

HORACIO QUIROGA: NARRATING THE LIMIT OF DEATH IN NATURE

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ABSTRACT

CARLOS ABREU MENDOZA: Horacio Quiroga: Narrating the Limit of Death in Nature
(Under the direction of Juan Carlos González Espitia)

The goal of the present study is to analyze how the concepts of limit, death and nature evolve in Horacio Quiroga's literature. There, nature becomes the stage on which the human drama of death is acted out to the limit. In order to understand this more in depth, I examine the relationship between death and nature in Quiroga from the philosophical perspective of limit as proposed by Eugenio Trías. I begin by analyzing Quiroga's first literary production in relation to *Modernismo* and the latter's existential approach to death and nature. The relationship between these two concepts can also be observed in his short stories, produced from 1912 to 1933: "La miel silvestre" [The Wild Honey] (1911), "A la deriva" [Drifting] (1912), "El hombre muerto" [The Dead Man] (1920) and "Los desterrados" [The Exiles] (1925). In these fictions, the characters become aware of an ungraspable end that happens through the narration of their journey from life to death, perishing in the limits of this world and ignoring what lies in the great beyond. Finally, the latter text "Las moscas" [The Flies] (1933), proposes an alternative that contrasts with the previous texts and culminates the evolution of Quiroga discussed here with the idea that the limit of death can be surpassed.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

I.	Introduction.....	1
II.	Quiroga and Modernismo: Death and Nature within the Limits of Literature.....	4
III.	The Stage of Nature and the Limit of Death.....	16
IV.	Writing from the “Great Beyond”.....	30
	Works Cited.....	37

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The foundational texts of Latin American literature inaugurated a discourse in which men and nature seem to share the task of shaping a common destiny. As Fernando Aínsa states in “La toma de posesión del espacio americano,” this undertaking can be described as a struggle of the logos to take possession of the topos (39). In his essay, Aínsa not only traces the evolution of this conflict in Latin American literature, but also considers Horacio Quiroga as the writer who best illustrates the conflict between man and the forces of nature; therefore, he makes Quiroga as an essential precursor to the writers of the “Novela de la tierra” [Telluric Novel].¹ This is a common observation when studying Quiroga but it is also one that normally overlooks an important aspect that has only been studied superficially: nature in Quiroga’s literature becomes the stage on which the limit of the human condition is acted out. The term “limit” appears frequently when discussing Quiroga’s literature.² 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. In order to understand this more in depth, it is necessary to examine the relationship between death and nature in

¹ A similar interpretation can be found in Leonor Fleming’s “Horacio Quiroga: escritor a la intemperie.” (109).

² The term can be found in most of the studies on Quiroga, but always in reference to the frontier geographical location of Misiones or to the condition of exiles of most of the characters from Los desterrados (1926).

Quiroga from the philosophical perspective of limit as proposed by Eugenio Trías, an approach that has not been applied to Quiroga by other critics.³

In Lógica del límite (1991), the Spanish philosopher argues that “mentar el término límite exige y obliga a referir el pensamiento, el logos, a un más allá, a algo que excede y sobresale en relación con él” [mentioning the term “limit” forces our thinking, the logos, to be referred to a great beyond, to something that exceeds and stands out from it] (520).⁴

Much of Quiroga’s literature deals with and remains within this type of limit. In his first poems and stories, nature reveals a mystery, exposing a tiny crack through which what is past the limit can be seen. Later, beginning with Cuentos de amor de locura y de muerte [Stories of Love Madness and Death] (1917) the entrance is solemnly closed and death remains an impossible barrier for the logos, an experience of the limit that Quiroga’s characters suffer in nature.⁵

In order to explore the evolution of the concepts of limit, death, and nature in the Uruguayan author, I begin by analyzing Quiroga’s first literary production in relation to *Modernismo* and the latter’s existential approach to nature and death. Then, using selected short stories, I demonstrate the manner in which Quiroga reveals the incapacity of logos to

³ Trías situates the concept of limit at the center of his philosophy. He acknowledges that previous philosophers like Descartes, Kant, Wittgenstein, or Heidegger deal 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 (Lógica18). The originality of Trías, then, is that he gives an ontological status to limit and includes aspects that have been traditionally obscured by the excess of confidence that western philosophy has in 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 relate with nothingness? What does art have to contribute to our knowledge of the world? In answering these questions Trías’ work brings a new perspective of the concept of limit which does not exclude reflecting on art.

⁴ All translations from Spanish are mine.

⁵ I am aware that there are stories like “El infierno artificial” [The Artificial Hell] (1913) in Cuentos de amor de locura y de muerte and others in later books, where Quiroga explores the possibilities of the fantastic genre. In these stories the events taking place are supernatural, with a touch of horror. These stories are not relevant to my current analysis because death happens inside the realm of the fantastic, exceeding the limits of human life and, therefore, it remains outside the boundaries of nature.

express the great beyond in discourse. The stories that will show this ineffability are “La miel silvestre” [The Wild Honey] (1911), “A la deriva” [Drifting] (1912), “El hombre muerto” [The Dead Man] (1920) and “Los desterrados” [The Exiles] (1925). In these fictions, the characters become aware of an ungraspable end that happens through the narration of their journey from life to death. Finally, I will discuss the way Quiroga deals with the great beyond in “Las moscas” [The Flies] (1933), a story that proposes an alternative to the limit of death that contrasts with the previously discussed texts.

CHAPTER 2

QUIROGA AND MODERNISMO: DEATH AND NATURE WITHIN THE LIMITS OF LITERATURE

Much has been said about nature in Quiroga's works. A common observation, for example, shows the jungle of his stories as a representation of the primitive.⁶ At the same time, critics traditionally tend to focus on Quiroga's experiences in the nature of Misiones as the main source of inspiration for his literature. In his canonical biography, Emir Rodríguez Monegal emphasizes that Misiones was the place where Quiroga discovered his destiny as a writer. According to Rodríguez Monegal, all of the previous steps were trials, a series of tests, missteps, and rites of passage that Quiroga needed to complete before finding his destiny. This interpretation is problematic because it undermines the relevance of Quiroga's previous literary attempts and also perpetuates a dangerous biographical trend.⁷ As is the case with other iconic authors, Quiroga's literature tends to be explained through his biography, placing emphasis on certain parts of his life over others. In fact, some critics would argue that his years in the nature of Misiones had a more profound impact on his life

⁶ 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" [nature is the fulfillment of the elementary: the biological mystery of the plant, the erotic alluvium of the male (...) a superstition (...) so close to wild amazement in the face of all these mysteries, including the inextricable ones of death] (63).

⁷ Leonardo Garet in Obra de Horacio Quiroga is correct when he affirms that in order to fully understand Quiroga's literature we should include the works that traditionally have been undermined as aesthetically inferior (8).

than his trip to Paris during his twenties.⁸ Therefore, the work he produced in Misiones would be of a superior quality to the decadent prose and poetry of his early adulthood in Paris or Salto.

For the most part, critics tend to classify the works he produced during 1898-1905 within the limits of Modernismo. For instance, Leonor Fleming points out that this movement was a starting point that Quiroga eventually abandoned because it was an accepted aesthetics that did not imply any risk for him as a writer (96). A more extreme interpretation of Quiroga's work during this period is Noé Jitrik's, who affirms that

Quiroga fue modernista, pero no vale la pena hablar de su modernismo. Nada relevante queda de ese período, salvo quizá la dificultad de abandonarlo y acercarse libremente a otros modos de literatura

[Quiroga was a modernista but it is not worth talking about his modernismo. Nothing relevant remains from that period except perhaps his difficulty with abandoning it and approaching other forms of literature] (131).

Nevertheless, in more than one way, the initial texts portray the experience of death and nature as it was felt by the young Quiroga. We can, therefore, conclude that his insight is the result of a gradual search and not of spontaneous or equivocal coincidence, as Jitrik and other critics would argue.

These modernista texts appeared in different magazines in the city of Salto in the early 1900's and came out when Modernismo had already established a new aesthetic sensibility.⁹ His first writings, from 1898, came ten years after the publication of Rubén Darío's Azul (1888). As shown by his letters, Quiroga was sensitive to the movement and

⁸ Even though this trip was brief it was of capital importance in Quiroga's decision to become a writer.

⁹ Quiroga himself founded Revista del Salto in 1899, a literary magazine that would only survive for one year.

well informed about literary novelties.¹⁰ What interests me here is the place that nature took among the modernistas and how it was a predominant element in the poems of Julián del Casal, José Martí, or Rubén Darío, just to name a few of the most significant writers. Obviously, due to lack of space, I cannot trace the evolution of nature in Modernismo, but it is important to give a few examples of how the modernistas included nature in their literature. The comparison between Quiroga and Casal shows some similarities in the way that both authors portrayed nature.¹¹

In general, in the poetry of the modernistas, nature appears as an expression of the poets' self and plays an important part in their quest for beauty. As Ivan Schulman points out, Modernismo has its roots in the revolution of ideas initiated in the Renaissance, when man started exploring his existence and his place in the world. The modernista movement that began in the last decade of nineteenth century, was marked by the search for self-knowledge and for the unknown regions of experience; it was a reaction against ready made patterns, and a fight against contra-hegemonic narrations (Proyecto inconcluso 10). If all of these searches characterize Modernismo and are passionately undertaken by their participants, could we not say that Quiroga was part of that movement in the sense that his literature confronts us with every existential theme that the modernistas explore?

If we follow this argument, it makes sense that Quiroga has been studied through the lens of philosophy, particularly existentialist philosophy, and his obsession with death has

¹⁰ He felt a great deal of admiration for Darío, as the letters during his time in Paris demonstrate (Rodríguez Monegal 43). He idolized Leopoldo Lugones as an indisputable master and dedicated an article to him in Revista del Salto in which he refers to Lugones as a genius and as the first poet of América (67).

¹¹ Casal has been seen as an initiator of the movement of which Quiroga is said to be a late participant. According to Federico de Onís, Casal represents the transition from Romanticism to Modernismo. In his chronological study he divides the movement into four segments: transition from Romanticismo to Modernismo, triumph of Modernismo, Postmodernismo and Ultramodernismo. Horacio Quiroga is not included in this classification.

been constantly analyzed in numerous studies.¹² But, in order to understand what Quiroga adds to the existential exploration of modern literature initiated in Latin American by the modernistas, I propose to explore the ontological dimension of the limit. If we consider that life is, indeed, a metaphysical stage, it becomes clear that, as actors, we know that our time is limited, whereas nature confronts us with its own continuance and seeming permanence. The very moment that man knows he is a transitory being on the eternal theater of nature he is wounded by his fleetingness, by the limit that death imposes upon him in time and space: he will make his way to the great beyond, whereas nature, the stage upon which life is acted out, will remain in this world. For every man the journey ends at the very frontier of this world as underscored by Trías:

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.

[every dead is dislocated in the frontier between that thing infinitely dead that refolds itself (...) at the border of the mystical and sacred, and that symbolic thing that, subsisting in the frontier Hades, (...) can still be the object of discourse (logos). Dead and alive communicate in the frontier zone, although they remain, both of them, infinitely separated] (Lógica 365).

¹² According to Leonardo Garet, “la filosofía existencialista tiene en Quiroga, dentro de la línea de Kierkegaard y Unamuno, un portaestandarte efectivo. Toda su obra [...] debe ser vista a través de ese vidrio oscuro” [Quiroga stands out as an effective standard bearer of existentialist philosophy, along the lines of Kierkegaard and Unamuno. All his literary work (...) must be seen through this dark glass] (13). There are a considerable number of articles dealing with the subject of death in Horacio Quiroga’s work. In “La muerte en los cuentos de Horacio Quiroga” (1958), Andree Collard lists the different manifestations of death in Quiroga’s work; in “Relectura de Horacio Quiroga” (1973), Jaime Alazraki focuses on Quiroga’s realism in order to question philosophical and metaphysical aspects; in “Horacio Quiroga: escritor a la intemperie” (1990), Leonor Fleming analyzes the concept of “border” applied not only to death but also to space, language and literary style; in “Muerte y resurrecciones de Horacio Quiroga” (1995), Carlos J. Alonso explains death through the rhetorical universe of fiction; in the introduction to the edition of Los desterrados y otros textos (2000), Jorge Lafforgue uses Heidegger’s philosophy to analyze the subject of death in Quiroga. Finally, in “Del criollismo a la urgencia existencial: fatalidad y angustia en tres cuentos de Horacio Quiroga” (2001), Alberto Acereda explores existential agony in Quiroga through Arturo Uslar-Pietri’s concept of criollismo.

The separation between this world and the unknown creates an existential agony that was felt intensely by the modernistas, and it is what Octavio Paz calls “irony”: “la herida por la que se desangra la analogía; es la excepción, el accidente fatal” [the wound by which analogy bleeds; it is the exception, the fatal accident] (109).

The wounds inflicted by the fleetingness of life can be better understood when we look at the example of Casal’s poetry. There, nature habitually represents death through classic oppositions of light and dark. In an attempt to translate the ultimate meaning of the universe in nature, the poet searches for the forest of symbols which are the elements of nature expressed through binary oppositions. Death, then, arises in the middle of nature, which is symbolically expressed by its elements, and destroys the poet’s ideals. In the end, as indicated by Schulman, Casal’s poetry represents “el destino del artista, morador temporal pero sufrido, de un mundo materialista y hostil” [the destiny of the artist, provisional but suffering inhabitant of a materialistic and hostile world] (Génesis 187).¹³ What is more, his work is also an example of another important aspect of Modernismo, the relationship between death and nature. The initial dream of Modernismo was that the limit that death imposes could be defied, that art could triumph over death, because poetry appears to modernistas as a faith, as the Absolute, making their search metaphysical. Casal wants to surpass that limit: “deseo volar hacia la altura, porque allí debe estar lo que yo he amado” [I desire to fly and reach the highness, because there it should be what I have loved] (“Blanco y negro” [Black and White] 187). But despite his desire to overcome anguish, it will always

¹³ The Cuban poet would be a perfect example of how the modernista poets preferred the spiritual over the material when facing the spiritual crisis of the *fin du siècle*. For a thorough exploration of the relationship between Modernismo and the spiritual crisis, see Cathy Login Jrade’s Modernismo, Modernity, and the Development of Spanish American Literature (1998). In her book, Jrade explains the way Modernismo was initially a movement that used language and poetry to unfold the universe’s meaning as a system of correspondances.

come back. Dualities are never resolved, the ideal is defeated, and the Poet is wounded by irony as stated by Paz. This irony is also described by Casal as a plea:

despedazad mi ser atormentado
que cayó de las célicas regiones
y devolvedme al seno de la nada...

[tear to pieces my tortured being
that fell from the heavenly regions
and bring me back to emptiness' heart...] ("Blanco y negro" 188).

The limit of death in Casal's poetry is confronted in two directions: through communion with nature, or through the desire to vanish into emptiness. On the one hand, the natural landscape would become a dreamscape for the poet: the triumph of his transcendental vision. On the other hand, it also certifies his existential emptiness:

pero al salir del sueño venturoso
sólo ve, dilatada las pupilas,
desierto, el arenal ilimitado;
roja, la inmensa bóveda vacía

[but when leaving the providential dream,
only sees, with dilated pupils,
the desert, the never-ending hill of sand;
and the immense empty red arch of heaven] ("El sueño en el desierto" [The Dream in the desert] 74).

Here we see how Casal uses several categories of the infinite, what goes beyond the limits: immensity, the endless desert, the absence of color, the monotony of space; all of these represent what escapes earthly limitations and face man with an inaccessible mystery. This quest for reaching the unknown regions of knowledge fills the poetry of the modernistas with unresolved dichotomies that deal with their ideal dream versus the imperfect reality of the world.

The contradiction between the ideal poetry and the reality of existence is not resolved in Casal or later in Darío. The suffering caused by "no saber adónde vamos ni de dónde

venimos” [not knowing whither we go or whence we come] (466) lamented by Darío in “Lo fatal” finally destroys the modernistas dreams of rhythmical harmony. Conscious that the mystery cannot be unfolded, the modernistas would remain hanging in the limit. They question what their lives mean to the universe and try to surpass their existential agonies through their poems, because poetry, as discourse, an art of logos, becomes the only instrument with which they can undertake this venture. The problem is that their exploration eventually reaches a dead end: while their poetic creations can only be a work of language because for human beings “no hay experiencia ni fenómeno sin logos (sin lenguaje)” [there is neither experience nor phenomena without logos (without language)] (Lógica 192). At the same time, as seen in the agonizing examples of Darío’s “Lo fatal” or Casal’s poems, death appears in the very moment they use their logos; as Michel Foucault reminds us, “death is undoubtedly the most essential of the accidents of language (its limit and its center)” (55).

All of these topics addressed by the poets of Modernismo were also common in Quiroga’s first texts.¹⁴ It is not a coincidence, then, that an early poem, entitled “Nocturno” [Nocturnal] (1898), speaks of the predilection of the modernistas (and previously of the romantics) for the atmosphere of the night. In Quiroga’s poetic prose, as in Casal’s examples, the nocturnal desolation is felt in the landscape: “Ha caído la tarde. La Naturaleza desmaya, presa de irremediable sopor” [The evening has fallen. Nature faints, prey to an irremediable lethargy] (28). At the end, the poet concludes that “Todo es misterio; y la noche, con una tristeza infinita, llena el espacio...” [Everything is a mystery; and the night, with an infinite sadness, fills up the space...] (29). The same dual oppositions seen in Casal are presented here, in particular that of light and darkness, together with every common term

¹⁴ All of the quotations from Quiroga’s texts in this section come from Obras inéditas y desconocidas: época modernista, vol. 8 (1967).

of romantic sensibility towards nature: the wind, the moon, the mystery, or the chromatic metaphors, among others. A similar interpretation of nature is also seen later in “Religiosa” [Religious], a text that appeared in Revista del Salto in 1899. Here, Quiroga recreates a scene of a priest suffering with the thought that he is wasting his life because he took an oath of chastity. The decadent subject is presented in the middle of a highly chromatic landscape infused with every expression of the romantic sensibility: dusk brings tedium and boredom to man’s life and the hymns of the soul rise in a nocturnal atmosphere that is absolutely predominant in the text.

In this period of his work, nature appears as the background of a series of scenes, or the place where the soul exteriorizes itself through two moments of the day (dusk and dawn) and two colors (light and dark). This chromaticism does not show the real colors of nature but, instead, only expresses the chromatic subjectivity of the author. Quiroga himself, in “Colores y estatuas” [Colors and statues] (1899), would list his beloved colors and their relation to the different life stages and their symbolism. The relevance of colors, particularly those of the landscape, can also be seen in poems like “Rojo y negro” [Red and black], in which the intense purple of the twilight announces the silence of the night where death surrounds the gloomy gardens during feverish nights and shadowy dreams (190-191). Moreover, chromatic symbolism can also be seen as a reinterpretation of the synesthetic experiments done by French Symbolists and Decadents and plays an important part in Quiroga’s literary productions after his voyage to Paris, when he returns to his salteño friends and the bohemian way of life of the “Consistorio del Gay Saber” [Gay Science Consistory].

The previous examples can easily lead us to conclude with Pablo Rocca that Quiroga “atravesó la condición de epígono del decadentismo francés y del modernismo

hispanoamericano” [he went through an epigonal phase with French Decadentism and Spanish American Modernismo] (8). Obviously, in his literary debut, the young Quiroga is seeing nature through the eyes of literature, but soon the description of the landscape acquires a more active role in his literature. Around the same years that Quiroga published those poems that later gave him the reputation as an epigone, he writes the short fiction, “Sin razón pero cansado” [Tired, Without a Reason], originally published in the magazine La Alborada in 1900 and later included in Los arrecifes de coral [The Coral Reefs] (1901). This story tells the tale of a love triangle between the characters, Luciano, Recaredo and his wife, Blanca. Beyond the decadent flavor of the story, it is worth looking at the description of nature.

In the first line, we are faced with the omnipresent dusk typical of the poems and prose analyzed before. The description of the effects of the absence of light indicates how the landscape affects human emotion. The twilight, the shadows, and the languished lights bring tedium, ataxia, and lethargy, which are the feelings that epitomize the personalities of the two male characters. Later, when both characters talk about Luciano’s infidelity with Blanca, the description of the landscape indicates that nature has an influence on their lives and they feel the environment as heavy and motionless:

el ambiente estaba fijo, ni una llama se movía. Las hojas de los árboles no temblaban, aletargadas bajo la exhausta depresión de la atmósfera quieta, palpable sobre los músculos, palpable sobre los últimos movimientos insignificantes, de una pesadez abrumadora en el solo levantamiento de una mano...

[the atmosphere was static, not a single flame flickered. The tree leaves did not shake, lethargic under the exhausting pressure of the still atmosphere, tangible in the muscles, tangible in the last insignificant movements, from the overwhelming heaviness of the mere raising of a hand...] (116).

Gradually, the lagoon that surrounds them starts imposing its presence: “la laguna había surgido silenciosamente del fondo sobre ese cauce preparado de noche, había surgido lentamente con su infinito amarillo inmóvil, siempre visible y fijo en la lontananza” [the lagoon had risen silently from the background over that path prepared at night, it had risen slowly with its endless stagnant yellow, always visible and fixed in the distance] (116). This example shows the nature of the lagoon with the form of a *teatro mundi* that has arisen spontaneously. At the same time that nature imposes itself as a sudden and spontaneous presence, it also appears as an ever-present stage that seems to creep over the characters’ finite condition as humans.

The ending of the story, when Luciano kills Blanca, had to happen during twilight, as the beginning of the story did, and in the middle of a nature that reflects Luciano’s emotions and is a backdrop for the murder. The coldness of the approaching night and the slow agony that begins to overtake the landscape creates an atmosphere of fatality: “una lenta agonía iba apoderándose del paisaje en la desventura irremediable de las últimas tardes...” [a slow agony was taking over the landscape in the unfathomable misfortune of the last evenings...] (117). The nature described by the narrator creates an intense sensation of death and emptiness that concludes in the water of the lagoon, that Luciano stares at insistently after the murder of Blanca:

Luciano quedó rendido, de pie, mirando las ondulaciones no pensaba en nada [...] Su cabeza, ni erguida ni baja, distraídamente fija, continuó por largo rato mirando el agua.

[Luciano ended up exhausted, standing up, while watching the undulations he was not thinking about anything (...) His head, neither leaning back nor forward, fixed inattentively, remained watching the water for a long time] (117).

Luciano, Recaredo, and Blanca are presented as characters who act out their life in the stage of nature and seem to be doomed by the same fatality and tediousness of the nature described by the narrator. Luciano assimilates the immovility of the lagoon that holds Blanca's dead body: his tedium and abulia are nothing more than a disdain for action and not even in the act of killing does he find satisfaction, he remains still as the lagoon in which the drama of his life is acted out.

The character of Luciano, a limited human being, ignores the fact that nature, like himself, is an unbridled force over which human beings go on with their lives, without knowing that this force can cut their thread of vitality with the slightest of movements, as Luciano, with the slight movement of his hands, strangles and kills Blanca. Everything in the story is moved by a lack of plot and purpose: the murder occurs as the slow agony that was taking over the landscape. In "Sin razón pero cansado" nature gains a new role: it is not so much the place where the action takes place, but the atmosphere that surrounds the characters and influences their actions. It also possesses the chromatic symbolism typical of Quiroga's poems and prose of this period, but it starts being the stage on which the drama of death is acted out: "el tono uniforme y mate daba la sensación de una existencia glacial que la laguna hubiera vivido eternamente en un eterno sin reflejo, eternamente fría con su helado descolorido" [the uniform and opaque tone gave the sensation of a glacial existence that the lagoon would have eternally lived in an eternity without reflection, eternally cold with its faded frozenness] (116).

In the eternal space of nature, Luciano decides to experience the passive death of the other. Involved in the drama of life, he finally takes an active role in causing Blanca's death but is still a passive individual in relation to nature. At the end of the story, the stage is only

a “paisaje lunar” [lunar landscape] (118), which creates a seemingly tangible dreamlike landscape that replicates Luciano and Recaredo’s coldness and grief for living a meaningless physical life. Not even death alters the stage or its actors. When Recaredo comes back and discovers the murder of his wife, everything remains the same:

Recaredo le había seguido día a día, tedio a tedio, sonrisa a sonrisa; y a su vez, ante la prueba convencida de que no había podido ser de otro modo, se dejó caer en el bote, con el desaliento de lo que no puede tener variación y ha de hostigarnos siempre con su matemática vulgaridad.

[Recaredo had accompanied him day after day, tedium after tedium, smile after smile; and at the same time, when facing the certain proof that it could not have happened differently, he let himself fall on the boat, with the discouragement of what cannot have variation and must always besiege us with its mathematical vulgarity] (118).

In “Sin razón pero cansado,” nature is not yet the active driving force that causes death but begins warning us that soon it will take a more active role in Quiroga’s literature. The lagoon does not merely receive the result of human violence, but also absorbs it, as the water literally swallows Blanca’s body: “y cayó, bajo el agua que la absorvía” [and she fell, under the water that was absorbing her] (117). In future stories, death will stop hiding behind the stillness of the landscape and will appear as an inherent quality of the stage on which man lives, acts, and works.

CHAPTER 3

THE STAGE OF NATURE AND THE LIMIT OF DEATH

As we saw in Fleming and Jitrik's interpretation, Quiroga's Modernismo has traditionally been understood as epigonal, as a literary fashion from which he would soon escape. According to studies like those of Rodríguez Monegal or Jitrik that have dictated the canonical interpretation of Quiroga's literature, his literary production under Modernismo is nothing more than a necessary step which he needed to overcome in order to reach the greatness of his fictions that take place in Misiones. At the same time, critics like Shoemaker affirm that some aspects of Modernismo are still present in his best short stories, such as "A la deriva" or "El hombre muerto." These two interpretations are difficult to reconcile. However, it is necessary to raise the question of whether Quiroga was only partially a modernista or whether it was a fad he followed insofar as his initial works reveal a conception of death and nature that cannot be diminished for the paucity of its literary value. As Quiroga stated in his article, "Aspectos del Modernismo" (1899) [Aspects of Modernismo]: "la literatura no declina: evoluciona. Y evoluciona con nosotros, con nuestro modo de ver, de pensar y de sentir" [Literature does not decline: it evolves. And it evolves with us, with our way of seeing, thinking and feeling] (50). This is exactly what happens to Quiroga: as a result of the constant evolution of his vision, his literature changes accordingly. If we look at one of the definitions of the term, evolution is "the process by which living organisms or their parts develop from a rudimentary to a mature or complete state" ("Evolution"). Through this definition, we can assume that humans are more evolved than

animals in the sense that we have reached a more advanced stage in the evolutionary process. Nevertheless, if we look at the biological example, humans could be in a more evolved stage, but this does not necessarily mean that we are better suited than a gorilla, for instance, for surviving in the wilderness of the jungle.

Following this analogy, evolution, in the case of Quiroga, can also be seen as the result of an adaptation to the environment. Once he experiences the jungle of Misiones, Quiroga stops seeing nature as both a sacred mystery and a transcendental landscape that decorate his fictions, and discovers a similar revelation felt by the character of “El salvaje” [The Savage] (1920):

desde miles de años la especie humana va al desastre. Ha vuelto al mono guardando la inteligencia del hombre. No hay en la civilización un solo hombre que tenga un valor real si se le aparta. Y ni uno solo podría gritar a la Naturaleza: yo soy.

[For thousands of years the human species goes towards disaster. It has returned to the stage of the ape while retaining human intelligence. There is not a single man in civilization that has real value if he is separated from civilization. And not a single one would scream to Nature: I am] (241).

After Quiroga has been in contact with the wild nature that faces him with real and tangible death, he gets rid of the previous rhetoric that does not correspond with the new environment he tries to narrate in his fictions. This makes us think that Quiroga evolves as a writer who needs new techniques with which to communicate his new vision.

Continuing with Quiroga’s evolution, I will now analyze the devotion to death that marks the short stories that gave Quiroga his reputation as “el fundador del cuento moderno en Hispanoamérica” [the founder of the modern short story of Latin America] (Lafforgue 7). This relationship between death and nature that I have just traced in his early literary

production can also be observed in his short stories, produced from 1912 to 1933.¹⁵ The ominous presence of death in these stories and in Quiroga's life has generated an important body of criticism in which death becomes the favorite device of biographical studies.¹⁶ In his essay, Jitrik traces the evolution of Quiroga's treatment of death, stating that

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.

[gradually he approaches death's sphere, exceeding the resort generally employed as a solution for conflicts, in order to arrive at the occurrence of death, to the expression of a dimension in which man acts and to which he is somehow devoted] (113).

Already in 1959, the Argentinean critic discusses the two main avenues of literary criticism on Quiroga —biographical and metaphysical interpretations— to conclude that Quiroga's originality manifests itself in his “estrecha vinculación con la disposición para la experiencia” [close link with the disposition for experience] (60). Even then, there will always be something that man will not be able to experience, a knowledge that can never be acquired, or an incident in which he will find his ultimate limit: death. As Trías explains: “nunca un muerto puede volver al lugar del habla, ni un vivo puede, en tanto que vivo, traspasar la zona fronteriza y encaminarse al Hades o al Infierno” [a dead person can never

¹⁵ Every study implies a necessary selection and I am aware that I am leaping from poems and texts written from 1898-1902 to fictions from 1912-1933. What Quiroga wrote from 1902 to 1912 has no place in this article, not because a lack of value, but because many of the stories written in this period would later be included in his book Cuentos de amor de locura y de muerte. From 1903 to 1917 Quiroga published many stories in the literary magazine Caras y caretas and other collaborations in journals like Fray Mocho. He also published the short stories of El crimen del otro [The Crime of the Other] (1904), strongly influenced by Edgar Allan Poe, and two novels: Los perseguidos [The Prosecuted] (1905) and Historia de un amor turbio [History of a Shady Love] (1908). For more information on Quiroga's production, see the chronology by Oscar Masotta and Jorge R. Lafforgue and Walter Rela's Horacio Quiroga. Repertorio bibliográfico anotado (1972).

¹⁶ For a thorough and concise exposition of the tragic life of Quiroga, see Augusto Monterroso's “Las muertes de Horacio Quiroga” (1985).

return to the place of speech, neither can a live person, being alive, go beyond the frontier zone and make his way to Hades or Hell] (Lógica 366).

In these short stories, the representation of nature gains another level of transcendence. In texts like “A la deriva” or “El hombre muerto,” Quiroga overcomes the dualities of triumph and failure, of everything and nothing, and of plenitude and emptiness, which characterize most of the modernista creations. Through this evolution, he becomes the narrator of the fundamental wound of modern literature: the limit of death. In these stories, the desert and the wilderness of nature no longer symbolize emptiness or plenitude. Unlike his modernista poems, man is not a passive individual anymore who contemplates the landscape in order to see himself in it. Instead, both nature and man are active subjects that coexist in a constant struggle. 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.

[for Quiroga nature is hard and aggressive. If man would passively expect for ecstasy or the abyssal sensation of his being from nature, he would be devoured by vipers, or by giant ants or by bugs and insects] (96).

Every single one of these deaths listed by Jitrik happens in the wild nature of the jungle of Misiones. In these fictions, nature is now the stage upon which the transition is acted out, where man embarks on the journey towards the frontier zone that is death.

“La miel silvestre” would be a good example of the fierce ants that Jitrik mentions but, more importantly, it stands out as an illustration of how the forest of Misiones is portrayed as a theater: “la aventura de los dos robinsones, sin embargo fuera acaso más formal de haber tenido como teatro otro bosque” [the adventure of the two Robinsons would otherwise be more formal if they have had another forest as a theater] (115). Here, for the

first time, there is a direct reference of the *teatro mundi* that was only sensed beneath the descriptions of the landscape in “Sin razón pero cansado.” Nature now loses the abstract component of its previous images and there is a focus on real dangers: tangible wild animals that share the stage of nature with humans and can decide human fate, whether man lives or dies.

Soon enough, the main character, Benincasa, will discover this terrible threat in the form of the ants known as “la corrección” [the correction]. The protagonist underestimates the dangers of the jungle: he finds a honeycomb and proceeds to drink the honey, being ignorant to the fact that it will poison him and cause his death. Before arriving at his fatal end, the narrator describes nature 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.

[the silent and crepuscular jungle tired him soon. He was under the exact impression of a stage seen in the daylight. At that time of the day from the turbulent tropical life there is nothing more than a frozen theater; there are no animals nor birds nor almost a noise] (117).

Nature, as the stage upon which the drama of life is acted out, fools him with in the illusion of its motionlessness and, therefore, grants him with 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 life as a student, the protagonist, described as “un muchacho pacífico, gordinflón y de cara rosada” [a peaceful, chubby guy with a ruddy face] (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 the actor of something greater. In this sense, he is similar to the main

character in “El salvaje” that “estaba cansado del comercio con los hombres y de la civilización, que todo se lo daba hecho; por lo que se aburría” [he was tired of the interaction with men and civilization that gave him everything already made; that’s why he was bored]

(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.

[the typical sign of Quiroga’s jungle (...) is the foundation of a sacred place where man, pulled out from his origin and corrupted in his originally good nature, is called to prove his own condition] (134-135).

In the story, Benincasa felt the “fulminante deseo de conocer la vida de la selva” [devastating desire of knowing life in the jungle] (115). Nature appears as the stage 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” [in Misiones evasions can lead to unexpected limits] (115). Nothing would be more unexpected to Benincasa than his own death, his ultimate limit. The motionlessness of the space and the unlimited horizon that he contemplates make him forget his limitations as a human being. Benincasa wants to experience the unexpected limits of the jungle, probably looking for tales of courage to bring to his friends in the city, but what he finds instead is his death, because in the *teatro mundi* of Misiones, the jungle makes evident the limited and mortal condition of man.

The jungle is not the only place in which this limit can be experienced. For instance, in the city the limit is disguised, postponed or ritualized through the masking of death: hospitals, morgues, wake rooms, etc. In stories like “Una estación de amor” [One Season of Love] (1912) or “El almohadón de plumas” [The Feather Pillow] (1907) death is something

about to happen, and reveals 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 the society of the dying individual. As shown in the story, “La cámara oscura” [The Dark Room] (1920), the wife 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 memories of death remain in the jungle, like 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 the uncle finds two days later.

“La miel silvestre” opens up Quiroga’s literature to a nature that stops being a passive receptacle of symbols. From the short stories of Cuentos de amor de locura y de muerte on, nature is not internalized but externalized in a narration that goes from the very instant in which a man, in his quotidian work, is assaulted by a death that is awaiting him behind the bushes or in his unexpected clumsiness. The narrator of these stories recounts the journey from the imminence of death to its effective fulfillment, now expressed in the fiction. As José Enrique Etcheverry points out, 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” [eliminates every abstract condition: more than the subject of death is that of the man that is dying, a passionate actor of his definitive existence] (269).

Man is an actor, nature is the stage. On a deeper level, Quiroga overcomes the modernista poets’ anguish as his work presents itself as the narrator-mediator of this limit, as a witness of the transition from life to death. Nature in Quiroga’s initial work, as it was for

his contemporary modernistas, was implied by the poet without actually being physically present in the poems. The quest initiated by the modernistas at the end of the nineteenth century was not only to look for what a man is in the realm of *being* —a thinking, but limited creature— but also to find his place in the world, in the new materialist society. What goes beyond the limits of human life concerns to both of these concepts. Men are in the world, but at some point they will not be, so they stop being part of it and depart to the zone of the ineffable. In this interpretation of Quiroga's literature, I consider both realms: on the one hand, *being* relates to the impossible experience of narrating death, because death is the place where we cannot be, but on the other hand, we are certainly present in the place where death occurs. In the selected works of Quiroga discussed in this article, that place is usually none other than nature.

The interconnections between death and nature in Quiroga's literature bring a new perspective to the common destiny that man and nature shape together throughout Latin American literature. Before him, the Romantics represent nature as a supreme presence that seizes the human senses. The case of Quiroga would be similar with respect to the overpowering presence, but the effect is not that of the character feeling overwhelmed. Instead, the result is that of the character experiencing the limit of being at once part of and foreign to nature. In this sense, Quiroga destroys the idea that human beings are more than nature, better than any other being just because they are conscious of their existence. In experiencing the limit, his characters are the same as any other living creature; they finish their lives being incapable of making sense of what is to be found “on the other side.” Moreover, Quiroga's move is highly secularizing: his literature does not pretend to give metaphysical explanations, it does not open a door to a divine presence. Nature is not divine,

it is just nature; the human character is not permanent, nor sublime, he is just nature, and as nature, he finds an end.

Quiroga exemplifies this vision of nature in the short stories that gave him fame. Texts like “A la deriva” or “El hombre muerto” expose us to the limit of death from their very beginning. Their abrupt openings direct themselves to the very center of the gap that goes from the imminent revelation of death in man’s consciousness to its effective accomplishment. This revelation of the certitude of death 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” [acquired, the cold, mathematical and inexorable security that he was just arriving to the end of his existence] (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” [I acquire from this very instant the clearest and primordial certitude that, at ground level, my life is waiting for the immediacy of a few seconds to be extinguished in one go] (51).

Death abruptly ends the narration and involves it in the mystery that closes every man’s life, since that impassable wall cannot be crossed by language. As we see in “A la deriva,” one of Quiroga’s paradigmatic fictions, the narration does not end in Hades or the afterlife, but in the mere physical act in which a man 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

[The man slowly stretched the fingers of his hand.
—On a Thursday...
And he ceased to breathe] (69).

From the opening line, once the snake bites the main character, Paulino, he 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” [funereally box the river] (69). The forest gets dark, forming an “eterna muralla lúgubre” [eternal mournful rampart] (69). The canoe rushes in the middle of an “aggressive landscape” where a “deathly silence” (69) prevails and where there is still space for beauty: “al atardecer, sin embargo, su belleza sombría y calma cobra una majestad única” [at sunset, however, its gloomy and calm beauty acquires a unique majesty] (69). Behind the familiarity of a landscape where the man works, there is a background of death that is waiting for him. The same calmness and beauty of the landscape makes the man 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” [the poison was starting to disappear, there was no doubt. He was feeling almost well, and even though he had no strength to move his hand, he relied on the dew drops to get completely better] (69). The river continues its eternal flow; the man, on the other hand, in his hallucinated 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” [his well-fare was progressing and with it came a sleepiness full of memories] (69).¹⁷ 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” [the sky was opening to the west in a screen of gold], “el monte dejaba caer

¹⁷ This remembering is believed by scientists to be part of the death process; see Dr. Raymond Moody’s Life after Life.

sobre el río su frescura crepuscular en penetrantes efluvios de azahar y miel silvestre” [the mountain let its crepuscular freshness fall to the river, in penetrating effluviiums of lemon blossom and wild honey] (69).

In “A la deriva,” Paulino, as a time based being, clings on to his past, whereas the exuberant eternity of nature acts out the conflict of the human finite condition: the awareness of being transitory in the middle of the eternal. This conflict, narrated in less than four pages, shows the depth of one of the stories which has received more critical attention than others. In 1973, Jaime Alazraki proposed a new approach to the works of Horacio Quiroga based on their realism, which, according to him, is at the center of Quiroga’s narrations. In his interpretation, the critic states that the material dimension has substituted the metaphysical dimension in Quiroga’s fictions and, therefore, the metaphysical is completely absent.¹⁸ His article focuses on “A la deriva,” “El hijo” [The son] (1928) and “El hombre muerto,” because these stories are mainly based on the description of the character’s surroundings. Nature encloses them with its reality, whereas death is marked by a strong sense of lack of reality that manifests itself in the impossibility of these characters accepting its occurrence to them.

With articles like those of 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” with “El hombre muerto,”

¹⁸ This interpretation agrees with what Saúl Yurkievich stated in 1960 about the absence of metaphysical value in this short story. On the other hand, Shoemaker stresses the metaphysical force that drags the man capriciously; he emphasizes the importance of chromaticism, together with the use of synesthesia and the repetitions of the verb “to feel,” are still marks of Modernismo.

written eight years later. Both stories narrate the journey from life to death, but while the first one recounts the character's physical reactions to death together with his effort to remember a superficial event in his life, the second gives more importance to the narrator's reflection about death. Moreover, in "El hombre muerto," the elements of nature no longer reflect death as its symbolic mirror but, instead, are the stage where human futility is acted out. Unlike "A la deriva," where nature acquires funeral tonalities or shines with a golden effluvium, the stage where the man dies in "El hombre muerto" is marked by an absence of color and a more austere description:

todo, todo exáctamente 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.

[everything, everything exactly as it always is; the sun of fire, the vibrant and solitary wind, the still banana trees, the fence made of very thick and tall posts, which he will soon have to change (...) nothing, nothing has changed, only he is different. As of two minutes ago... he is dying] (688-89).

This change in the presentation of nature marks a new step in the permanent evolution of Quiroga's literature: beginning with Cuentos de amor de locura y de muerte, the nature of his stories starts losing its decorative elements and increasingly becomes more and more an austere stage. The decrease in the use of decoration results in a more powerful insistence upon human fleetingness. We have already seen how Paulino, the main character of "A la deriva," tries to get in contact with his past through both his godfather, Alves, and his ex-boss, trying hard to remember the day he met the latter. This attempt might seem arbitrary, but it shows that the protagonist's mental processes are being affected by death and it also has a powerful meaning with regard to the human condition: what we have is time, time is the

substance we are made of, and it is what we desperately try to hold on to when we know our moment has come.

“A la deriva” is not the only story where this certainty is experienced. In “Los desterrados,” (1925) the two characters, Joao Pedro and Tirafofo, two old Brazilians living in Misiones, start missing their homeland after a long and mean life; they are described as “enmudecidos por aquella tardía sed de la patria” [mute by that late thirst for the homeland] (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” [we are far from our land my friend Tirá... And one day we’ll have to die] (666). This revelation marks the moment when the characters are described by their childish tenderness and are moved by their “recuerdos natales que acudían a sus mentes con la facilidad y transparencia de los de una criatura” [natal memories that were coming to their minds with the ease and transparency of those of a child] (667).¹⁹

Among all the journeys towards death narrated by Quiroga, this is probably the most affectionate and passionate, 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.

[hope to forget pains, soothe ingratitudes, purify oneself from deceptions. Erase the dregs of life already much lived, be a child once again; moreover: return to the primitive not being, before gestation and all existence: all of these is what death offers us with its rest without nightmares] (93).

¹⁹ 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 two characters in “Los desterrados” seem to share a destiny similar to the one described by Quiroga in his letter. At the end of the story, after an exhausting journey through the jungle towards Brazil, 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 bring 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” [in an expression of children’s joy] (669). In this story Quiroga still keeps us within the limit, his characters die at the very border of their homeland and death grants them the illusion of their final return home, where they could finally stop being exiles. Nevertheless, the miracle remains impossible; the limit of death is still as untraversable as the border of their homeland for Tirafofo and Joao Pedro.²⁰

²⁰ According to Rodríguez Monegal, Los desterrados 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 relating 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. Only years after Quiroga’s passing will the idea of death as a return acquire a significant and transcendental meaning in the work of the next generation of Latin American writers. This representation of death reappears in Alejo Carpentier’s “Viaje a la semilla” [Journey Back to the Source] (1944) and in the masterful opening of Gabriel García Márquez’s Cien años de soledad [One Hundred Years of Solitude] (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 and Carpentier 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. On the other hand, 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 of novels like José Eustasio Rivera’s La vorágine [The Vortex] (1924) or Carpentier’s Los pasos perdidos [The Lost Steps] (1953). The difference again is that Quiroga’s literature is not a project of continuation. In the examples of Rivera and Carpentier, there is an intratextual permanence: the protagonists of both fictions embark on a project in the jungle that fails, in the case of Carpentier, and ends up in death in the case of Rivera. 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. Instead, Horacio Quiroga proposes a study of the human being in its finitude: his characters are in the present, they perish in nature and they do not go beyond nature, either metaphysically or metatextually.

CHAPTER 4

WRITING FROM THE “GREAT BEYOND”

So far, we have explored the way Quiroga narrates the journey towards death in the middle of nature. Death in his first poems was a mystery, an idea that inflamed the transcendental longings of the young Quiroga. Later, it would become a *teatro mundi* in which life is presented as a journey, the final day of which remains unknown for its actors. However, before the curtain closes, the only certainty that they have is that they will dwell on that stage without knowing what lies behind the curtain. The impossibility that this representation implies is accordingly included in his fictions: 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. Quiroga, as a writer, must make use of narration to recount the journey from life to death. In the case of “El hombre muerto,” he takes the place of the traditional omniscient narrator, but decides to go beyond that point to get closer to his 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 purely realistic (77). Even though this statement holds true for the vast majority of Quiroga’s work, the literary analysis would remain incomplete if we fail to incorporate a philosophical approach in order to understand the ontological dimension of his literary project.

Obviously literature is a linguistic art, an art of logos and, according to Trías, “a través de imágenes o de tramas argumentales, se nos comunica y narra la relación entre el habitante del mundo y ese mundo” [through images or plots, they communicate and narrate to us the relation between the inhabitant of the world and that world] (Lógica 204). This is exactly what happens with the third person who narrates the death from the outside. The narrator of “A la deriva” and “El hombre muerto” situates himself in the limit of the world. As Trías points out in his philosophical explanation of the place of the narrator:

el narrador se halla en el límite del mundo, enroscado en esa frontera [...] Desde ella dice ese sujeto algo relativo a lo que en el mundo sucede o acontece. En el ámbito de las artes del signo ese sujeto ha sido detectado como lugar del narrador [...] Ese lugar puede permanecer elíptico, o puede ser encarnado por un ambiguo personaje que se halla dentro-y-fuera [...] del relato que se cuenta.

[the narrator is situated in the limit of the world, coiled in that frontier (...) From there the subject says something relative to what happens or occurs in the world. In the sphere of the arts of the sign, that subject has been detected as the place of the narrator (...) That place can remain elliptical, or it can be incarnated by an ambiguous character that is situated inside-and-outside (...) of the story that is being told] (Lógica 207).

One of the essential qualities of Quiroga’s fictions is that they appropriate the place that Trías describes as the place of the narrator: the limit of the world, which narratology will describe as external focalization.²¹ The third person narrator of “A la deriva” and “El hombre muerto” is captured in the fracture of his characters’ lives from the opening paragraph: in narrating their certain death, the narrator can only speak of their physical reactions or about the lack of reality of such an unexpected event. The reader never knows what the two men find on the other side, because the narration only brings tangible and live words of what remains inside the limits of this world. Nonetheless, there is a story in which the stage of nature leaves the curtain open to the great beyond. The text where this happens is “Las moscas,” included in

²¹ For a detailed explanation of the relation of art and metaphysics see Trías’ Los límites del mundo (72-160).

his last published book, Más allá [Great Beyond] (1935) and described with a subtitle that says “Réplica a ‘El hombre muerto’” [Answer to “The Dead Man”]. Again, we are faced with the story of a man who suffers an accident that causes his death. The premise is the same as in “A la deriva” or “El hombre muerto”: death comes and nothing changes. The man stops belonging to this world, but the nature that surrounds him will remain here: “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” [the rains will follow wetting bark and clothes, and the suns will dry lichens and hairs, until the mountain sprouts and unifies trees and potash, bones and footwear leather] (52). The only difference now is the conclusion. At the end of the story, once the man is dead, his ego disperses itself in nature, becoming the flies nurtured by the decomposed corpse.

Carlos J. 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 common end of every previous text, the critic gives little relevance to this fiction: “el relato no es ni particularmente significativo ni original” [the story is not particularly significant nor original] (207) and only interests him in demonstrating 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. The two extremes of Quiroga’s literary production, the beginning and the end, have been disdained by critics. However, in stories like “Las moscas,” Quiroga poses a new possibility for the limit of death that shows a new step in the evolution of this subject. If before in his literary production, the narrator was consistently situated in the limit

of the world, now he adopts the perspective of what exists beyond it. As Quiroga's own death approaches, is this the "Great Beyond" that the title of Quiroga's last book announced?²²

From "Más allá" [Great Beyond] (1925), the opening story of the book, death is treated as something that needs to be surpassed or as the place where the characters would find peace. Later, in stories like "El vampiro" [The Vampire] (1927) or "El puritano" [The Puritan] (1926), the characters would be in touch with the great beyond through esoteric experiments connected to the experience of cinema. These fictions are not relevant to my analysis because they do not deal with the experience of death in nature, however they reveal an insistent preoccupation for the unknown in Quiroga's last published book. There is only one text in which the limits of the unknown are revealed in nature: "Las moscas." As critics like Shoemaker or Alonso have noticed, this fiction can be grouped with other stories like "A la deriva" or "El hombre muerto," in the sense that all of them share a similar approach to the subject of death. The difference is that the last two texts have an external focalization: they are narrated through an omniscient third person. This narrative point of view reaches a new level in "El hombre muerto," where it begins to merge with the character's voice. "Las moscas," an answer or a coda to this story, goes beyond its antecedent in two ways: unifying narrator and character with only one voice and fulfilling the dying man's desire of elevating himself to abandon his body and start seeing everything from the air:

puede aún alejarse con la mente, si quiere; puede si quiere abandonar un instante su cuerpo y ver desde el tamar 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

²² Más allá is an eclectic book and, 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 stories like "El vampiro" or "El puritano," in the fantastic genre, but it also contains narrations like "Las moscas" or "El hijo" that bring the readers back to the stage of the jungle.

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.

[he can still move away with the mind, if he wants; he can if he wants abandon his body for one instant and see from the breakwater built by him, the same trivial landscape as always (...) And yet farther away he can see the field, the fruit of his labor. And at the foot of a post stripped of its bark, laying on his right side, exactly like everyday, he can see himself, like a small lump under the sun, on the grass] (“El hombre muerto” 690).²³

What was set out as aspiration later becomes a reality in “Las moscas.” The desire of the character from “El hombre muerto” to fly out and depart from body is accomplished at the end of its textual answer, when the man’s voice, and more importantly the man’s vision, become the flies teeming from his own body’s decomposition. 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 limit of the narrator and the character, the limit of life and death, and finally the limit of man and nature. These three limits are presented in previous texts with a sense of impossibility, but only in “Las moscas” do they acquire their final overcoming.

As Shoemaker underscores, “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” [no other story reveals with the same preoccupation the attempt for resolving the enigma of the great Nothingness that death represents to man. Therefore, the story represents a culmination] (262). The critic finally 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 limit of death is acted out insofar as the character

²³ Similar examples of near-death experiences can be found in Moody.

dies working in the jungle and, for the first time in the selected stories discussed here, nature reveals the transition from human life to insect life: man's consciousness can cross the wall that death imposes in life and experience the afterlife, being able to bring words from the unknown region. More importantly, according to this story, the afterlife is nothing more than nature: the man stops being human to transform into flies, that is to say, he becomes nature. In this moment of Quiroga's literary production, the great beyond is not the heavenly regions that inflame his young modernista creations but, instead, is a mere continuation of life in the eternal cycle of nature. The evolution of the relationship between man and nature reaches a new level with this story. If before, nature was the cause of death and the stage on which man experienced his limited condition, with "Las moscas," the signs of antagonism disappear in order to reveal that man is 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 in 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 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" (Engels 241), 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. At the end, like the flies that come to life from the man'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, in the "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” (Engels 54). In the same letter to

Martínez Estrada from April 1936, Quiroga himself intuits this:

¿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.

[What if we reappear in a phosphate, in a sprout, in the beam of a prism? Much better, then. But the capital matter is the certainty, the undeniable security that there is a talisman for the excess of living or the excess of suffering or the constant despair. And the talisman is the infinitely sweet rest of the dream that we call death. I always felt (I think since I was very young) that the greatest torture that can be inflicted to a human being is to live eternally (...) Oh, no! The hope of living for a young tree has an identical essence as its waiting for dying once having already given its fruits. Both are diametrical radii of the same sphere] (93).

The evolution of Quiroga’s literature seems to be following the same direction, in the sense that its desire of permanence also ends in this world: both “Las moscas” and the previous letter agree to the idea that if we were to reappear it better be in a phosphate, a sprout or a fly than in heaven’s eternity. From the twilight of his first poems and prose to the reality of the jungle of his later stories, Quiroga develops a progressive desacralization of man and nature. As we saw in “A la deriva” or “El hombre muerto,” the characters of these stories perish in the limits of this world, ignoring what lies in the great beyond. While on the contrary, the latter text “Las moscas” proposes an alternative to this limit: eternity happens in this world, men do not just end in nature but also return to it and it is there that they begin again.

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