguez Monegal states that Misiones was the place where Quiroga discovered his destiny as a writer. On a gloomier biographical note, Augusto Monterroso defines Quiroga's life as a long tragic dream (12); the many obituaries that populate his biography and his work have generated an extensive bibliography on the subject of death.³

This article demonstrates the singularity of Quiroga as an author who rethinks the fatal confrontation between man and nature, which has marked Latin American letters since the Conquest. Quiroga's answer to such a pervasive Latin American subject emerges in short stories that take place in the jungle of Misiones, the *locus in quo* of his most memorable fiction. I propose to narrow down this comprehensive canon to focus on five short stories that share a similar plotline: "La miel silvestre" (1911), "A la deriva" (1912), "El hombre muerto" (1920), "Los desterrados" (1925) and "Las moscas" (1933); they all tell a story of a man who is about to die while working or wandering in the wilderness. These men lie in vast, still landscapes while they wait for a death foretold in the opening lines of the story. They all emit one agonizing last breath, a death rattle that becomes both the limit of narration and the moment when that limit is touched. By fashioning death as a limit experienced in nature, Quiroga poses an alternative to the appeal of sublimity in Latin American literature.

² According to Nicolás Bratosevich, in Quiroga "naturaleza es toda realización de lo elemental: el misterio biológico de la planta, el aluvión erótico del varón [...] la superstición [...] tan cerca del asombro salvaje ante todos esos misterios, incluidos los inextricables de la muerte" (63). Recent studies have shown the relevance of nature in Quiroga's work by looking at ecocritical issues (Rivera-Barnes) and the historical frame of neo-colonialism (French).

³ Already in 1958, Andree Collard lists the different manifestations of death in Quiroga's work; Jaime Alazraki focuses on Quiroga's realism in order to question philosophical and metaphysical aspects; Leonor Fleming analyzes the concept of "border" applied not only to death but also to space, language and literary style; Carlos J. Alonso explains death through the rhetorical universe of fiction; Jorge Lafforgue uses Heidegger's philosophy to analyze the subject of death in Quiroga. Finally, Alberto Acereda explores existential agony in Quiroga through Arturo Uslar-Pietri's concept of criollismo.

The Limit of Latin America's Sublime Nature

Despite nature's prominence in Quiroga's work, his stories habitually deny the experience of the sublime as it was conceptualized during Romanticism. Latin America's nature has been a hotly debated topic since the time of the Conquest. In the nineteenth century, it acquired features drawn from the language of Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, who had journeyed the continent in the early 1800s. Using adjectives such as 'colossal,' 'majestic,' and 'heavenly,' the explorer associated the experience of Latin American nature with the sublime. Building upon Humboldt and exploiting the rhetoric of an immense and overwhelming national landscape, foundational figures such as Andrés Bello and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento perpetuated the sublime as the hegemonic lens through which to observe and write about the Latin American landscape.

Modernista writers inherited a similar fashioning of nature that harks back to Romanticism's preoccupation with the soul. As Denis E. Cosgrove notes, the Romantics proclaimed "a natural and properly organic intrinsic value located in the soul of the individual [...] and in the process of phenomena of the external world, especially those which underlined human insignificance and weakness: barren mountain recesses, storms, seas and night" (230-31). According to such a view, nature is a supreme presence that seizes the human senses and triggers the sublime, an experience that in Immanuel Kant's words, "does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us" (94).

As Marie Escalante has noted, the *modernistas* were not oblivious to these Kantian ideas of the sublime that would eventually consecrate art as a form capable of harmonizing the soul with nature. According to Escalante, Quiroga presents an alternative to Modernismo's rote deployment of the aesthetic of the sublime: "Quiroga va más allá de lo sublime como categoría estética. [...] La selva misionera no es un objeto sino un mundo en el que el hombre está inmerso y que termina por dominarlo; no hay distancia "estética" entre el hombre y ella" (n.p.). This

noted distance is the constitutive element of the sublime experience since it allows the viewer to be simultaneously attracted to and safely delivered from the overwhelming terror of the sublime object. In Quiroga's narrative, however, there is no buffering distance to shield man from the horror of nature's sublime presence. Escalante goes on to argue that Quiroga offers up an "aesthetic of impurity" that differs from the *modernistas'* embrace of the Kantian visual and contemplative worldview instituted present in texts by Leopoldo Lugones.

This comparison with Lugones seems apt insofar as both writers approach the overwhelming space of Misiones from completely different aesthetic perspectives. While in *El Imperio Jesuítico* (1904) Lugones turns the Misiones jungle into a spectacle of geometric perfection and privileges a narrative subject that poses a vertical relationship with the natural world, Quiroga's work conflates this subject/world binary. However, in this refashioning of the sublime, Quiroga not only subverts *El Imperio Jesuítico*, but also Rubén Darío's "Momotombo" (1907), José Asunción Silva's *De sobremesa* (1925) and myriad *modernista* texts that likewise signal nature's sublime. In such works, nature is rendered inert, it is merely the object that fuels the poet's imagination.

Contrasting this presentation of nature as passive muse, in the stories that I have chosen to discuss, nature appears as a space within which man is inexorably trapped. For man, the jungle is not about spiritual self-realization, but rather it is about physical survival—a battle between life and death, or perhaps, a battle against death. All five of Quiroga's stories open up with a man on the verge of death. During their journey from life to death, the doomed characters encounter an ungraspable end, perishing in the limit of this world and ignoring what lies on the other side. Moreover, when compared to the *modernistas'* faith in the art's and nature's sublime, Quiroga's move becomes highly secularizing: his literature does not pretend to give metaphysical explanations for nature; it does not open a door to a divine presence. Nature is not divine, it is just nature; man is not permanent, nor sublime, he is just nature, and as nature, he encounters his end.

The term “limit” can be found in most of the studies on Quiroga, but always in reference to the geographical location of Misiones or to the characters’ exile in *Los desterrados* (1926). For instance, Leonor Fleming uses the notion of “border,” but she mainly focuses on geography and language and not on the philosophical dimension of the concept. To better grasp the relationship between death and nature in Quiroga, I draw on the concept of “limit” developed by Eugenio Trías in *Lógica del límite* (1991). Here the Spanish philosopher acknowledges that René Descartes, Kant, Ludwig Wittgenstein, or Martin Heidegger have previously dealt with this concept as “limit of knowledge” or “limit of thinking,” but their philosophical systems do not conceive or conceptualize *being* as limit or frontier (18). The originality of Trías, then, is that he gives an ontological status to the limit, a concept traditionally obscured by Western philosophy’s privileging of reason. What is there beyond the limit of human existence? What can we possibly say about it? If nothing is to be found on the other side, how do we understand nothingness? Quiroga’s work relates to these questions in that many of his stories narrate a journey that ends at the very frontier of this world. A great number of Quiroga’s characters reside on the border; to borrow Trías’ expression, they are “*seres fronterizos*” who unexpectedly face their only undefeatable limit:

todo ser muerto se descoyunta, en la frontera, entre eso infinitamente muerto que se repliega [...] en el cerco de lo místico y sagrado, y eso simbólico que, subsistiendo en el Hades fronterizo, [...] puede seguir siendo objeto de discurso (logos). Vivos y muertos comunican en la zona fronteriza, si bien se hallan, unos y otros infinitamente separados. (365)

Much of Quiroga’s literature deals with this type of limit. A perfect example can be found in what has been regarded as his best work: *Los desterrados*. According to Rodríguez Monegal, this book takes the form of an episodic novel that tells the story of different characters. The presence of the narrator, presented as a witness in most of the texts, creates an illusion of unity in the book (213-14). Rodríguez Monegal is also correct in associating this narrator with Quiroga, but it is worth pointing out that everything in *Los desterrados* remains within the limits of the book: there is no found manuscript or any other metatextual explanation whatsoever. It is only

among the next generation of writers that the idea of death as a return acquires a significant and transcendental meaning. This representation of death reappears in Alejo Carpentier's "Viaje a la semilla" (1944) and in the masterful opening of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967). Aureliano Buendía, in the very moment of his death, was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice. The difference is that in García Márquez's and Carpentier's works there is an immanent project. On one hand, the genealogy that García Márquez's novel contains shows a desire for continuation, for outliving the experience of death through the future generations of Buendías, even though the family is doomed from the start due to incest. Carpentier's "Viaje a la semilla" implies the pervasive idea that death brings us back to the sacred space of childhood and, therefore, that the place of death is the place of the beginning. Another common genealogy situates Quiroga as the precursor to novels like José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine* (1924) or Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953). The difference again is that Quiroga's literature is not a continual project. In the examples of Rivera and Carpentier, there is an intertextual permanence: the protagonists of both fictions embark on a project in the jungle that fails and, in the case of Rivera, ends in death. Despite this failure, the written text remains in this world as a textual survivor that recounts their journey and therefore functions as something that overcomes the limit. Quiroga, on the contrary, proposes a study of human beings in their finitude: his characters are in the present, they perish in nature and they do not go beyond nature, either metaphysically or metatextually.

Uncovering the Artifices of the Jungle

Noé Jitrik traces the evolution of Quiroga's treatment of death as such: "se aproxima gradualmente más al ámbito de la muerte, sobrepasando y superando el recurso que en general se emplea como solución de los conflictos, para llegar a la instancia de la muerte, a la expresión de una dimensión en la que el hombre actúa y a la que está de alguna manera consagrado" (113). Already in 1959, the Argentine critic discusses the two main types of literary criticism on Quiroga—biographical

and metaphysical interpretations—and concludes that Quiroga’s originality manifests itself in his “estrecha vinculación con la disposición para la experiencia” (60). This emphasis on experience, underlined by Jitrik, represents Quiroga’s counterhegemonic move in the treatment of the subject of death and nature. In texts like “A la deriva” or “El hombre muerto,” the desert and the wilderness no longer symbolize emptiness or plenitude. Man is not a passive individual who contemplates the landscape in order to see himself in it. Instead, both nature and man are enmeshed in a mutual struggle against the forces of life and death. As Jitrik points out: “para Quiroga la naturaleza es dura y combativa. Si el hombre esperara, pasivamente de ella el éxtasis o la sensación abisal del ser, sería devorado por las víboras, o por las hormigas gigantes o por los bichos y los insectos” (96).

Jitrik’s allusion to the ants is a clear reference to “La miel silvestre,” a short story that stands out as an illustration of how the Misiones forest is portrayed as a theater: “la aventura de los dos robinsones, sin embargo fuera acaso más formal de haber tenido como teatro otro bosque” (115). The nature described in the story highlights real dangers: tangible wild animals that can decide human fate. Soon enough, the main character, Benincasa, will discover this terrible threat in the form of the ants known as “la corrección.” The protagonist underestimates the dangers of the jungle: he finds a honeycomb and proceeds to drink the honey, oblivious to the fact that it will poison and kill him. Before arriving at his fatal end, the narrator describes nature again as a stage: “el monte crepuscular y silencioso lo cansó pronto. Dábale la impresión exacta por lo demás de un escenario visto de día. De la bullente vida tropical no hay a esa hora más que teatro helado; ni un animal ni un pájaro ni un ruido casi” (117). Nature fools him with the illusion of its motionlessness and, therefore, grants him the false impression of being invulnerable. This feeling of immunity allows Benincasa to believe that he can play a more active role in the drama. After an ordinary urban life as a student, the protagonist, described as “un muchacho pacífico, gordinflón y de cara rosada” (115), decides to honor his life with a couple of days in the jungle. Benincasa wants to feel the intensity of life in Misiones, distancing himself from his common existence in the

city and aspiring to become an agent of something greater. In this sense, he is similar to the main character in “El salvaje” (1920) who, “estaba cansado del comercio con los hombres y de la civilización, que todo se lo daba hecho; por lo que se aburría” (239). As Martha L. Canfield points out, “el signo característico de la selva quiroguiana [...] es la fundación de un lugar sagrado donde el hombre, arrancado de su origen y pervertido en su naturaleza originalmente buena, es llamado a probar su propia condición” (134-135).

In the story, Benincasa feels the sudden desire to explore the jungle (115); nature appears as the space where he looks for his completion, but the only fulfillment he finds is the reality of death. In a revelatory line at the beginning, the narrator affirms that “las escapatorias llevan aquí en Misiones a límites imprevistos” (115). The motionlessness of the space and the unlimited horizon that he contemplates make him unaware of the hidden dangers of nature. Benincasa wants to experience the unexpected limits of the jungle, looking for tales of courage to bring to his friends in the city, but what he finds instead is his death, because, in Misiones, the jungle makes evident the limited condition of man.

For Quiroga the city can also provide the experience of the limit however, there it is disguised, postponed, or ritualized through the masking of death that takes place in hospitals, morgues, and wake rooms. In stories like “El almohadón de plumas” (1907) and “Una estación de amor” (1912) death is something about to happen, revealing itself in the form of disease or a parasite that man tries to defeat with medicine. Doctors, drugs, and hospital rooms show the ritualized experience of death as a limit that includes the family and community of the dying individual. As shown in the story “La cámara oscura” (1920), a widow needs a memory of her dead husband before the funeral and demands that a picture be taken, which dramatizes the ritual of death as something that is postponed. By contrast, the jungle is foreign to these rituals because wild nature disrobes the limit and forces man to experience death in its utmost nudity. No ritualization of death remains in the jungle, as evidenced by the protagonist of “La miel silvestre,” who literally disappears due to the voracity of ants that leave no

place for ritualizing a death whose only testimony is the bones that Benincasa's uncle finds two days later.

"La miel silvestre" was included in *Cuentos de amor de locura y de muerte* (1917), a collection that opens up Quiroga's work to a nature which stops being the passive recipient of symbols, as it was in the *modernista* poetry of *Los arrecifes de coral* (1901). Nature is no longer an impressionistic fresco of nocturnal desolation and will now take on a more active role throughout the narration. The quintessential Quiroga story follows a very recognizable pattern: after a concise introduction of the setting, the narration focuses on the very instant in which a man, distracted by his daily labor, is suddenly assaulted by an inevitable death; a stalking death that waits for man behind the bushes and pounces on him in a moment of clumsiness. The narrator of these stories recounts the journey from the imminence of death to its effective fulfillment with a focus on the physicality and materiality of the process of dying. As José Enrique Etcheverry notes, Quiroga "le quita todo carácter abstracto: más que el tema de la muerte es el del hombre-que-se-está-muriendo, apasionado actor de su acontecer definitivo" (269). Texts like "A la deriva" or "El hombre muerto" expose us to the limit of death from their very beginnings. Their abrupt beginnings direct themselves to the characters' realization of the imminence of death. This revelation is perfectly illustrated in "El hombre muerto," where the protagonist "adquirió, fría, matemática e inexorable, la seguridad de que acababa de llegar al término de su existencia" (687) and later in "Las moscas": "clarísima y capital adquiero desde este instante mismo la certidumbre de que, a ras de suelo, mi vida está aguardando la instantaneidad de unos segundos para extinguirse de una vez" (51).

Death and Austerity

The above quotes reflect a prerequisite for narration in Quiroga's work: telling a story is an exercise of survival that is doomed by a known ending. As noted Carlos J. Alonso has noted, Quiroga's poetics of storytelling involves exploration. His stories constitute an investigation into the possibilities of death as the absolute *telos* of narration, and a rhetorical

strategy which “equivale a amenazar la escritura con la nada, con la homogeneidad indiferenciada y absoluta del silencio” (200). As we see in “A la deriva,” one of Quiroga’s paradigmatic stories, the narration does not end in Hades or the afterlife, but in the mere physical act of a man who ceases to breathe. The words that culminate the narration are there only to ascertain physical death and to emphasize this physicality at the end of the story: “El hombre estiró lentamente los dedos de la mano. —Un jueves... Y cesó de respirar” (69). From the opening line, once the snake bites the main character, Paulino embarks on a journey to death surrounded by a nature that acquires the dark overtones of a funeral. The walls of the Paraná River “encajonan fúnebremente el río” (69). The forest gets dark, forming an “eterna muralla lúgubre” (69). The canoe rushes in the middle of an aggressive landscape where a deathly silence prevails and there is still space for beauty: “al atardecer, sin embargo, su belleza sombría y calma cobra una majestad única” (69). The same calmness and beauty of the landscape makes Paulino cling to life: “el veneno comenzaba a irse, no había duda. Se hallaba casi bien, y aunque no tenía fuerzas para mover la mano, contaba con la caída del rocío para reponerse del todo” (69). The river continues its eternal flow; the man, on the other hand, in his hallucinating journey towards the unknown, hangs on to the only thing he has: his past and his life (his buddy, his chief, his memories) and the feeling that “el bienestar avanzaba y con él una somnolencia llena de recuerdos” (69).⁴ Nature seems to shine still more in this final interstitial moment of his life: “el cielo, al poniente, se abría ahora en pantalla de oro,” “el monte dejaba caer sobre el río su fresca crepuscular en penetrantes efluvios de azahar y miel silvestre” (69).

In “A la deriva,” Paulino clings to his past—he tries to connect with his godfather and remember the day he met his former boss—while the exuberance of nature acts out the tragedy of human fleeting: the awareness of being transitory in the middle of the eternal. Narrated in less than four pages, this conflict shows the depth of one of Quiroga’s stories that has

⁴ Scientists believe this remembering is part of the death process. See Dr. Raymond Moody’s *Life after Life*.

received more critical attention. In 1973, Jaime Alazraki proposed a new approach to the works of the Uruguayan author based on their realism, which, according to him, is at the center of Quiroga's narratives. Accordingly, the material dimension has replaced the metaphysical in Quiroga's fiction and, therefore, the metaphysical is completely absent.⁵ His article focuses on "A la deriva," "El hijo" (1928) and "El hombre muerto," because these stories are mainly based on the description of the character's surroundings. These characters allow themselves to be enfolded by nature, with its true and overwhelming presence, yet they deny death the same realism by refusing to accept its inevitability.

In articles by Alazraki and, later, Shoemaker, the subject of death is seen as part of an evolution in Quiroga's literature. Shoemaker is right in pointing out that the evolution takes place in three main aspects of Quiroga's stories: firstly, there is a tendency to give less importance to the landscape, secondly, the character is more conscious of his situation as a dying man and, finally, the narrative point of view is progressively internalized (264). This becomes clearer when we compare "A la deriva" to "El hombre muerto," written eight years later. Both stories narrate the journey from life to death, yet the first one recounts the character's physical reactions to death together with his efforts to remember a superficial event in his life, the second underlines the narrator's reflections about death. Moreover, in "El hombre muerto," nature's elements no longer reflect death as its symbolic mirror but, instead, are the stage at which human futility is acted out. Unlike "A la deriva," where nature acquires funereal tonalities or shines with a golden effluvium, the stage where the man dies in "El hombre muerto" is marked by a more austere description and an absence of color: "todo, todo exactamente como siempre; el sol de fuego, el aire vibrante y solitario, los bananos inmóviles, el alambrado de postes muy gruesos y altos que pronto tendrá que cambiar [...] nada, nada ha cambiado, sólo él es distinto. Desde hace dos minutos... se muere" (688-89).

This change in the portrayal of nature marks a step in Quiroga's evolution: beginning with *Cuentos de amor de locura y de muerte*, nature

⁵ This interpretation goes along with what Saúl Yurkievich stated in 1960 about the absence of metaphysical value in this short story.

becomes more and more an austere stage. The decrease in the use of decoration results in a more powerful insistence upon human's transitory status, as seen in Paulino's attempt to get in contact with his past in "A la deriva." An effort of parallel futility reappears in "Los desterrados," (1925) where the two characters, João Pedro and Tirafofo, two old Brazilians living in Misiones, begin to miss their homeland after a long and arduous life and are described as "enmudecidos por aquella tardía sed de la patria" (667). This sudden nostalgia is brought on by the certainty of death: "estemos lejos de nossa tierra, seu Tirá... E un día temos de morrer" (666). This revelation marks the moment when the narrator describes the characters' childish tenderness when they are moved by their "recuerdos natales que acudían a sus mentes con la facilidad y transparencia de los de una criatura" (667).⁶ Among all the journeys towards death in Quiroga's fiction, this is probably the most affectionate and passionate one, and it also reminds us of what he confessed to Ezequiel Martínez Estrada in a letter from April, 1936, less than a year before his death: "esperanza de olvidar dolores, aplacar ingratitudes, purificarse de engaños. Borrar las heces de la vida ya demasiado vivida, infantilizarse de nuevo; más todavía: retornar al no ser primitivo, antes de la gestación y de toda existencia: todo esto es lo que nos ofrece la muerte con su descanso sin pesadillas" (93).

The two characters in "Los desterrados" seem to share a similar destiny to the one Quiroga describes in his letter. At the end of the story, after an exhausting journey through the jungle, the two dying Brazilians contemplate their homeland from a distance. Tirafofo tries to wake an exhausted Joao Pedro and once he opens his eyes, he affirms that he is already there, implying that death is going to take him back to his homeland. Tirafofo remains skeptical about this arrival, but once the moment comes he feels that he is also returning to the sacred place of childhood, opening his eyes "en una expresión de infantil alborozo" (669). In this story Quiroga still keeps us within the limits. His characters die on

⁶ The knowledge that science has about the experience of death has developed enormously since Quiroga's times. For instance, it is believed that the death process involves flashbacks to one's past. For a thorough exposition of near-death experiences see Moody.

the very border of their homeland and death grants them the illusion of returning home, where they finally cease to be exiles. Nevertheless, the miracle remains impossible; the limit of death is as impassable as Brazil's border for Tirafero and João Pedro.

There is a theme that unites the stories analyzed so far: nature becomes the stage of the journey of life. However, before the curtain closes, the only certainty that the characters have is that they will dwell on that stage without knowing what lies behind the curtain. Death closes the story; words remain on this side of the world and only the hallucination of the characters in their desire to keep living ("A la deriva," "El hombre muerto") or to return home ("Los desterrados") creates the illusion of arriving at the great beyond. As Michel Foucault reminds us in "Language to Infinity," "death is undoubtedly the most essential of the accidents of language (its limit and its center)" (55), and Quiroga's work attests as much. In his stories, death is at the center of narration and becomes its very limit.

Let us take the example of "El hombre muerto"; this story starts with an omniscient narrator, but crosses the limit between third-person narrator and character. In order to achieve that, as Alazraki underscores, Quiroga uses a third person narrator that unifies his voice with the voice of the character (78). In doing so, the Uruguayan author situates the narrator of the story as the voice that recounts the transition from life to death; creating a perplexity that, according to Alazraki, is realistic (77). However, "realism" can be a tricky term when talking about such experiences. Can we say with total certainty that this or that account of death is realistic? How can we attest to the reality of words that we—the living—have never pronounced? Trías' reflections on these questions can shed some light on Quiroga's literary project. The Spanish philosopher argues for a conceptualization of the human condition as a border space in which reason and being are in constant dialogue with the power of non-being that lies beyond the limit of this world. Trías notes that literature is a linguistic art, an art of *logos* that uses images and plot lines to communicate "la relación entre el habitante del mundo y ese mundo" (204). This is exactly what happens with the third person that narrates death from the outside in Quiroga's stories. The narrator of "A la deriva" and "El hombre muerto"

situates himself on the limits of the world, a place that, according to Trías, “puede permanecer elíptico, o puede ser encarnado por un ambiguo personaje que se halla dentro-y-fuera [...] del relato que se cuenta” (207).

One of the essential qualities of Quiroga’s fictions is that they appropriate this liminal place Trías describes. The third person narrator of “A la deriva” and “El hombre muerto” is captured in that interstitial zone opened up by death at the beginning of the story: in narrating the characters’ journey to their certain death, the narrator can only speak of their physical reactions or about their refusal to recognize that unexpected event. The reader never knows what the two men find on the other side, because narration can only provide tangible words for what remains inside the limits.

“Las moscas,” a Culminating Story

While in his earlier works Quiroga explored narrative patterns of ineffability with regards to death, in a later story, “Las moscas,” nature provides a stage to access the great beyond. This text is included in Quiroga’s last published book, *Más allá* (1935) and described with the subtitle “Réplica a ‘El hombre muerto.’” Again, we are faced with the story of a man who suffers an accident leading to his death. The premise is the same as in “A la deriva” and “El hombre muerto”: death comes and nothing changes. The man stops belonging to this world, but the nature that surrounds him remains: “las lluvias se sucederán mojando corteza y ropa, y los soles secarán líquenes y cabellos, hasta que el monte rebrote y unifique árboles y potasa, huesos y cuero de calzado” (52). The only difference at this stage is the conclusion. At the end of the story, once the man is dead, his ego disperses itself in nature, becoming a fly nurtured by the decomposed corpse.

Alonso indicates that “Las moscas” reflects a sort of materialist pantheism that insists on the continuity of the spirit in the material world (207). Despite this odd alternative to death, that differs from the usual end to previous texts, the critic finds little significance in this fiction: “el relato no es ni particularmente significativo ni original” (207). He seems only interested in the differences between this story and previous work to

demonstrate the lack of consistency between Quiroga's theory of writing and his actual practice. Generally, "Las moscas" has been studied as a continuation or response to "El hombre muerto," or as a story that is out of place within the decadent atmosphere of Quiroga's last book. However, in stories like "Las moscas," Quiroga poses a new possibility for narrating the limits of death. While the narrator was consistently situated within the limits of the world in his previous literary production, he now adopts the perspective of what exists beyond it. As Quiroga's own death approaches, is this the "Great Beyond" that the title of his last book announced?⁷

From "Más allá" (1925) on—the opening story of the book—death is treated as something that needs to be overcome or as the place where the characters find peace. Later, in stories like "El vampiro" (1927) or "El puritano" (1926), the characters come into contact with the afterlife through esoteric experiments connected to cinematic experiences. These stories are not relevant to my analysis because they do not deal with the experience of death in nature, however they reveal an insistent preoccupation with the unknown in Quiroga's last published book. "Las moscas" is the only text in which the limits of the unknown are revealed in nature. As critics like Shoemaker, Alonso and Rodrigo Varela Cabezas have observed, this fiction can be grouped with stories like "A la deriva" and "El hombre muerto," in the sense that all of them share a similar approach to the subject of death.

In addition to this similarity regarding the subject, the three stories attest to Quiroga's experimentation with narrative focalization, which is evident in the gradual merging between the narrator and character's voice. In fact, this narrative merging foreshadows another assimilation that takes place at the diegetic level of "El hombre muerto" and "Las moscas." Towards the end of the latter, the narrator subtly suggests that death might be the point of departure to a new place within the cycle of life, a possibility for reincarnation that will be fully embraced in the latter. Thus, in the

⁷ *Más allá* is an eclectic book like most of Quiroga's collections of short stories. It is also a miscellanea of texts from different periods (Rodríguez Monegal 189). The collection includes fantastic stories like "El vampiro" or "El puritano," but also narrations like "Las moscas" or "El hijo" that bring the readers back to a jungle setting.

conclusion of “El hombre muerto” Quiroga paves the way for a new possibility to narrate the limits of death in nature:

puede aún alejarse con la mente, si quiere; puede si quiere abandonar un instante su cuerpo y ver desde el tajar por él construido, el trivial paisaje de siempre [...] Y más lejos aun ver el potrero, obra sola de sus manos. Y al pie de un poste descascarado, echado sobre el costado derecho y las piernas recogidas, exactamente como todos los días, puede verse él mismo, como un pequeño bulto asoleado sobre la gramilla. (“El hombre muerto” 690)⁸

This shift in narrative perspective from the dying man to a point beyond him creates an uncanny effect. It presents a sudden discontinuity with the physical realm where, until that point, the story had been enclosed. With the conclusion of the text, this sense of the uncanny is heightened because the narrative perspective is shifted to a horse who, until then, was merely a decorative figure in the physical landscape: “el caballo [...] ve también al hombre en el suelo y no se atreve a costear el bananal como desearía. Ante las voces que ya están próximas [...] vuelve un largo, largo rato las orejas inmóviles al bulto: y tranquilizado al fin, se decide a pasar entre el poste y el hombre tendido que ya ha descansado.” (690)

The major difference between this story and “Las moscas” is not that the former retains a level of reality while the latter enters a fantastic zone, as Varela argues. “Las moscas” goes beyond its textual antecedent by accomplishing three aspirations that were unfulfilled in “El hombre muerto”: unifying narrator and character in only one voice; satisfying the dying man’s desire to elevate himself and abandon his body; and achieving a full process of metamorphosis, as was suggested by evoking the horse’s perception at the end of “El hombre muerto.” Thus, what really takes place in “Las moscas” with regards to its textual source is the narration of a process of becoming: the dying man’s desire of abandoning his body to see himself from above is now accomplished through the metamorphosis into an insect. The dying man’s pointless wish to fly turns into the reality of a new point of departure in life: “del seno de esta expansión, que el sol dilata

⁸ Similar examples of near-death experiences can be found in Moody.

desmenuzando mi conciencia en un billón de partículas, puedo alzarme y volar, volar...” (“Las moscas” 53).

Alazraki points out that “El hombre muerto” represents the necessary union of the omniscient narrator with the character because the story’s intention is to remove barriers. His conclusion does not identify which barriers Quiroga removes, but I propose that there are three: the limits of the narrator and the character, the limits of life and death, and finally the limits of man and nature. These three limits are presented in previous texts with a sense of impossibility, but only in “Las moscas” do we note their final overcoming. Shoemaker highlights this idea: “en ningún otro relato se revela con tanta inquietud la tentativa de resolver el enigma de la gran Nada que representa la muerte para el hombre. El cuento, pues, es culminativo” (262). The critic states that nature does not attack man and does not become the stage of death. Nevertheless, it can be argued that nature in “Las moscas” is also the stage upon which the limits of death are acted out insofar as the character dies working in the jungle and, for the first time in the stories discussed here, nature reveals the transition from human existence to the life of an insect: man’s consciousness can cross the wall that death imposes on life and experience in the afterlife, being able to bring words from the region of the unutterable. More importantly, as noted by Varela, the metamorphosis into a fly

tendría así la paradójica función de salvaguardar la realidad del mundo negando al mismo tiempo la realidad ontológicamente más vinculada a la noción misma de vida: la muerte. En consecuencia, el mundo no sería una ilusión o un lugar de tránsito hacia otras realidades trascendentes, sino que sería la única realidad posible, en la cual todo parecer únicamente supondría el momento de cambio de nuestra envoltura física, instante fugaz en la interminable cadena de la existencia. (523-24)

If nature was the cause of death and the stage on which man experienced his limited condition before, in “Las moscas,” the signs of antagonism disappear in order to reveal that man is at one with nature. After reading stories like “A la deriva,” “El hombre muerto” or “Las moscas,” we are left with the impression of a total absence of transcendent desire with respect to death or nature: everything ends within the limits of nature. Characters like Paulino in “A la deriva” or the men in “El hombre muerto” and “Las

moscas” die during their quotidian labor, an act that, according to Karl Marx, represents “the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence” (283). In doing their work, these characters try to impress the stamp of their will upon the world, but this is only an illusion. Their work has no impact on nature and they depart from this world without being able to produce any change. In the end, like the flies that come to life from the character’s body in “Las moscas,” death means a new point of departure to a place within the limits of this world: man comes to be integrated into the eternal cycle of nature, which Friedrich Engels defines as constantly changing, a “cycle in which every finite mode of existence of matter, whether it be [...] single animal or genus of animals, chemical combination or dissociation, is equally transient, and wherein nothing is eternal but eternally changing” (54). In the letter to Martínez Estrada quoted earlier, Quiroga himself intuits such transformational law:

¿Y si reaparecemos en un fosfato, en un brote, en el haz de un prisma? Tanto mejor, entonces. Pero el asunto capital es la certeza, la seguridad incontrastable de que hay un talismán para el mucho vivir o el mucho sufrir o la constante desesperanza. Y él es el infinitamente dulce descanso del sueño a que llamamos muerte. Yo siempre sentí (creo que desde muy pequeño) que la mayor tortura que se puede infligir a un ser humano es el vivir eternamente [...] ¡Ah, no! La esperanza de vivir para un joven árbol es de idéntica esencia a su espera del morir cuando ya dé sus frutos. Ambos son radios diametrales de la misma esfera. (93)

Quiroga’s Place in the Lettered City

Quiroga’s work yearns for a similar destiny as the one outlined in his epistolary confession: from the decadent twilights of *Los arrecifes de coral* to the laconic narratives of his jungle stories, there is a progressive desacralization of man and nature in Quiroga’s *oeuvre*. In stories like “A la deriva” and “El hombre muerto,” the characters perish on the limits of this world, ignoring what lies in the great beyond. The abruptness and inevitability of such a conclusion seems to be corrected by the ending of “Las moscas,” but it is only an illusion: the character is now a fly that will perish too, as another stage in the eternally changing cycle of nature. There is a significant part of Quiroga’s work that denies art the ambition of lifting

Isis' veil. The stories examined here represent a miniature corpus of such a literary undertaking. The Uruguayan author refuses to domesticate nature's might with a concession to the sublime and, thus, denounce Modernismo's broken relationship with nature. In Ángel Rama's words,

si algo testimonia el ingénito espíritu urbano de la cultura latinoamericana es este desvío por las esplendideces naturales, que si todavía fueron obligados compromisos románticos, rápidamente se agostaron al llegar la modernización [...] Entre los latinoamericanos no hubo un Thoreau que fuera a vivir en la naturaleza, a proclamar sus glorias y a escribir su diario; los escritores residieron en las ciudades, capitales si era posible, y allí hicieron sus obras, en ese marco urbano, aunque las espolvorearan del color local de moda que exigía 'naturaleza.' Dada esta tradición urbana, no hubo mayor problema en trasladar la naturaleza a un diagrama simbólico, haciendo de ella un modelo cultural operativo donde leer, más que la naturaleza misma, la sociedad urbana y sus problemas, proyectados al nivel de los absolutos. Lo hicieron sagazmente los dos mayores poetas de la modernización, Rubén Darío y José Martí, quienes construyeron estructuras de significación, más engañosamente estéticas el primero y más dramáticamente realistas el segundo. (85)

When we think of Rama's profound knowledge of Quiroga's work and the fact that from 1967 to 1973 he edited eight volumes of his unpublished works, his avoidance of the Uruguayan author in this passage is perplexing. The absence is specially striking since Quiroga's life and work are a perfect example of what Rama yearns for: like Thoreau, Quiroga lived in a cabin that he himself built in the jungle; his letters to Martínez Estrada were the diary of his life there; a significant part of his work (specially the stories analyzed here) lack that level of abstraction and detachment that Rama sees in Martí and Darío. Where is Quiroga's place within Latin America's lettered city then? In the opening lines I mention that Quiroga is still admired and praised by critics today, but, as evidenced by Rama's passage, there is a sense of inadequacy when dealing with him, a difficulty in placing him within a tradition or aesthetic movement. He might very well be the founder of Latin America's modern short story, as Lafforgue affirms, but can we say that he is a "modern" writer? Furthermore, can we ascribe to him the same modernity that Darío and Martí represent? The question still stands for those who are rebuilding the ruins of the lettered city.

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