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THE SUPERNATURAL IN SHORT FICTION OF THE AMERICAS

The Other World in the New World

Dana Del George

The logo features a stylized green leaf motif to the left of the text.

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The Supernatural in Short Fiction of the Americas

The Other World in the New World

Dana Del George

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To Stevan

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Introduction

Among the many fascinations of the World Wide Web is “Interlupe,”¹ a site that represents a conglomeration of attitudes toward the supernatural spanning hundreds of years. The subject of this website is the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe to the Aztec Juan Diego in Mexico City in the year 1531: An image of the Virgin was miraculously imprinted on Juan Diego’s clothing and preserved as a relic. One of the links to “Interlupe,” entitled “The Eyes,” discusses scientific proof of the reality of the Virgin’s image: “[I]n 1944, analysis made by outstanding ophthalmologists identified micro artery circulation in the free edge of the image’s eyelids.” The website casts the Virgin of Guadalupe as a premodern miracle, a modern scientific fact, and a postmodern hypertext; thus, “Interlupe” may be viewed as a palimpsest of the intellectual history of the supernatural. Another such palimpsest is the short story, which was a popular medium for the expression of supernatural interests long before the internet existed and continues to be so today. This book traces the history of representations of the supernatural through short narratives of U.S. and Spanish-American literatures.

Belief in the supernatural has changed dramatically since the advent of modernity, and so has its literary representation. The arrival of European conquistadors and colonists in the Americas coincides with the beginnings of a major change in Western cosmology. In 1534, fifty years after Columbus landed in the West Indies, Copernicus published *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*. In 1620, the same year Plymouth Colony was founded, Francis Bacon published *Novum Organum*. These treatises exemplify how Western scholars began to prefer the inductive thinking of empiricism to the deductive reasoning of religious authority. The New World and the modern world were concurrently introduced to Western culture. While supernatural belief still abounded in the Americas for several centuries more, in the form of Christianity and Native American religions, the European Enlightenment found its way to the Americas at the end of the eighteenth century. And the Americas

were not without Enlightenment figures; for example, Benjamin Franklin was part of the circle of European intellectuals engaged in debunking the claims of the other world.

Even as the emerging nations of the New World began to identify themselves with modern Western culture, premodern cultures still thrived in the Americas, offering a view of a way of life that had become extinct in Europe. While only traces of premodern life remained in the Old World by the nineteenth century, Native American cultures survive to this day with their supernatural beliefs intact. Consequently, Pan-American (henceforth "American") supernatural literature is informed by plural versions of the other world. Religious beliefs that Enlightenment rhetoric reduced to "superstition" accounted for much of the intricate and varied cultural knowledge of the New World before the Europeans arrived, and much of this otherworldly knowledge can still be described objectively, since it is shared knowledge.

When the other world is depicted in literature, it is not merely a "secondary" world. The "other" world is a synonym for the supernatural, while a secondary world is the product of an individual writer's imagination. The genres of science fiction and fantasy, for instance, are not included in this study. Robert Heinlein distinguishes these two genres as "imaginary-but-possible" and "imaginary-and-not-possible," respectively (Davenport 18); they deal not in established beliefs but in projected ideas.² They fill a space left open by the removal of the supernatural from modern Western ideology. The other world of the supernatural, by definition, is inherent (if not in its totality) in the natural world. As such, the depiction of the other world will be, at least in part, a depiction of the world recognizable to the reader as his or her own. Verisimilitude in a supernatural story includes not only the representation of recognizable settings, objects, and character types but also of recognizable beliefs.

Modern narratives of the other world are complicated by the assumptions of their intended audience, which is usually either threatened by the traditional claims of the other world or nostalgic for its charms. "Modern," for the purposes of the following argument, is simply the consciousness of being modern. The self-proclaimed "modern" attempt to correct the errors of "primitive" thought or "superstition" flares up most intensely after the Enlightenment; and, on into the twentieth century, when critics refer to themselves and their age as "modern," they invoke a similar set of associations: science, progress, materialism, and psychology. The modern reader also has distinguishing characteristics of a practical kind. The limits of his or her leisure time have encouraged the development of new forms of storytelling and publication, including the short story and the magazine, which reach a wider audience than do many literary genres with a longer history. The short stories that appear in magazines and anthologies reach an audience with (one could argue) nearly the same facility as that with which folktales reached their original audience.

In the chapters that follow, I will argue that nineteenth- and twentieth-century supernatural stories are thematically an extension of premodern folktales, with the significant difference that they are written as fiction and have only a shadow of the reality ascribed by the premodern consciousness to supernatural stories. In modern times, which have fully arrived by the nineteenth century, the supernatural is no longer understood as an external and objective reality but rather as imaginary and interior phenomena projected by the self and in its own image. Although religious belief in the supernatural has survived in modern times, a defensive apologetics often accompanies the modern believer's mention of miracles, thus the "Interlupe" insistence on the scientific verifiability of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Reality continues to lose its status as external and objective in the twentieth century, when the project of discovering a universal truth is nearly abandoned.

For the purposes of my argument, I have developed a set of terms to describe the *episteme*, or consciousness, of the intended audience of a given text.³ The law of authority is my term for that which gives coherence to the premodern *episteme*; in modern times, the law of science governs the nineteenth-century *episteme*; and what I call the law of total fiction rules the twentieth-century *episteme*. The law of authority deems the supernatural more real and more powerful than the natural. The law of science conflates the natural and the real and locates the supernatural in the human imagination, which has the status of illusion. Finally, the law of total fiction rules when both the supernatural and the natural lose their status as real. This last category has characteristics associated with postmodernism.

The geographic boundaries of the present study are more an effort to address a lack of critical attention to American supernatural literature than an effort to make claims about American identity. The supernatural literature traditions of Germany and England, for instance, are well established and well studied, while the American supernatural literature tradition rarely receives notice beyond that accorded to certain works by Poe and Borges. Other works, like those of Mary Wilkins Freeman or Cristina Peri Rossi, deserve more critical attention because they offer a distinct depiction of the other world.

While American short fiction has found its way into theoretical discussions of supernatural literature, it is rarely discussed as a coherent continental tradition. Studies like Brian Attebery's *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin* need to be put into conversation with collections like *Otros mundos, otros fuegos: Fantasía y realismo mágico en Iberoamérica* [*Other Worlds, Other Fires: Fantasy and Magical Realism in Iberoamerica*]. This inter-American critical conversation about supernatural literature has begun in recent collections such as *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, and it continues here.

Chapter 1, "Coming to Terms with American Supernatural Short Fiction," begins with a brief review of critical studies of American cultural identity. I postulate a "usable eternal" as an alternative to the "usable past" that American

culture lacks. Then, I suggest that theoretical models of supernatural literature are faulty to the extent that they fail to acknowledge the instability of the meaning of the term “supernatural,” which is understood as a fact or a fiction depending on when it is used. While theories of the fantastic give an excellent account of nineteenth-century supernatural literature, the local-color ghost story of the same era received little attention; and critical work on the supernatural literature of the twentieth century, the neofantastic and magical realism, is still coming into focus. These three alternative genres are outlined in this chapter and discussed in more detail in later chapters. I emphasize and build on critical works that situate the genres of the fantastic and of the short story within their cultural-historical contexts.

Chapter 2, “The Law of Authority: The Complexity of the Other World,” demonstrates the intricacy of premodern supernatural narratives with close readings of several ancient and medieval texts; it offers a discussion of folktales and their appropriation by modern collectors, critics, and authors; and it concludes with a look at the first encounters of European and Native American supernatural beliefs. Throughout, I argue that premodern cultures with differing religious beliefs and languages have more in common with each other than they do with their own descendants, which are modern materialist cultures; indeed, the conflict of the first encounters of European and Native American beliefs proves their likeness. My treatment of premodern supernatural narratives serves as a background against which modern supernatural fiction will become clearer by contrast.

Chapter 3, “The Law of Science: Haunted Memories in an Age of Progress,” focuses on American literature of the nineteenth century, which exhibits opposing attitudes toward traditional beliefs: fright and sentimentality. American short stories that are written according to European models of fantastic fiction give their readers a chilling sense of the uncanny—as described by Freud—while regional ghost stories give their readers a sense of poignancy and even amusement. Both kinds of modern supernatural stories, and some curious hybrids of the two, represent a complex fusion of materialist biases and metaphysical fascinations; and, both use narrative devices that allow modern readers to suspend their disbelief in the supernatural in order to enjoy its emotional effects. In this chapter, U.S. literature is prominent, while Spanish-American literature is prominent in the fourth chapter.

Chapter 4, “The Law of Total Fiction: Life Is but a Dream,” defines the supernatural as its least common denominator: the relativization of time and space, which Jung described as characteristic of the collective and the individual unconscious. The regional ghost story becomes magical realism, and the fantastic becomes the neofantastic—two often indistinguishable genres marked by attitudes of nostalgia and uncertainty. The conflicting realities of magical realism reflect the conflicting cultures of the Americas, and a radical skepticism about the distinctions of Western philosophy allows the neofantastic to erase all kinds of boundaries, including the boundary between text and reader. Though

the twentieth-century *episteme* offers a heterogeneous and undecideable reality, free of the psychological limitations of science, its literature bears the marks of alienation because it is difficult to achieve community without concrete shared beliefs.

NOTES

1. [http:// pp.terra.com.mx/~msalazar/](http://pp.terra.com.mx/~msalazar/).

2. As noted by Daniel Timmons in “Mirror on Middle-earth: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Critical Perspectives,” Diss., University of Toronto, 1998.

3. By *episteme* I mean Foucault’s definition: “the epistemological field . . . in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or to its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility” (xxii). However, the *epistemes* delineated here do not match Foucault’s chronology.

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1

Coming to Terms with American Supernatural Short Fiction

If the nations of the Americas are young, comparative literary studies of the Americas are much younger. Only in the past fifteen years have scholarly studies of the literature of the Americas begun to accumulate. One such study is a collection of essays edited by Gustavo Pérez Firmat entitled *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* (1990). In his introduction, Pérez Firmat groups the essays into four distinct approaches to the study of literature of the Americas: generic, genetic, oppositional, and mediative (3). Alfred J. Mac Adam's book *Textual Confrontations: Comparative Readings in Latin American Literature* (1987) was among the first to offer an inter-American literary study, though British literature is better represented than U.S. literature in his essays. Mac Adam's thesis, which could be characterized as genetic, is that Latin American literature is "eccentric" in the context of Western literature and functions parodically: "Thus it gives back to what once were the centers of Western culture their own writing, now distorted and reshaped into something new" (x).

The eccentricity of the Americas is the subject of an essay by Lois Parkinson Zamora, which I take as my point of departure. First presented in Pérez Firmat's collection as "The Usable Past: The Idea of History in Modern U.S. and Latin American Fiction," Zamora's essay was later revised and included in her book, *The Usable Past: The Imagination of History in Recent Fiction of the Americas* (1997). Zamora argues that in the Americas there is an "impulse to create precursors rather than cancel them," which is evidence of "an anxiety of origins" brought about by the seeming lack of long-established cultural traditions (ix).

A USABLE ETERNAL: ALTERNATIVES TO HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

Zamora's thesis has explanatory power for much of American literature, but it does not account for the success of American supernatural stories, which offer

their readers unique satisfactions despite a lack of national history and without the pretense of one.¹ For example, an anxiety of origins is evident in a famous complaint of Nathaniel Hawthorne's, but in the scope of his body of work, the complaint loses validity. In the preface to *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne writes:

No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a Romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land. (quoted in Attebery 42)

Hawthorne's desire for a longer history and a more mysterious tradition may not have been satisfied by his native land, but his gloomy scenes of forests filled with Puritan evils are not lacking in intrigue. This is because Hawthorne's work did not depend entirely on his nation's short history. Where history failed him, the eternal did not. Hawthorne's allegories and romances have a high metaphysical content that compensates for the uselessness of American history. A short past does not hinder a young nation's connection to a timeless other world. American authors have at their disposal, if not a long historical record, at least a considerable inheritance of intricate supernatural beliefs.

Not only did the first European Americans have a detailed picture of the other world, they also encountered supernatural beliefs in Native American cultures. This encounter continues to reverberate in the fiction of contemporary authors like Alejo Carpentier, who concludes his famous statement, "On the Marvelous Real in America," with these words:

Because of the virginity of the land, our upbringing, our ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation constituted by its recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing [*mestizaje*], America is far from using up its wealth of mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real? (88)

Where Hawthorne complains of a country with "no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong," Carpentier celebrates a continent where "we have not yet begun to establish an inventory of our cosmogonies" (87). Where Hawthorne sees the historical poverty of the Americas, Carpentier sees the metaphysical wealth of the Americas, which is found in the many and varied mythologies and the cultural contrasts of the New World.

Carpentier insists on the importance of supernatural belief to literary inspiration; he states, "the phenomenon of the marvelous presupposes faith" (86). For Carpentier, an esoteric Western movement like Surrealism compares unfavorably to the marvelous reality of America because Surrealism is a "marvelous invoked in disbelief," "never anything more than a literary ruse" and therefore "boring" (86). The other marvelous world is not simply a product of an individual unconscious mind but is mapped out to the consensus of a whole culture and is consistent in its logic and detail. A cultural cosmogony is worth

more to Carpentier than Surrealism's "codes for the fantastic," which arbitrarily and randomly invert natural law and logic (85).

THE DUAL NATURE OF REALITY: TRADITIONAL BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL

Although belief in the supernatural has waned with modernity, modern supernatural fiction still references cosmogonies rather than invented codes, and the belief in the supernatural that survives today is not very changed from what it was in premodern times. In his 1931 volume, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, philosopher John Wood Oman describes the supernatural as an "environment" in which we live, analogous to the natural and "so constantly interwoven [with the natural] that nothing may be wholly natural or wholly supernatural" (Oman 72). Oman writes, "We may be living by this higher environment as fishes in the water live by air, and be equally ignorant of the fact: and the reason may be lack of interest, not of capacity" (Oman 5). The interest of the supernatural to the present argument is clear, but it is a literary interest, not a philosophical one. Our concern is for the reader of a supernatural story, whose reading is impoverished without an understanding of supernatural beliefs that inform the story.

The vicissitudes of supernatural belief and their effects on literature will guide the reading of my selected texts. As Oman points out, "All environment deals with us and we deal with all environment as meaning, and for this our thinking about it is of the utmost importance" (Oman 96). Literature is certainly a meaning-making endeavor, and it freely makes meaning even where it only pretends to know reality. It is not frustrated, as philosophy is, by the reticence of reality. Oman complains that reality "only dimly unveils itself of our most sympathetic and far-reaching insight," a fact that frustrates philosophy (Oman 52). But where philosophy is frustrated, literature is content to be just the shadow of reality.

Whether the supernatural is considered real or imagined, it is useful to think of it as an environment, comingled with the natural environment, though usually inaccessible to the physical senses. As an environment, dealt with as meaning, it has values and provokes responses that the natural can never have or do. Thus, the representation of the supernatural in a realistic story will add levels of meaning to the narrative. This logic, which is consistent with Oman's propositions, is also employed by Kathryn Hume in her book, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*.

Hume proposes that literature is produced by the impulses of mimesis and fantasy—the latter being the realm of the supernatural, among other things. This does raise the question of whether the supernatural folktale is mimetic or fantastic, since premodern storytellers believed the supernatural to be as real an environment as the natural. But though the modern storyteller is unlikely to