

A Man of Action with a Head Crammed Full of Poe: Horacio Quiroga and the Latin American Short Story's (Scientific) Departure from Romanticism

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Abstract: Horacio Quiroga (1878-1937), born in Uruguay and living much of his life in Argentina, is popularly likened to Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) for his critical standards for the short story and an inclination toward dark and morbid subject matter. Indeed, Quiroga deified Poe as a "maestro [...] como en dios mismo".¹ While openly admiring and partially emulating Poe's work, Quiroga's writing diverges from Poe's supernatural and metaphysical Romanticism to a more scientific narrative. Several prominent scholars of Latin American literature observe that early twentieth century Latin American literature was particularly affected by non-literary

¹ "Master [...] as in God himself." (All translations are mine and are, unfortunately, more literal than poetic). Horacio Quiroga, *Sobre Literatura* (Montevideo: Arca, 2008), 102.

sources, whether from a heightened awareness of the environment (Jennifer French), the exposure to and adaptation of scientific documents (Roberto González Echevarría), or the increased attention to emerging technology (Beatriz Sarlo). Analyzing two short stories by both Poe and Quiroga, I demonstrate that while Quiroga may have been inspired by the Romantic subject matter of death from the work of Poe, the type of death that he portrays is not Romantic: The heightened non-literary discourse of Quiroga's surroundings motivate him towards a depiction of death that is more natural than supernatural, more scientific than metaphysical.

The beginning of the Latin American short story canon is most commonly attributed to Esteban Echeverría's 1838 "El matadero,"² after which the genre was soon after put into dialogue with short story authors from all over the world including Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849). Poe's work was particularly attractive to Latin American modernists, suggest scholars Susan and Stuart Levine, for his "idea of creating a melancholic tone" and the use of "specific sounds to create specific effects, interior rhymes and new variations of meters, repetitions, and onomatopoeia."³ In the words of one critic, early twentieth century Latin American authors belonged to "a generation brushed by the wings of Poe's raven."⁴ It was in this Romantic atmosphere that Horacio Quiroga began his literary career.

² Margaret Peden, "Introduction", in *The Latin American Short Story: A Critical History*, ed. Margaret Peden (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983), 3.

³ Susan and Stuart Levine, "Poe in Spanish America" in *Poe Abroad: Influence, Reputation, Affinities*, ed. Lois Vines (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1999), 122.

⁴ Mary Berg, "Horacio Quiroga", in *Poe Abroad: Influence, Reputation, Affinities*, ed. Lois Vines (Iowa City: University of Iowa), 239.

Writing in the first thirty years of the twentieth century, Quiroga created nearly two hundred stories in addition to essays, novels, a film script and a play.⁵ Though he began writing more than sixty years after the inaugurating "El matedero", it was only after Quiroga that the genre solidified in Latin America, so that scholars deem him as "the first truly major Spanish American short-story writer."⁶ Scholarship is divided in how to place Quiroga within the greater development of Latin American literature: he has been claimed as a *modernismo*, a movement largely lead in Latin America by the poet Rubén Darío,⁷ as a part of the "realist-naturalist tradition,"⁸ and as a contributor to *criollo* literature, because his stories "are rural" and "exalt *criollo* values such as virility and endurance."⁹ Peter Beardsell alleviates this confusion by suggesting that Quiroga is "too idiosyncratic to conform to any single trend"¹⁰; no matter how many categories that may claim him, Quiroga was one of the pivot points between the raven-brushed era of Latin American literature and what was to follow.

Scholars repeatedly emphasize a direct and particular kinship between Quiroga and Poe despite their chronological and geographical differences (Peden, Berg, Levine, Shade, Rocca, González Echevarría, French). Critic Mary Berg writes: "few young writers apprenticed themselves to Poe quite as openly and obsessively as Horacio Quiroga. [...] Poe was his avowed

⁵ Peter R. Beardsell, *Quiroga--Cuentos De Amor, De Locura y De Muerte* (London; Dover, N.H: Grant & Cutler, 1986), 20.

⁶ Margaret Peden, "Introduction", in *The Latin American Short Story: A Critical History*, ed. Margaret Peden (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983), 5.

⁷ Margaret Peden, "Introduction", in *The Latin American Short Story: A Critical History*, ed. Margaret Peden (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983), 4. For more on Rubén Darío and his close affinity to Poe, see Marjorie Johnston's "Ruben Darío's Acquaintance with Poe" in *Hispania: A Journal Devoted to the Teaching of Spanish and Portuguese* (17.3, 1934), 271-78.

⁸ John Brushwood, "The Spanish American Short Story from Quiroga to Borges" in *The Latin American Short Story: A Critical History*, ed. Margaret Peden (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983), 71-2.

⁹ Peter R. Beardsell, *Quiroga--Cuentos De Amor, De Locura y De Muerte* (London; Dover, N.H: Grant & Cutler, 1986), 19.

¹⁰ Ibid.

master and lifelong soul mate, and many of his early stories flaunt this apprenticeship."¹¹ Quiroga reveals his perhaps obsessive devotion when he describes his state of mind in 1904: "Poe was the only writer I was reading at that time; that cursed madman had come to dominate me completely; every book on my table was by him. My head was crammed full of Poe."¹² Quiroga's obsession perhaps explains the oft-noted similarity in content in the work of the two authors, such as the macabre¹³ or "the climate of perversion, the ghoulishness, the vague aura of disease - both mental and physical".¹⁴ Quiroga's deification of Poe convinces Berg that "It is as though Quiroga had internalized and assimilated Poe's texts so fully that nearly every story Quiroga wrote can be connected in some way to his mentor".¹⁵

I will analyze some of these "connections" in the fiction of the two authors below, after pointing out Quiroga's more direct emulation of Poe via literary criticism. The best known of Quiroga's critical works, the *Decalogo Del Perfecto Cuentista*, is ten epigraphs of advice for the willing short story writer. The piece opens in paying tribute to Poe and other masters by suggesting that writers treat masters of writing like Gods: "Cree en un maestro - Poe, Maupassant, Kipling, Chejov - como en Dios mismo".¹⁶ Quiroga then echoes the critical demands that Poe lineated for the short story nearly sixty years earlier. While Poe insists that, "In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect,

¹¹ Mary Berg, "Horacio Quiroga", in *Poe Abroad: Influence, Reputation, Affinities*, ed. Lois Vines (Iowa City: University of Iowa), 239.

¹² *Ibid.*, 241.

¹³ Peter R. Beardsell, *Quiroga--Cuentos De Amor, De Locura y De Muerte* (London; Dover, N.H: Grant & Cutler, 1986), 44.

¹⁴ Roberto González Echevarría, "Introduction" in *The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories*, ed. Roberto González Echevarría (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 17.

¹⁵ Mary Berg, "Horacio Quiroga", in *Poe Abroad: Influence, Reputation, Affinities*, ed. Lois Vines (Iowa City: University of Iowa), 241.

¹⁶ "Believe in a master [...] as in God himself." Horacio Quiroga, *Sobre Literatura* (Montevideo: Arca, 2008), 102.

is not to the one pre-established design,”¹⁷ Quiroga advises that authors avoid unnecessary adjectives and that “Inútiles serán cuantas colas de color adhieras a un sustantivo débil. Si hallas el que es preciso, él sólo tendrá un color incomprable. Pero hay que hallarlo”.¹⁸ When Poe orders strict consciousness that the “dénouement” be “constantly in view [so] that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence,”¹⁹ Quiroga warns that authors “No empieces a escribir sin saber desde la primera palabra adonde vas. En un cuento bien logrado, las tres primeras líneas tienen casi la importancia de las tres últimas.”²⁰ In regards to the short story structure, then, Quiroga loyally follows his “maestro.”

It is in the content of the fiction writing that Quiroga strays from Poe. Poe writes that “Truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale”²¹ while Quiroga advises that authors aim to express life, not truth: “Tell your history as if your tale wouldn't have more interest beyond the small environment of your characters, you could be one of those. There isn't another way to obtain *life* in a tale”.²² The consequences of Poe's aiming for truth and Quiroga's quest for life is made manifest in a comparison of each man's portrayal of death. I analyze two stories from each author in which the protagonist awaits death: Poe's “A Descent into the Maelstrom” and “The Pit and the Pendulum,” and Quiroga's “Drifting” and “The Dead Man.”

¹⁷ Poe, Edgar Allen, in *Literary Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Robert Lee Hough (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 135.

¹⁸ “The streaks of color sticking to a weak noun will be useless. If you find the exact noun, it will have incomparable color on its own. But you have to find it.” Horacio Quiroga, *Sobre Literatura* (Montevideo: Arca, 2008), 103.

¹⁹ Poe, Edgar Allen, in *Literary Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Robert Lee Hough (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 20.

²⁰ “Don't begin writing without knowing where you're going from the first word. In a successful story, the first three lines have nearly the same importance as the last three.” Horacio Quiroga, *Sobre Literatura* (Montevideo: Arca, 2008), 103.

²¹ Poe, Edgar Allen, in *Literary Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Robert Lee Hough (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 136.

²² Horacio Quiroga, *Sobre Literatura* (Montevideo: Arca, 2008), 103.

From these stories it is clear that Poe romantically portrays death as a metaphysical and supernatural search for truth, while Quiroga depicts death as a scientific process of nature.

The theme of death has a strong presence in the stories of each author. Poe's characters come back from the dead ("The Fall of the House of Usher"), make deals with the dead ("Eleanora") and nearly become the dead ("A Descent into the Maelstrom", "The Pit and the Pendulum"). Scholars Levine argue that Poe's treatment of death is generally metaphysical:

Poe is interested in the varieties of inspired creativity - hence the hint that dreams and fainting fits carry knowledge of eternity; the unconscious mind may know what will be known after death. The person just awakening has dim memories of such knowledge. The narrator, in an abnormal state, tortured and frightened, has glimpses of it while awake.²³

For Poe, the body does not merely expire with death. A leader of the Romantics, Poe emphasizes the supernatural and metaphysical aspects of death, as well as its importance to the individual. Death takes a person beyond the physical world, serving as a potential conduit towards what he sees as the ultimate goal: truth.

Quiroga shares Poe's morbid fascinations, as seen in stories with acute descriptions of murder ("The Decapitated Chicken") and accidental deaths ("Sunstroke," "The Feather Pillow," "The Dead Man," "Drifting"). Beardsell writes that death makes various appearances in Quiroga's oeuvre: "It can be predictable [...] or unexpected [...] the result of error [...] or of something beyond human control [...] pitiable [...] gruesome [...] noble [...] or even a source of

23 Susan and Stuart Levine, "Salvation Through Terror", in *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Stuart and Susan Levine (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1976), 39.

indifference".²⁴ While sharing Poe's obsession with the morbid, Quiroga's dying characters do not experience a death that is Romantic; Quiroga stops death at the body, allowing no speculation for what happens after corporal demise. Beardsell confirms that for Quiroga death is more about the life that was than a prolonged life that could be:

In Quiroga's stories as a whole [...] characters faced with danger or aware of imminent death rarely entertain metaphysical thoughts and never approach religious experience. Any solutions to the problems constantly posed by death seem to be available only within life on earth. What counts for him in particular is the way the characters treat their life, the way they cope with dying[...].²⁵

The difference between Poe's metaphysical and Quiroga's corporal portrayal of death is particularly striking in the two stories from each author that feature a dying protagonist.

Poe's protagonists in these two stories face death unavoidably, eventually surviving as changed men. The old sailor in "A Descent into the Maelstrom" relates how he inexplicably survived nature's wrathful storm at sea: "there happened to me an event such as never happened before to mortal man - or at least such as no man ever survived to tell of - and the six hours of deadly terror which I then endured have broken me up body and soul".²⁶ The uncanny fortune of the old man does not, however, leave him unscathed: "My hair, which had been raven-black the day before, was as white as you see it now. They say too that the whole expression of my

²⁴ Peter R. Beardsell, *Quiroga--Cuentos De Amor, De Locura y De Muerte* (London; Dover, N.H: Grant & Cutler, 1986), 56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁶ Edgar Allen Poe, "A Descent into the Maelstrom," in *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Stuart and Susan Levine (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1976), 40.

countenance had changed".²⁷ The brush with death has left him with an extraordinary - and supernatural - mark, his changed hair. "The Pit and the Pendulum" features a survival that is just as unlikely, as the confined narrator suffers in a torture chamber for days with no distraction but the thoughts of imminent death: "That the result would be death, and a death of more than customary bitterness, I knew too well the character of my judges to doubt".²⁸ After enduring various methods of torture and emotional responses, the narrator prepares himself for death but is saved at the last moment. Albeit in different situations, both of Poe's protagonists believe that they will die, and this knowledge -- and only this knowledge -- creates a sense of wonder that brings them closer to a supernatural truth.

Poe's protagonists are altered by their near-death experiences in ways Romantic and metaphysical. The sailor in "A Descent" recounts that he "shook from head to foot" as if with "the most violent fit of the ague",²⁹ but that at the end of the arduous path of physical torture awaited a mysteriously calm, accepting sense of wonder:

It may look like boasting - but what I tell you is truth - I began to reflect how magnificent a thing it was to die in such a manner, and how foolish it was in me to think of so paltry a consideration as my own individual life, in view of so wonderful a manifestation of God's power. I do believe that I blushed with shame when this idea crossed my mind. After a little while I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a *wish* to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make; and my principal grief was that I

²⁷ Ibid., 50.

²⁸ Ibid., 52.

²⁹ Ibid., 45.

should never be able to tell my old companions on shore about the mysteries I should see.³⁰

Despite death's initial terror, the experience offers something alluring, mysterious and even desirable: At the brink of death there is truth. The wretched narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" undergoes a similar philosophical progression. He suffers physically throughout his confinement: "I was sick - sick unto death with that long agony; and when they at length unbound me, and I was permitted to sit, I felt that my senses were leaving me".³¹ Yet these corporal maladies climax in an alluring and pensive calm, familiar to that above:

I saw that some ten or twelve vibrations would bring the steel in actual contact with my robe - and with this observation there suddenly came over my spirit all the keen, collected calmness of despair. For the first time during many hours - or perhaps days - I *thought*.³²

In both of Poe's stories death grants man a knowledge that is unattainable during life. When the tortured narrator swoons, he thinks, "In the deepest slumber - no! In delirium - no! In a swoon - no! In death - no! Even in the grave all *is not* lost. Else there is no immortality for man".³³ Poe's death is not a closing but an opening.

While Quiroga's tales operate with a similar progression (an event occurs that causes the protagonist to consider his own death for the duration of the narrative) Quiroga does not grant death the same philosophical optimism: Quiroga's protagonists do not survive. "Drifting" opens with a death sentence:

³⁰ Ibid., 46-7.

³¹ Edgar Allen Poe, "The Pit and the Pendulum," in *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Stuart and Susan Levine (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1976), 50.

³² Ibid., 56.

³³ Ibid., 51.

The man stepped on something soft and yielding and immediately felt the bite on his foot. [...] The man bent over the bite, wiped off the drops of blood, and thought for a moment. [...] Hurriedly he bound his ankle with his kerchief and continued along the trail to his small ranch.³⁴

The rest of the story follows the victim in his struggle to survive the wound, paddling along the river in search for help, only to eventually die at the bottom of his canoe. "The Dead Man" traces a similar plot path, opening with the cause of death, following the protagonist in his last moments, and concluding with his expiration. The second paragraph reads as follows:

But as he lowered the barbed wire to cross through, his foot slipped on a strip of bark hanging loose from the fence post, and in the same instant he dropped his machete. As he was falling, the man had a dim, distant impression that his machete was not lying flat on the ground. [...] The handle and half the blade of his machete protruded from his shirt; the remainder was not visible.³⁵

The injured protagonist does not move for the rest of the tale but simply notices the world around him. At the end, the perspective pulls away from the protagonist and his death is portrayed as a detached, natural event: "for a long, long while, the mare turns her motionless ears toward the heap on the ground and finally, quieted, decides to pass between the post and the fallen man - who has rested now".³⁶

Though Quiroga's protagonists experience a form of happiness when close to death, their stories do not end in the same openness. The man in "Drifting" has a similar moment of calm as that experienced in Poe's maelstrom and torture chamber:

³⁴ Horacio Quiroga, "Drifting," in *The Decapitated Chicken and Other Stories by Horacio Quiroga*, trans. Margaret Peden (Austin: University of Texas, 1976), 69.

³⁵ Horacio Quiroga, "The Dead Man," in *The Decapitated Chicken and Other Stories by Horacio Quiroga*, trans. Margaret Peden (Austin: University of Texas, 1976), 121.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

The sun had already set when the man, half-conscious in the bottom of the canoe, was shaken by a violent chill. Suddenly, astonished, he dully raised his head; he felt better. His leg was less painful; his thirst was diminishing; and his chest, relieved now, relaxed in slow respiration. [...] His feeling of well-being increased and, with it, a somnolence filled with memories. He no longer had any feeling in his leg or in his belly.³⁷

The "well-being" of the snakebite victim, however, is noticeably more physical than Poe's eventual philosophical "thought" and "curiosity:" it is the relief of his leg, thirst and chest that soothes him, rather than a curiosity of what awaits him. Furthermore, the thoughts of Quiroga's protagonist look backwards, in a "somnolence filled with memories," while men dying in Poe's tales want to "explore" that which kills them, curious to understand the "immortality of man." For Quiroga death affects the body and its physical experiences, not the soul and its potential opportunities.

Quiroga's depiction of death as a physical event - rather than metaphysical or supernatural - is further developed in "The Dead Man." It is true that within the first few minutes after the accident the protagonist speculates on the significance of his fall, softly echoing a dying Poe protagonist:

Death. One often thinks in the course of his life that one day, after years, months, weeks, and days of preparation, he will arrive in his turn upon the threshold of death. It is mortal law, accepted and foreseen; so much so that we are in the habit

³⁷ Horacio Quiroga, "Drifting," in *The Decapitated Chicken and Other Stories by Horacio Quiroga*, trans. Margaret Peden (Austin: University of Texas, 1976), 71-2.

of allowing ourselves to be agreeably transported by our imaginations to that moment, supreme among all moments, in which we breathe our last breath.³⁸

As the life drains from Quiroga's protagonist, however, the attention shifts to the field on which he lies, the same field the he has worked every day of his adult life. No longer concerned with "the threshold of death," he worries over his separation from the sensations of daily life:

Is this or isn't it an ordinary midday like so many others in Misiones, in his bushland, on his pasture [...]? [...] Nothing, nothing has changed. Only he is different. For two minutes now his person, his living personality, has had no connection with the cleared land he himself spaded [...] He has been uprooted, brusquely, naturally, because of a slippery piece of bark and a machete in the belly. Two minutes: he is dying.³⁹

The protagonist does not ponder the meaning of life, or wonder, awe-stricken, at the new experiences that await him. Rather, he laments the sensual life that has been ripped from him so accidentally.

Quiroga thus breaks from Poe's Romantic portrayal of death, preferring the physical to the metaphysical and the natural to the supernatural. Quiroga's biography and personality, as striking and remarkable as some of the more poignant scenes in his writing, help to explain these preferences. He suffered the early deaths of father, stepfather and first wife, contracted cancer, and eventually committed suicide.⁴⁰ Apart from their morbid markers, however, Quiroga's fifty-eight years were very much full of life. He experimented with a chemical laboratory,

³⁸ Horacio Quiroga, "The Dead Man," in *The Decapitated Chicken and Other Stories by Horacio Quiroga*, trans. Margaret Peden (Austin: University of Texas, 1976), 121-2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁰ Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 118.

electroplating, ceramic ovens, farming ventures, and various business enterprises⁴¹; he was attracted to the fields of invention and mechanics⁴²; he took his children hunting in forests so that he could "expose them to situations where they might learn to understand danger without fearing it";⁴³ he experienced business failures and difficult exposures to the wild that "proved a vitally important - and satisfying - exercise in effort and self-sufficiency".⁴⁴ When Quiroga looked back on his career in 1936, he assured that "the man of action in him [...] was as important as the writer".⁴⁵ These "real-life" influences lead Beardsell to suggest that it is "hardly surprising [...] that rather than [as an abstract] theme for intellectual consideration, Quiroga's stories tend to treat death as something dramatic, personal, and charged with emotional impact".⁴⁶ But using Quiroga's personality and experiences as an answer to his unique perspective begs a further question: unless we believe that something comes from nothing, Quiroga's unique traits were influenced and nurtured by his surroundings.

At the opening of the twentieth century and Quiroga's career, Latin American literature was exposed to several new influences that may have shaped the author's non-Romantic understanding of death. Scholar Jennifer French argues in *Nature, Neo-Colonialism, and the Spanish American Regional Writers* (2005) that "The period of 1910-1930 is unique in Latin American history, in its convergence of economic, political and cultural events, including both the apex of British investment in Latin America and many Latin Americans' rude awakening to

⁴¹ Beatriz Sarlo, "Horacio Quiroga and Technoscientific Theory," in *The Technical Imagination: Argentine Culture's Modern Dreams* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 13-4.

⁴² Pablo Rocca, "The Short Story in The Works of Machado De Assis and Horacio Quiroga: A Material Aesthetic?" *Portuguese Literary and Cultural Studies* 13/14 (2006), 534.

⁴³ Peter R. Beardsell, *Quiroga--Cuentos De Amor, De Locura y De Muerte* (London; Dover, N.H: Grant & Cutler, 1986), 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

the deleterious effects that investment was having on their human and natural landscapes".⁴⁷ This neo-colonialist context, French argues, had "profound implications for the cultural discourse Latin Americans produced in the 1920s"⁴⁸, so that authors like Quiroga, unlike their predecessors, "display the benefits of new forms of mobility in their sharp awareness of the disparate effects of modernization on urban and rural areas".⁴⁹ Quiroga's work suggests the Argentineans' increasingly important relationship with the natural environment; scholar Noe Jitrik, for example, writes that the horror in Quiroga's work is more fact than fiction, drawn from his real experiences in the selva: "Droughts, venom, cruelty, an insane sun, carnivorous ants, jaguars, thirst and fear of an abysmal desperation were the presences that filled and besided that era in his life".⁵⁰

In addition to the emerging emphasis on nature, Quiroga's writing is touched by the growing scientific and technological spirit of his surroundings. Roberto González Echevarría argues in *Myth and Archive: a Theory of Latin American Narrative* (1990) that Latin American narrative is affected by non-literary texts, such as documents of law, science and anthropology. González Echevarría's theory suggests a large-scale, perhaps sub-conscious use of non-literary texts,⁵¹ and Quiroga's insatiable intellectual appetite for the non-literary makes him all the more susceptible to such affectation. Author Beatriz Sarlo confirms that "[Quiroga] was finding concrete information in places and materials with which literature did not associate, but especially information of a type that, if not new, was nearly inconceivable as an element of a

⁴⁷ Jennifer French, *Nature, Neo-Colonialism, and the Spanish American Regional Writers*, (Hanover, N.H: Dartmouth College Press, 2005), 37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 27-8.

⁵⁰ As quoted in French. *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵¹ Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive : A Theory of Latin American Narrative*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

writer's intellectual education".⁵² Sarlo argues in *The Technical Imagination: Argentine Culture's Modern Dreams* (2008) that technology became increasingly influential in Argentina in the early twentieth century, particularly to the lower classes: "[The] lay use of technology was bringing about the reorganization of a hierarchy of knowledge [...] the scientific notions published in technical manuals, newspaper articles - all of these stood in for the science taught in universities".⁵³ Sarlo admits that though Quiroga had little knowledge of "pure" science, he nevertheless "demanded something from science".⁵⁴ Scholar John McIntyre notes how in "Drifting" Quiroga "[charts] the gradual progress of the poison through the man's body"⁵⁵, and that details like the "slow-motion close-up on the fingers, together with the references to skin drawn tight, to feeling burning thirst, to shivering and to vomiting blood, come together to create a dying that is horrendously physical in its anatomical precision and stomach-churning in its effect on the reader".⁵⁶ Though perhaps not precisely citing a textbook on anatomy, Quiroga emphasizes the physical body more than the spirituality of his dying protagonist. In the case of the two stories that I analyze, death is not connected to the supernatural, but is determined by nature: Quiroga "demands" that science determines death.

It is Quiroga's attention to the environment that seems to most significantly contribute to his non-Romantic view of death. In the essay, "Horacio Quiroga and Jack London Compared: A la deriva, El hombre muerto and To Build a Fire," scholar John McIntyre analyzes the

⁵² Beatriz Sarlo, "Horacio Quiroga and Technoscientific Theory," in *The Technical Imagination: Argentine Culture's Modern Dreams* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 17.

⁵³ Beatriz Sarlo, "Introduction," in *The Technical Imagination: Argentine Culture's Modern Dreams* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 5.

⁵⁴ Beatriz Sarlo, "Horacio Quiroga and Technoscientific Theory," in *The Technical Imagination: Argentine Culture's Modern Dreams* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 28.

⁵⁵ John McIntyre, "Horacio Quiroga and Jack London Compared: A La Deriva, El Hombre Muerto and To Build a Fire," in *New Comparison: A Journal of Comparative and General Literary Studies* 7 (1989): 151.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

environment's role in death in both "Drifting" and "The Dead Man," concluding that Quiroga's environment is "viewed as fundamentally hostile to man"⁵⁷: it is the snake that kills the one protagonist and a "piece of damp bark" the other. Furthermore, McIntyre argues that the dying protagonist in "The Dead Man" continuously asks himself rhetorical questions ("Is this or isn't it an ordinary midday like so many others?") that "suggest the man's sense of shock and dismay that his passing has triggered no general cataclysm in Nature. The arrogant assumption of cosmic value by and for this one human life is almost punished".⁵⁸ McIntyre thus questions whether Quiroga's protagonists are "being 'punished' for [their] temerity in coming into the wilderness in the first place".⁵⁹ In Quiroga's stories Nature is the ultimate power, crucially diverging from Poe's sailor who cowers under the power of God ("how foolish it was for me to think of so paltry a consideration as my own individual life, in view of so wonderful a manifestation of God's power.")⁶⁰ It is perhaps because Quiroga's protagonists do not have a Romantic relationship with an afterlife that they must die: They are at the mercy of the scientific reality of the natural environment.

Horacio Quiroga's name has not maintained the international fame of his literary mentor, Poe, or of his Latin American successors; nearly a century after Quiroga's innovations, the magical realism of Garcia Marquez and the fantasy of Borges applied magical realism overshadow the more subtle, scientific innovations of their predecessor. Nevertheless, Quiroga's work remains exemplary of the spirit of the short story by his own definition: His use of science and technology is neither superfluous nor at the sake of anything vital, but rather essential to the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 143.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 154.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 147.

⁶⁰ Edgar Allen Poe, "A Descent into the Maelstrom," in *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Stuart and Susan Levine (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1976), 46.

hunted “color incomparable.” Finding the right color of words under new shades of light renders him a master of a genre whose capacity for complexity increases by its brevity.

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