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The Short Story as a Language of  
Demystified Modernities:  
A Study of  
Yūsuf Idrīs' and Julio Cortázar's  
Visualizing Aesthetics

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## ABSTRACT

This project takes the “visualizing capacity of language” in the short story as a language unto itself, asserting the genre as text rather than a literature *per se*, conceived from within and in the service of an as-yet unrealized social reality in societies undergoing profound transition. It raises questions about the nature of textuality, and poses visuality as a language of textuality.

A pervasive comparative approach in short story criticism locates its agency *vis a vis* the novel, which it situates as the literary embodiment of the modern world, considering modernity within a corresponding hegemonic framework. I frame the resulting problematics using John Berger’s idea of “mystification,” whereby the short story and its discourses are obscured.

This study questions whether articulating the short story’s language as a visualizing text may contribute to a new understanding of the form and its place in society. It seizes on the textual dynamics of (in)visibility, a visually distilled aesthetics whose *essence* is located in sublanguages of visibility and invisibility, conveyed through a salient materiality at the intersection of form and language. The aesthetics that assert these ideas constitute *examples* of the *method* of reading the short story’s visualizing aesthetics within their local and textual scenarios and offers a method of entering short story criticism through the local, rather than *vice versa*.

I focus on two short story writers whose visualizing aesthetics are imbued with a legacy of ideas that encompass the short story’s intimate relationship with discourses arising out of their regions’ modernizing projects. For Yūsuf Idrīs the trope is *amāra*, a conceptual Arabic word that refers to the implicit knowledge of a populace. For Julio Cortázar, it is a self-referential mythopoesis as a form of resistance against hegemonic elements. Achieving these ideas aesthetically requires a “prolonged struggle” to wrest the short story from its Eurocentric elements to inscribe it with the languages constitutive of an organic modernity.

Ultimately, this study offers a method of reading the short story as a language of social concern rather than merely a conduit for such a language. It rethinks ideas connected to modernity, to the short story’s situatedness as a world literature, and the complexities and contributions of Egyptian and Argentine/Latin American literature *vis a vis* postcolonial studies.

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## NOTES ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

### Arabic

Transliterations from the Arabic generally follow the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)* system. I have applied full diacritical notation to the names of persons and places, and to the titles of published works, except in cases where the author is widely published in English. I have transliterated concepts, while longer quotes are offered in both the original Arabic and English translation. I have relied on already available translations whenever possible and these are explicitly referenced and I have qualified these translations insofar as it has bearing on the project. Where the Arabic original and English translation are cited side by side, I have denoted which is which by using the Arabic title for the Arabic language citation, and the English title for the English language citation.

### Spanish

Quotations are offered in both the original Spanish and English translation. Translations are my own except where explicitly noted otherwise. Where the Spanish original and English translation are cited side by side, I have denoted which is which by using the Spanish title for the Spanish language citation, and the English title for the English language citation. Where the title for each is the same in both languages (for example, *Facundo* and “Axolotl”), I have noted the difference in the citation by following the title with “Spanish ed.” or “English ed.” for clarification.

## INTRODUCTION

This study considers the short story as a literary form that arises out of and is inhered of localized conflicting discourses intended to figure the modern in societies undergoing moments of profound transition. In particular, it focuses on how the visualizing aesthetics so central to the short story's literary function serves as a useful framework for this dynamic in specific contexts. Indeed, what arises from the research is a form whose very being and whose shape or embodiment is at once prompted by and in the service of such transitional moments; the relationship between social discourse and literary form is wholly reciprocal. And yet, this idea is at odds with some of the most pervasive critical approaches to the short story, which consider it as an already-realized embodiment of the ideals and perspectives of a so-called "modern" society: for example, that it is contingent upon the privileging of an individualized voice; that it is expressive of those "outside of" the homogenous social center (and that such a center exists);<sup>1</sup> that it is an incomplete fragment of the more fully-realized novel.<sup>2</sup> However, these ideas are contingent themselves upon a particular presumption about the very nature of modernity and how it is conceived, and this is the crux of my research question as well as the driving force behind my approach.

My approach privileges close readings of the primary texts included in Parts II and III of this study, while also benefitting from close readings of texts beyond this study; in other words, my approach exceeds the strict parameters of the research focus I present here. Simply, I present a way of reading that focuses strongly on the short story's visualizing aesthetics as a language of social concern. The aesthetic language of social concern I refer to here is a play on the more commonly phrased "aesthetics of social change." This latter term has been used widely across disciplines and media to

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<sup>1</sup> See: Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice* (Cork: Cork City Council, 2003 edition); Sabry Hafez, *The Quest for Identities: The Development of the Modern Arabic Short Story* (London: Saqi, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See: Mary Louis Pratt, "The Short Story: The Long and Short of It," in ed. Charles E. May, *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994); Brander Matthews, *The Philosophy of the Short Story* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1901); Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Second edition, 1997).

denote: an artistic moral imperative to peace building;<sup>3</sup> as a proposed tool for development studies and practice, where “aesthetics” is broadly constituted as structures, systems, etc. that are “beautiful” or visually pleasing;<sup>4</sup> most recently it has become a point of emphasis regarding the visual arts and environmentalism;<sup>5</sup> it has also been used as a term denoting a visual mode of achieving agency or shifting identity in anthropological studies, particularly those focused on gender or other “threatened” groups.<sup>6</sup> My use of the term is inspired by Ayman El-Desouky’s reference to Yūsuf Idrīs’ “aesthetics of social change,” whereby Idrīs sought to “turn the social into a question of artistic form, and not just the content of a committed message.”<sup>7</sup> For their divergences, the above variations make clear that, regardless of the specific definition attributed to the word “aesthetics,” art is a potentially vital creative form of activist expression, or a catalyst for activism, in the face of social rifts, and that when utilized towards this end, the aesthetic impetus of the art form in question adopts a “language” to address those rifts. Parts II and III call on the works of Yūsuf Idrīs and Julio Cortázar to show that the short story is necessarily constituted of such visualizing aesthetic impulses, and that in fact its existence is dependent upon an activist, reformist, or resistance scenario.

The visualizing capacity of language in the short story is a centering mimetic force in the form, broadly speaking, that engages in a reciprocal relationship with its brevity (this relationship is the focus of Chapter Two). However, it also emerges as a trope of the localized short story. With Yūsuf Idrīs, this trope is embodied in *amāra*, a conceptual Arabic word that refers to the implicit knowledge of a populace. For Julio Cortázar, the trope is a self-referential mythopoesis that acts as a form of resistance against hegemonic elements.

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<sup>3</sup> See: John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> See: John Clammer, *Vision and Society: Towards a Sociology and Anthropology from Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Choreography, for example. See: Michael Kliën, Steve Valk, Jeffrey Gormly, *Book of Recommendations: Choreography as an Aesthetics of Change* (Limerick: Daghdha Dance Company, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> See: H.R. Silver, “Beauty and the ‘I’ of the Beholder: Identity, Aesthetics and Social Change Among the Ashanti,” in the *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Summer, 1979, pp. 191-207).

<sup>7</sup> Ayman A. El-Desouky, *The Intellectual and the People in Egyptian Literature and Culture: Amāra and the 2011 Revolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2014) p. 7.

Both of these mimetic tropes manifest through powerful visualizing aesthetics that drive my approach to each and form a persistent thread in this study. The word “visualizing” here refers to a particular distillation of language that amounts to a language formed of imagery. I borrow the term from Lois Parkinson Zamora’s discussion of magical realism as a “visualizing capacity of language”<sup>8</sup> (see “Introduction” to Chapter Two) to emphasize a materiality realized through a relationship between form and language, however without the more explicitly “magical” elements constitutive of magical realism strictly speaking (while also not excluding it where it shows up). For example, Idrīs uses powerful visualizing aesthetics to transform *amāra* from a conceptual term into a literary language of the social. I seize on two manifestations tied to this effort. The first is what I call a “light code,” where lightness and darkness form a powerful sublanguage intended to tap into *amāra* as a means of social intervention (see Chapter Four). Later in his career, he begins experimenting with material object symbols to achieve the same, while also exploiting the short story’s extra-textual spaces by choosing signifiers connected to powerful, often conflicting discourses regarding power and modernity in the Egyptian imaginary (see Chapter Five). One example is Judge Abdullah’s watch in “Qā‘ al-madīna,” the loss of which catalyzes a profound sequence of events for the story’s characters. As the story progresses, the watch comes to evoke and complicate national and individualized narratives *vis a vis* the repercussions of late capitalism in Egypt. As a more fully realized achievement of this technique, Idrīs’ chair and chair carrier in “Ḥammāl al-karāsī” evoke discourses regarding fraught colonial and internal struggles connected to Egypt’s antiquities and their place in forming narratives of modernity in Egypt from the *nahda* through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Conversely, Julio Cortázar persistently evokes bestial imagery to drive his mythopoeses in his first two collections of stories, which together form a cycle of myth through *bestiario* (bestiary). Cortázar’s *bestiario* exploits its legacy in Argentine literature as a political allegory used to subvert censorship and reconcile the alienating atmosphere of exile, and also its legacies in Judeo-Christian and post-Enlightenment European contexts as a metonym of society’s values as conceived from within hegemonic conceptions of said values. He uses *bestiario* to complicate, subvert, and

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<sup>8</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, “Swords and Silver Rings: Magical Objects in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez,” in eds. Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang, *A Companion to Magical Realism* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2005) p. 31.

problematize assumptions about and conceptions of modernity deriving from labeling practices with strong colonial legacies that divide the world between east and west, modernity and tradition, and, in Sarmiento's words, civilization and barbarism. For example, the tiger prowling the grounds of the Funes' family home in "Bestiario" (Chapter Six) is constitutive of many narratives at once, thus subverting the ability to delimit its metonymic power into an allegorical fable. Meanwhile, "Axolotl" (Chapter Seven) sees Cortázar breaking new ground in re-inscribing pre-colonial, Mesoamerican mythologies into Latin American fictional narrative discourse. Depending how one chooses to read it, however, it may at once signify a Eurocentric, ethnographic perspective<sup>9</sup> – particularly if one considers Cortázar's own personal closeness to Europe as part of their analysis – while also signifying a powerful postcolonial<sup>10</sup> narrative where such a label as "Eurocentric" is rendered baseless. Indeed, this ambiguity regarding Argentine modernity, Argentine literature, and Cortázar himself as situated at once within dominant conceptions of Europeanness and Americanness, and of the modern and the not-yet modern simultaneously serves as a powerful backdrop to discussions of the literature. It situates it as both subversive and reifying, and in the process complicates the very act of labeling.

What these visualizing aesthetics share in common, between both Idrīs and Cortázar, is the use of a visually distilled language whose *essence* is located in sublanguages of visibility and invisibility (what I refer to as (in)visibility). To put it briefly, (in)visibility is the reflective prism for my approach to the visualizing aesthetics of the short story, to trace how the form of the short story constitutes a language of social concern. However, it cannot be reduced to the examples I provide in this study, like the light code, the watch, the tiger, or the axolotl. Indeed, I do not offer these

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<sup>9</sup> For example: R. Lane Kauffmann, "Narrating the Other: Julio Cortázar's 'Axolotl' as Ethnographic Allegory," in eds. Erik Camayd-Freixas and José Eduardo González, *Primitivism and Identity in Latin America: Essays on Art, Literature, and Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000, pp. 135-56).

<sup>10</sup> The term "postcolonial" takes on different meanings in the contexts of Egypt, on the one hand, and Argentina and Latin America, on the other. These differences will be discussed extensively in the respective chapters, as well as Chapter III of Part I. In broader contexts, such as this one, the term "postcolonial" refers broadly to the experiences, outcomes, cultural productions, and encounters that have been or continue to be shaped by the colonial experience. It is worth noting here that the term "colonial experience" does not refer only to formal colonial scenarios, whereby one country or region is governed by a colonial government representing another country; it can also refer to quasi-colonial scenarios, such as was the case with Egypt, which was never "officially" colonized by either the French or the British, but whose influence was akin to that of a colonial state.

particular metonymic examples as distilled representations of a larger phenomenon, but rather offer them as *examples* of the *method* of reading the short story's visualizing aesthetics that must be taken within their local and textual scenarios; further, it provides a method of entering the short story as a genre/form through the local, rather than *vice versa*.

At stake in the question of method is the persistent mystification of an entire literary form based on historicized knowledge that locates its agency as dependent upon the novel and reduces its non-Euro-American "traditions" under an assumption of their being "derivative," versus approaching the short story, in all of its diverse manifestations, from within its own context, and in a language suited to its own form *as it shows up*. The method I am proposing is not intended as restrictive, or based on rules, or assumptions about what is to be found in the short story – whether that "what" constitutes shortness, endings, fragmentation, or epiphanic moments (see Chapter One). Rather, it begins with one of the most persistently remarked upon characteristics of the short story – its brevity – and also what is possibly the most undisputed outcome of a well-conceived short story – Poe's, articulation of unity of impression – as broad entry points (see Chapters One and Two), which then give way to close readings and the variable aesthetic manifestations of each story.

In a short story that achieves its unity of impression, these aesthetic aspects will form a structural and narrative sublanguage whose force is located in the social. Whereas short story criticism as a discipline, on the one hand, and localized studies of the short story (author-, story-, collection-, country-, region-, or language-specific), on the other, have for the most part produced strikingly divergent, fragmented, and sometimes even contradictory bodies of scholarship, built on assumptions gleaned from within their own historicized contexts, I propose reading the short story through its visualizing aesthetics as a *way of seeing* capable of valuing both while escaping or problematizing their insularity and the premises upon which it is based. Further, it offers a way of reading the short story that does not necessarily assume the centralizing capitalist power structures through which the short story "first" emerged from within in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which have continued to shape short story criticism in a cycle of reifying Eurocentric perspectives (see Chapter One).

The following sections provide an overview of the short story's situatedness *vis a vis* discourses of modernity, particularly those based on capitalist and Eurocentric assumptions (I will not go in depth here, as Part I provides an extensive discussion of

these points). These are the broad categories of “historicized knowledge” I refer to as constituting a “mystification” of the short story. I borrow this term from John Berger’s seminal *Ways of Seeing*, which frames historicized knowledge as a process of mystification whereby a piece of art or an entire art form becomes subsumed within dominant forms of discourse that are often bound up in ideas of capitalism and ownership.<sup>11</sup> He says, “Many of these assumptions no longer accord with the world as it is [...] Out of true [tune?] with the present, these assumptions obscure the past. They mystify rather than clarify.”<sup>12</sup> With reference to the short story, this has often resulted in ideas that have formed into sub-fields of study of the genre, giving the impression of movement and vitality in short story studies, but are in fact based on static assumptions concerning modernity that are bound up old ways of thinking and seeing the world and literature (see Chapter One).

### I. Mystifying the short story: capitalism and the question of modernity

This study posits one of the most immediate problems facing short story criticism as one of perception *vis a vis* questions of modernity. These issues of perception have solidified into a body of knowledge in short story criticism broadly speaking, amounting to a mystification of the short story’s agency as a distinct literary form. I discuss the issue of perception as it relates to two broad categories. The first concerns the perception that the short story is an incomplete, fragmented, partial, or derivative genre. This idea is tied to an assumption that its agency is to be located *vis a vis* the novel (see Chapter One) and situates the novel as the literary embodiment *par excellence* of a/the modern world and considers modernity from within a corresponding hegemonic framework. The second category concerns the treatment – or rather the lack thereof – of non-Euro-American short stories and writers in what purports to be a broadly conceived field of short story criticism. These two issues converge at the question of modernity as it relates to the short story, compounding one another and highlighting Eurocentric assumptions undergirding the field. These assumptions helped spawn the field of short story criticism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with Brander Matthews’ *The Philosophy of the Short Story* (1901), which set out to defend and define the short story via a comparative analysis with the novel. As Chapter One shows, short story criticism has

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<sup>11</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1972) pp. 15-16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11.

built on top of the assumptions Matthews' inscribed into his study, which has not only hampered attempts at a definition of the form as a distinctive literature, but has also created a fragmented field whose assumptions are premised almost entirely upon so-called western canonical writers and works and has avoided addressing questions of the local, even in the context of those western writers. Instead, the local has been addressed through works coming out of Area Studies, which situate the short story almost exclusively within a localized scenario related to a particular language, country, region, author, or religion. My approaches to both Idrīs and Cortázar attempts to bridge the gap, so to speak, between the two spheres. Before touching on that, however, I will outline how the issue of modernity, as described above, as lead to a mystification of the short story facilitated through short story criticism.

Interestingly, when I commenced research for this project, what I encountered was a field of criticism that assumed the short story to be “already” modern and expressive of that modernity – and this qualification as “modern” is what purportedly distinguished the “modern short story” from its literary predecessors, like oral storytelling and folktales, anecdotes, and other, older forms of short literature. Immediately, however, the “modern” modifier revealed itself as signaling a particular conception of modernity that is contingent upon capitalist models, beginning with its modes of production in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The nature of the short story's modernity, broadly speaking, is owed in part to the unique channels of publication and distribution that the short story emerged through in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, like journals and dailies. These channels in themselves were a testament to the power of the printing press and the triumph of nationalism, but also to the achievements of the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism. Individual citizens could now enjoy literature for the cost of a daily rather than the cost of an entire bound volume. In places where the short story was emerging through these avenues in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century – North America, Britain, Russia, France, Germany, and Argentina among them – its form was as much a product of its channels of distribution as *vice versa*. For example, in the United States, the short story was emerging at a time when the country's writers and scholars were engaged in the task of writing a North American voice and identity that reflected post-independence North American realities, distinct from Great Britain. The new nation was extremely divided on all fronts from the beginning and the burden placed on newspapers and journals to unify the country's citizens to the extent that they could form a cohesive national identity, in line with

Benedict Anderson's conception of nations as "imagined communities"<sup>13</sup> was significant. Short fiction thus began taking shape in the pages of periodicals as a way of entertaining, informing, and *forming* the new American citizenry through storytelling in print.

An implicit task of these stories was to create a unique American voice that would facilitate a distinct cultural identity in the collective mind of Americans. Noah Webster's first dictionary in 1828 took a literal approach to this task by intentionally altering spelling and grammar practices (often by reverting them back to spellings found in older British literature, including Shakespeare) to mark American written English out as separate from that of British written English.<sup>14</sup> The serialized short stories of Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe were arguably the first to bring the short story into maturation as a genre capable of encapsulating a distinctly American imaginary, in particular harnessing a language of symbols and textual elisions to convey the psychological polarities visited upon man by living in a wild and mysterious world punctuated by extreme violence, fear, and reliance on one's self for survival. The stories were dark, deeply psychological, and powerfully connected to engrained narratives of the North American east coast.

Argentina's short story also emerged in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as an outcome of post-independence debates and an ensuing modernity projects. However, in this case its fictionalization served as a veil for politicized speech and its distribution mimicked that of political pamphleteering, intended not only to tap into an evolving national sentiment, but to also persuade the populace to the Unitarian cause and shape the terms of post-independence debates and popular sentiment (discussed extensively in Chapter Three). Further, because the intellectual writer class that made up the May Association – formed as a political organization to challenge the Rosas regime – were nearly all in exile outside of Argentina, print media provided a critical bridge between themselves and their target audiences inside the country.

Thus, the short story emerged as a form capable of communicating sweeping social and political shifts in the service of various forms of nationalism through print

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<sup>13</sup> See: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Webster's first dictionary, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*, was reissued several times, each with its own name, before being issued as *Webster's Dictionary* in 1845 under a Merriam imprint.

media, while also helping to coalesce disparate and sometimes opposing national imaginaries. Its shortness was dictated by the space allotted its publication, and its shortness also meant that it could be read in minimal time – crucial for the growing literate classes of workers and women who were beginning to play increasingly vital roles in most of these countries. However, from the beginning, its shortness also seemed to dictate its narrative voice as one of extreme individualism. In recent scholarship on the short story, this individualism has been attributed to the form’s brevity (see Chapter One); however, it also expressed post-Enlightenment, European conceptions of individualism and free will, which was a central tenant in the nationalizing projects of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the aforementioned places where the short story was emerging.

These connections had a lasting impact on the field of short story criticism when it began emerging in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which are addressed extensively in Part I, but which I will outline briefly here. One point is that short story criticism, when it did emerge, did so as a result of engagement with short stories and short story writers coming out of the aforementioned European and American “traditions,” barring Argentina. As such, it assumed discourses regarding modernity from within those contexts. Another point is that the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the novel beginning to overshadow other literary forms, particularly in those places already mentioned. Seen as capable of reflecting the intricacies of “real life” owing to its (seemingly unlimited) length and a chapter format that allowed for narrative shifts and extensive contextualization for the story’s ideas and actions, the novel was viewed as the literary form best suited to express the realities of modern life. In contrast to the novel, the short story was viewed as fragmented, partial, incomplete, or even as just a practice form for amateur writers (see Chapter Two). The discrepancies in pricing between the two – buying a bound volume that would sit on a library shelf as opposed to buying a daily that could be thrown away in the trash after reading – translated as a discrepancy in commitment and vision and was reflective of deep divisions concerning class and power. Proponents of the short story – writers, critics, intellectuals, etc. – inadvertently compounded this perspective by assuming comparisons to the novel as valid and expressing the short story’s value, characteristics, purpose, narrative, aesthetics, and so on, from within this assumed dynamic. Indeed, as Chapter One will show, it was precisely this comparative discourse with the novel that gave birth to the field of short story criticism.

Chapter One draws out the consequences of this assumed dependency on the novel as revealing of significant underlying assumptions regarding modernity based on

a Eurocentric model that becomes particularly stark when one looks at non-European short story “traditions.” Among these is an assumption of what Emily Apter calls “Eurochronology,”<sup>15</sup> which places non-European short story “traditions” that emerged after the early 19<sup>th</sup> century on the chronological historical timeline as secondary to and derivative of European and North American short story “traditions,” which are viewed as having emerged “first” and equates “first” with “source.” This idea also situates the broad field of short story criticism as reproducing the idea of Europe as “the original home of the modern,” or the conceptual process Dipesh Charkrabarty refers to as “provincializing Europe.”<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the novel is viewed as the ultimate purpose of the short story, which assumes the short story to share the same impulses – literarily and socially – as the novel. In consideration of the novel as the ultimate expression of literary modernity, the short story becomes a “not-yet” novel.

Maha Abdelmegeed points to a similar problem of historicized knowledge in her doctoral thesis, which writes against dominant treatments of the classical Arabic *maqāma*, and in particular Moḥammed al-Muwayliḥī’s *Ḥadīth ‘Īsa Ibn Hishām* (A Period of Time, 1907), which is frequently posited as “in-between the dichotomously juxtaposed ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity,’ furnishing the necessary transition to modern Arabic literature by performing an indispensable closure of the classical *maqāma*.”<sup>17</sup> Her articulation of the problem is strikingly similar to that facing the short story. She addresses the outcome of the assumption that:

It is already determined that the text is necessarily attempting to be a novel. Since the defining characteristics of the novel are already established, pointing to [al-Muwayliḥī’s] text’s failures becomes a simple matter. Aspects of the studied literary practice, which do not correspond to the extrinsic historical narrative, are failures of the text. They do not gesture towards potential methodological or theoretical issues in the over-arching narrative. *Ḥadīth ‘Īsa* – and other “transitional texts” – are an amalgamation of traits attempting to be a novel. In this sense, literary texts as a “totality” are invisible in the histories of modern Arabic literature.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso Books, 2013) p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Dipesh Charkrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, Updated 2008 edition) p. xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Maha AbdelMegeed, *Khayālī Textuality as Historical Urgency: Al-Muwayliḥī’s “Ḥadīth ‘Īsa Ibn Hishām” and the Long 1890s* (London: SOAS, University of London, unrevised 2015 version, unpublished PhD thesis) p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.

Abdelmegeed uses Chakrabarty's idea of the "not-yet" as a critical intervention against what she traces to the universalizing tendencies of capitalism, citing Karl Marx's argument that capitalism creates the world in its own image.<sup>19</sup> She asserts that what is at stake in her intervention is the restructuring of the world in capitalist modernity's – circumstantially also European modernity's - image.<sup>20</sup>

With regard to the short story, this idea finds its agency in the fact that the "modern" short story, unlike the *maqāma*, emerged *through* and *in the service of* capitalism's permeating societal structures, perspectives, institutions, and discourses, and it is from within this dynamic that the modifier "modern" is attributed to the short story as a way of distinguishing it from other traditional forms of localized literature from which it evolved. In this way, the short story shares much in common with the photograph, a topic that is addressed in Chapter Two. Both these art forms emerged out of and through an impulse of commodification and consumption, not only with regard to their restrictive frames and brevity, but also, as I previously mentioned, with regard to the idea of expediency as it relates to the time required the reader/viewer to "experience" the story presented them. Within the capitalist model, where time itself is commodified, these art forms seemed to promise the reader/viewer an ability to consume their messages in limited time, and at a correspondingly limited price tag. Edgar Allan Poe famously pinpointed the short story's ability to be read in a single sitting<sup>21</sup> as a key aspect of its definition, an assertion that has been mostly debunked now, but which prompted some of the earliest ideas about the short story's definition centering around its brevity that continue to the present (see Chapter Two). The very persistence of this issue of brevity as a central defining aspect of the short story as a distinct literary form – particularly in critical discourse that draws its brevity in direct contrast to the novel's lack thereof – is indicative of the embedded capitalist narrative and as a reifying implicit discourse regarding modernity as represented through the form and narrative impulses of the short story, which are made inseparable from the issues of its commodification and consumption.

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx and Frederic Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Roadmap to History's Most Important Political Document*, ed. Phil Gasper (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005) p. 45.

<sup>20</sup> Abdelmegeed, *Khayālī Textuality as Historical Urgency*, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Review [*Graham's Magazine*, May 1842] of Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales*," in ed. Leonard Cassuto, *Literary Theory and Criticism* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1999) p. 60.

The underlying visualizing impulse inhered in both the short story and the photograph is a further outcome of the idea of artistic expediency. In her essay “The Image-World,” Susan Sontag expands on the social meanings of photography and emphasizes how humankind’s allegiance to imagery has come to shape its demands on reality, and that the idea of an image *constituting* experience over the experience itself is a powerful impetus to this impulse.<sup>22</sup> It is made all the more powerful by the image’s ability to stand in for infinite experiences simultaneously. Thus, its form gives the impression of allowing the consumption of life through a brief image in lieu of the time-rigorous practice of gaining lived experience. This is yet another mode of being that the photograph shares with the short story, except that the short story does so through written language. And yet, the nature of that written language in the short story is profoundly visual, a trait dictated as much by the form’s brevity as by its social impulse (see Chapter Two). Sontag also emphasizes the individual-centricity of the photograph deriving from its capability in representing the unique perspective of its viewer, and defining the idea of individualism and free will according to this impulse, compounded by the impression of unlimited access to the world.

From within this framework, visuality itself becomes expressive of a modernity that is filtered through a consumer capitalist lens, facilitated by an overt privileging of the individual’s expectations as dictated by that paradigm. Thus, the issue of metaphor in the short story as a central mimetic impetus to the realization of the form’s brevity while subverting narrative reductionism takes on materialist discourses through its signifiers. This relationship between capitalism, materiality, metaphor, and discourses of power – including European colonial projects – becomes explicit in some of Yūsuf Idrīs’ short stories, broadly speaking and within specific contexts, as will be shown in Part II. I especially seize on discourses regarding Egyptian artifacts and their appropriation both inside and outside of Egypt, and their role as actors in the conflicting conceptions of modernity (as it relates to Europe and to Egypt, and the nuances therein), and I draw out how Idrīs’ harnesses the complexities of these discourses inherent in metaphorical textual objects to essentially critique the resulting modernity discourses. Idrīs exploits the assumed relationship between the short story’s visuality and its capitalist impulse to do something else. And yet, this “something else” has thus far remained unexamined in short story criticism, not only with regard to Idrīs, but overall.

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<sup>22</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: RosettaBooks electronic version, 2005) p. 121.

And so the assumed relationship has remained intact and also unacknowledged, and therefore any forms of narrative critique occurring from without, or indeed from within, the European short story that subvert the implication of visibility as a textual embodiment of capitalism is rendered invisible, and the power dynamic that situates non-European short story traditions as derivative remains intact.

A larger outcome of this mystification is that the short story has remained almost entirely invisible in world literature debates<sup>23</sup>, and, until very recently, also in postcolonial studies (see Chapter One). Contemporarily, this is somewhat ironic given the short story's prominent place as a literature uniquely suited to Internet and social media platforms, and its continued relevancy as a form imbued of scenarios intricately connected to issues of globalization and corporate capitalism, but also to the heightened visibility of folk and oral literatures through those avenues. However, these contemporary scenarios constitute continued, non-linear transformations of the "modern" short story as I conceive of it herein. The powerful distillation of language in the short story, and the sociality inhered in its languages as manifested through, among other things, its visualizing aesthetics, potentially offer important critical, methodological, and even creative insights to complement and problematize current world literature and postcolonial debates (Chapter One).

## II. Demystifying the short story: a tale of two authors

So far, I have mostly discussed the issues that form the basis of Part I, the first half of this project. I now turn to the authors whose contexts, philosophies, and works provide the analytical focuses of the second half, Parts II and III. It is through their examples that reading (in)visibility as a language of demystification gains clarity. "Demystification" here does not mean one thing or lead to one outcome; rather it refers to a *method* of reading language in the short story from within its own context. This context is not fixed or static or constitutive of a single thread or analytical possibility; likewise, (in)visibility in the short story is neither fixed nor static, but shows up as a

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<sup>23</sup> The term "world literature" here and elsewhere throughout this research refers to a literature's value and/or relevance extending beyond its country, culture, or language of origin. David Damrosch makes a caveat to this general definition by asserting that only a literature that has an *effective* life whenever and wherever it is active beyond its culture of origin may be considered a world literature (David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) p. 4).

multi-faceted textual possibility that is continually renewed in the present. With this in mind, my aim in approaching Idrīs through *amāra* and Cortázar through mythopoesis is to elucidate their own struggles in the artistic process in the service of a vision of modernity or modernities.

Here, (in)visibility is expressive of the short story's sociality and constitutes an entry point to the local. Two major aspects of the short story lead its visualizing aesthetics: form and sociality. With regard to form, Edward Said articulates textuality as the interplay between what is visible and invisible in a text,<sup>24</sup> with the form itself as the distillation of the language of the story. Its textuality is not restricted within the text itself, but expands beyond it; and it is precisely the nature of that expansion that speaks to the issue of form as textual power. Its discursive manifestations move in and out of these two ideas, and the nature of that movement is indicative of the struggle undertaken on behalf of the writer to demystify the short story in favor of the local. This is the process Berger described as a "prolonged struggle" on behalf of artists to subvert narratives of historicized knowledge in order to achieve something new and true to purpose, whatever that may be.<sup>25</sup> The idea of the prolonged struggle is how I delineate the works of Idrīs and Cortázar to address the process of mystification regarding the short story, one of the most powerful sources of which is tied to the embeddedness of Eurocentric conceptions of modernity and how those issues present themselves.

In the initial process of selecting authors and works for this study, Idrīs and Cortázar stood out because of the powerful strength of vision as communicated through their stories. I found myself returning to their stories repeatedly because of (what I then perceived as) the clarity of the social impulses undergirding their respective corpuses, which I will return to. Other vital factors included the fact that the majority of their literary output manifested in the short story; that they are masters of the form within their respective literary spheres; that many of their works are canonical classics in those contexts and also enjoy popular renown; and that they were contemporaries, in that they lived and wrote at roughly the same time on the historical timeline (Idrīs' first collection was published in 1954 and Cortázar's in 1949).

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<sup>24</sup> Edward W. Said, "The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions," in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Summer 1978).

<sup>25</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 110.

With regard to this latter point, their respective historical situatedness also influenced my decision. The 1950s and '60s were moments of profound transition for both Egypt and Argentina, and Latin America more generally speaking. The natures of these transitions were distinct, naturally, however they also shared what Hosam Aboul-Ela has referred to as “a set of parallel problems.”<sup>26</sup> Aboul-Ela’s critique of European Marxism with regard to the “Mariátegui tradition” reads political economy in spatial terms rather than according to linear-temporal terms,<sup>27</sup> offering an alternate mapping of the global south that builds on Pratt’s “third category of analysis” as neocolonialism.<sup>28</sup> His approach offers a method in which such countries, what he calls “other South,” may be approached through other modes of reading than the historical – for example, through the intellectual, economic, (post)colonial, etc. (see Chapter One).

This approach is useful in considering Egypt and Latin America’s “parallel problems” in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, whose events and outcomes had major impacts on both Idrīs and Cortázar, respectively. In 1952, a military coup overthrew King Farouk, installing Gamal Abd el-Nasser as Egypt’s President. Nasser embarked on a series of socialist policies intended to correct class injustices and reclaim Egyptian interests from foreign companies and governments. Meanwhile, 1953 marked the start of the Cuban Revolution, whose victory would not come until 1959 upon the ousting of President Fulgencio Batista. The Revolution’s initially stated priorities were, like Nasser’s, aimed at social reform through land and wealth redistribution and nationalization projects, including a pronounced shift in the country’s foreign relations, particularly with the United States (see Parts II and III, respectively).

Idrīs and Cortázar were each politically active, and their activism took many forms, including essays, journal articles, interviews, and of course, fiction. Both of them would fall in and out of favor with their respective local governments – Idrīs was imprisoned for two years, while Cortázar went into voluntary exile in France in 1951, where he remained until his death in 1984. Meanwhile, Cortázar’s position *vis a vis* the

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<sup>26</sup> Hosam Aboul-Ela in interview with Christopher Micklethwait. “Christopher Micklethwait Interviews Hosam Aboul-Ela in ‘The Global South’ and the Big Bail Out,” in *E3W Review of Books*, Vol. 9 (Spring 2009) np. Accessed 25 June 2016, <<http://www.dwrl.utexas.edu/orgs/e3w/volume-9-spring-2009/global-souths/christopher-micklethwait-interviews-hosam-aboul-ela-in-the-global-south-and-the-big-bail-out>>.

<sup>27</sup> Hosam Aboul-Ela, *Other South: Faulkner, Coloniality, and the Mariátegui Tradition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007) p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, “Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*,” in *Social Text*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1994) p. 4.

Cuban Revolution and Fidel Castro, which began as euphoric support, began to deteriorate with the Padilla Affair and would remain tortured and conflicted also until his death.

These contexts are explored further in Parts II and III. My intention in mentioning them here is to delineate a degree of the social impetus undergirding Idrīs' and Cortázar's literary "moments." They signify moments of historical urgency for each author in their respective literary conceptions of *amāra* and mythopoesis. Each had been present to one extent or another in their region's narrative discourse since the beginning of what is referred to as their respective "modern" eras. Chapter Three delineates the literary histories of each of these ideas and their situatedness with regard to Egyptian and Argentine/Latin American literatures. This is important, because their emergence in literary discourse was a way of figuring organic modernities in postcolonial scenarios.

For Egypt, the beginning of the "modern" era is commonly cited as the "moment of encounter" marked by Napoleon's invasion of the country for three years, from 1798 to 1801. The dominant perspective has held that Egypt's modernity emerged from European influence, however, Wail Hassan points out that the colonial threat posed by Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was an equally significant catalyst for the *nahda*.<sup>29</sup> Argentina's and Latin America's modernity is less easily traced back to a single moment, and the issue of European influence is profoundly complex owing to three hundred years of colonialism and then post-independence European immigration to Argentina thereafter. The question of race, introduced as a dividing social factor by the *conquistadores*, would play a major role in post-colonial struggles for modernity in Latin America.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, Dussell argues that, rather than Europe *bringing* modernity to Latin America through colonialism, it was the colonial act itself that began in 1492 in the Americas that played a major role in shaping practices and belief systems that would eventually be considered synonymous with European modernity, which he argues did not exist prior to the colonization of the American continent.<sup>31</sup> Again, see Chapter Three a more expansive discussion.

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<sup>29</sup> Wail S. Hassan, "Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature," in *Journal of Modern Arabic Literature*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2002) p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> See: Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," in *Neplanta: Views from the South*, No. 3 (2000).

<sup>31</sup> Enrique Dussel, *Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of the "Other" and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995).

It is at this point that the set of “parallel problems” facing Idrīs and Cortázar – with regard to the shape these discourses had taken when they reached each of them – begins to diverge in interesting ways. So far I have situated the question of modernity as deriving from colonial acts, and I have shown that the dominant view of European modernity being *applied* to Egypt and Argentina in order to make them modern is only part of the story; the fact of it is far more complex, and involves reciprocal and conflicting realities. These complexities would help to shape the nature of the modernizing projects that began to commence in earnest in their postcolonial scenarios. The short story emerges in both of these cases as a *new kind of literature* intended to address the question of modernity. In each scenario, the short story’s narrative and mimetic impulses reflected the conflicting social (political, historical, cultural, linguistic, etc.) discourses. It is important to note here that, although the short story emerged as a distinct genre in Egypt and Argentina/Latin America<sup>32</sup> about a century apart from one another, in both places it emerged as a literary form intended to embody and convey a particular idea. That is, *the short story emerges out of social discourse*.

My intention in saying this is to point out that – as Chapter Three and the Introductions to Parts II and III discuss – the short story became a textual, narrative embodiment of the ideas of *amāra* and mythology, respectively. In Egypt, *amāra* began taking shape as an idea that could be encompassed in literature, as a way of infusing Egyptian literature into a form capable of reflecting contemporary, fluid realities while also embodying the language (i.e. knowledge) of the people. Thus, the aesthetic and linguistic achievements of Sannu‘, Nadīm, Lāshīn, Haqqī, and the New School were reflective of the social discourses regarding the struggle for modernity. In many ways, this “struggle” consisted of disentangling the short story from the European structures and narratives assumed within it when the New School adopted it in order to Egyptianize it. As the threat of foreign dominance resurfaced after WWII with the ascending power of the United States and its capitalist systems, Idrīs took up this effort with renewed urgency. Part II of this project documents that urgency and Idrīs’ struggle, which I mark as a continuation of the ideas and impulses that propelled the *nahda* and New School writers.

With this in mind, I have chosen three primary stories by Idrīs to document his struggle: “Abū al-Hawl,” (1956) “Qā‘ al-madīna,” (1956) and “Ḥammāl al-karāsī”

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<sup>32</sup> Argentine author Esteban Echeverría’s “El matadero” is frequently cited as the first Latin American short story. See Chapter Three and Part III.

(1969). Although these stories move along a linear timeline, from earliest to latest, Idrīs's effort in figuring *amāra* was uneven, moving in fits and starts. I have opted to use these stories not for their linearity, but rather because of the possibilities they open up for looking at Idrīs' aesthetic experimentation as it related to his social goals. While "Abū al-Hawl" is a fairly preliminary work, it provides an excellent entry point for looking at Idrīs' aesthetics. Building on the light code of Lāshīn and Haqqī, the story shows a continuity of narrative discourse and the persistent struggle to figure *amāra*, while also highlighting Idrīs' points of departure, particularly regarding his critique of what had to that point been representations of the Egyptian "people" as a nameless, faceless, ignorant mass. He immediately uses (in)visibility through the light code to complicate this form of representation, which he continues in "Qā' al-madīna." Although "Qā' al-madīna" is a long, meandering story, it shows the urgency and also frenzy with which Idrīs was experimenting with various modes of visualizing aesthetics to figure *amāra*. This includes the light code, in a wide variety of manifestations that work in complicated ways, complementing and opposing one another at the same time. But it also introduces the use of significant, centering objects as narrative actors in Idrīs' stories – a technique he uses sparingly but effectively in his corpus. "Ḥammāl al-karāsī" is my interpretation of a culmination of a literary moment in Idrīs' career. It is a short, unified story that finally transforms the use of an object (the chair) into a profound visual discourse that exceeds the strict parameters of the text, creating a fluid, shifting narrative that is constantly renewed in the present.

My approach to Cortázar's corpus is somewhat different, and the stories I have selected for close readings from among them are based on a different set of criteria. There are a few reasons for this. While I have opted to focus on works from the first two decades from both of their careers – owing to the "parallel set of problems" component from the 1950s and '60s with regard to each author – there are significant differences in their approaches. For example, while Idrīs' stated goals of Egyptianizing the short story and using it as a tool for social reform remained constant, for the most part, in the first two decades of his career, his methods of achieving those goals was less consistent. There are certain overwhelming tropes in Idrīs' work, including gender, sex, urban and village life, class disparities, etc.<sup>33</sup> However, his employment of them does not necessarily manifest with equal commitment or consistency, and more than anything

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<sup>33</sup> See: P.M. Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs: A Modern Egyptian Author*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981).

they tend to reflect almost distinctive sub-cycles, and it is with this in mind that I have selected the above stories.

Cortázar, conversely, was extraordinarily selective about which stories he published. This means that the stories he published during his lifetime were only those he considered to be the very best. And, rather than appearing sporadically in magazines or journal serializations, Cortázar conscientiously compiled his stories into sorted collections. These collections, like the two I will focus on (*Bestiario* and *Final del juego*) form consistent, powerful, progressive cycles of both Cortázar's mythopoesis and *bestiario*. However, what is also interesting about Cortázar is that, unlike Idrīs, while his aesthetics displayed this powerful consistency throughout most of this career, his stated aims for writing were never fixed, and changed profoundly in his years as a writer (see Cortázar's quote in the epigraph to "Section II: A Briefly Sketched Life" in Part III). Therefore, while I approach his stories through his visualizing aesthetics, in keeping with my approach to Idrīs, the undergirding influences, interpretations, and goals of his aesthetic choices are not always as clear, or leading to the same goal, even among aesthetically similar stories. In this way, I have articulated Cortázar's myth-making as a form of resistance to what is hegemonic and as a subversion of labeling – though these in themselves are perspectives that have been and will likely continue to meet with some challenges. This is the challenge of Cortázar's writing, which itself exhibits interesting ideas about the impossibility of writing.<sup>34</sup>

With this in mind, I have approached Cortázar's work as a cycle, discussing many of the stories in *Bestiario* and *Final del juego* to draw out certain aesthetic patterns, while focusing the majority of my attention on two primary stories: "Bestiario," from *Bestiario* and "Axolotl" from *Final del juego*. I approach "Bestiario" as a forceful questioning of reality and the place of the individual in a divided society through the (in)visibility trope, also calling on the works of other scholarly analyses of the story to complement or complicate my interpretation. (It is worth noting here that my ability to call on secondary sources for Cortázar is in direct contrast to the situation for Idrīs, for whom there is significantly less scholarly work available, particularly on his short stories, in either Arabic or English). Chapter Seven looks almost exclusively at the story "Axolotl," which is among Cortázar's most complex and analytically disputed stories. My reading of the story is influenced by its manifestations of metamorphosis,

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<sup>34</sup> See: Roberto González Echevarría, "Los reyes: Cortázar's Mythology of Writing," in *Books Abroad*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Summer 1976, pp. 548-557)

which serves as a departure for Idrīs' use of *bestiario* as a visualizing aesthetics. My approach to "Axolotl" marks a radical departure from most other readings of the story, in that it centers around Cortázar's use of the axolotl and the myth of the Xolotl from Aztec mythology – a myth that has nearly been lost to time and constitutes a powerful commentary on the invisible and silenced Mesoamerican narratives since colonialism. I situate the story as marking Cortázar's departure from European mythology to write a new Latin American mythology and re-inscribe pre-colonial narratives into conceptions of the modern.

In this section I have outlined my reasons for selecting Idrīs and Cortázar as the two major authors included in this study. The shared set of problems confronting their life and works in the 1950s and '60s allows for a spatial framework for exploring overarching discourses regarding modernity and their connectedness to colonial and neoliberal threats, with Idrīs and Cortázar constituting actors within these frameworks. This shared scenario can be traced back to Egypt and Latin America's respective "moments of encounter" with Europe and subsequent, postcolonial modernizing projects. From within these projects, ideas began forming intended to address conflicting discourses about the nature of modernity, and these ideas both *gave rise to* and became *embedded within* the short story as it emerged in each place. These scenarios, as articulated by Aboul-Ela, provide a way of seeing the short story in its broad, socio-historical patterns of emergence, particularly in non-European contexts, that nonetheless allow access for consideration of the local. In this way, the scenarios conveyed through Egypt and Argentina offer salient examples of the short story's interconnectedness with postcolonial narratives, as well as world literature debates, while also emphasizing that the short story's demystification is to be found in methods leading to the local, rather than broad meta-narratives regarding form alone.

The specific choice of Idrīs and Cortázar expands these debates rather than restricting them, offering the method of reading the short story *vis a vis* its visualizing aesthetics as a fluid interpretive method that is continually renewed in the present. Further, it offers the aesthetic method as one capable of encapsulating divergent discourses deriving from equally divergent social aims, philosophies, and perspectives, while also helping to conceive a language to talk about the short story that is not contingent upon the novel or other forms of historicized mystification. And finally, Idrīs and Cortázar each – and together – show the short story as a literary form which, for all

its “shortness,” is not only capable of conveying complex, fully-realized narratives and commenting on social discourses, but is in fact *constitutive* of these things.

This Introduction has provided a roadmap of my thesis in its trajectory; however I will reiterate it briefly here. Chapter One will look at the major debates in short story criticism drawing the problems facing the field and proposing ways forward through methods offered through world literature, on the one hand, and postcolonial studies on the other. Chapter Two moves away from this issue a bit, instead focusing on the disputed issue of form in the short story. I use this chapter to elucidate how the short story’s form is inhered of significant visualizing impulses. Together, these chapters provide a basis for Chapter Three, which pivots the discussion towards the specific contexts of *amāra* in Egypt and mythology in Argentina and Latin America. These issues are posited as being contradictory to the dominant debates in short story criticism, while posing the local as an entry point into the short story. It emphasizes the role of modernity debates in giving rise to the short story as a language of social concern, inhered of conflicting, complex debates. Parts II and III turn to Idrīs and Cortázar and their stories and methods, situating them within the contexts discussed in Chapter Three, and emphasizing the role of their visualizing aesthetics as textual responses to the conflicting modernity discourses of Chapter Three. The ultimate aim of this study is to consider the short story as a literary form that arises out of and is inhered of localized conflicting discourses intended to figure the modern in societies undergoing moments of profound transition, and to do so by privileging the visualizing component of the short story’s brevity and unity of impression. In the process, it rethinks ideas connected to modernity, to the short story’s situatedness as a world literature, and the complexities and contributions of Egyptian and Argentine/Latin American literature *vis a vis* postcolonial studies.

## PART ONE

### CRITICAL HORIZONS:

#### Definition, Sociality, and Modernity

The short story is a genre without a working definition. Volumes have been dedicated to the task of pinning it down one way or another, but it has so far managed to elude all such attempts; the short story is a shape-shifter whose existence seems premised upon exceptions and very few, if any, rules. Indeed, the question of whether the short story even meets the loose definition(s) of “genre” remains open for debate, and it is alternatively referred to in the most ambiguous term as a “form.” Even its name is in flux, at least in English, alternating between “short story,” “short fiction,” “short narrative,” and can very often be found published as a short story in one volume, while existing as a “novella” in another, and as a poem in yet another.

And so the question emerges: how to deeply engage with a genre without even knowing precisely what it is? In the beginning, this question seemed to thwart my ability to clearly articulate the problematics and terms of my research; I was lacking a foundation, and I felt myself constantly pulled into the far more available, robust, and delineated studies on the novel to supplement voids in language and theory by which to talk about the short story. Such a reliance is indeed rife in short story criticism, in some cases, like mine, for want of terms delineating the field of play, while for others, it has been borne out of a not-uncommon perspective that the short story is a “not-yet” novel, and a conflation of terms is therefore justified.

Those attempting to define the short story on its own terms have nevertheless frequently used the novel as its opposing “other;” since the short story seems to have no rules of its own, a common practice has been to define it against what it is not. John M. Ellis’s theorization that the “performance” of a literature serves as the grounding for its definition reads against this tendency and offers an interesting starting point for thinking about the idea of “genre” as a positively identifiable literary form based on its social function. Ellis uses the metaphor of the “weed,” referring to an unwanted plant, to describe how the positive characteristics of the plant overlaps indistinguishably from other plants, and that what marks a weed out as being a weed is the regard society holds

for that particular plant.<sup>35</sup> “This means that the composition of the group may be extremely varied in terms of physical structure and this, in turn, is why we do not necessarily find structural features possessed exclusively by all members of the class. [...] categories are set up which project, above all, human needs and human decisions to treat things in certain ways for their own reasons. They organize the world rather than describe it.”<sup>36</sup>

Literature is one of the ways that we organize the world around us, and the short story is no different. It therefore makes eminent sense to look at the short story *vis a vis* its social embeddedness rather than as somehow comparatively dependent upon the novel. Nevertheless, because the latter approach has so permeated short story criticism from its earliest days, it is necessary and useful to delineate how and why this discourse came to shape the field, what it has gleaned, what has been lost or missed, and what assumptions underlie these approaches. This is where I begin the journey of this study, in Chapter One, by way of entering into how the field of short story criticism has addressed the fraught question of definition. It becomes clear that even where no strict comparison to the novel exists, implicit assumptions deriving from this perspective nevertheless find their way in. Examining these assumptions is particularly useful in opening up questions of the short story’s situatedness as a “world literature,” what that means, and how current debates in world literature offer a way forward for evolving a language of short story criticism suited to its unique positionality and demystifying the historicization of knowledge that surrounds the form with regard to its literary history, but also with regard to its sociality. Pointing towards the precise nature of that sociality, the end of Chapter One will begin a discussion of the role of the short story in societies undergoing profound transformation and how recent work being done on the “postcolonial short story” benefits the broader field of criticism – a topic that will be resumed in Chapter Three.

Before moving on to that topic with more force, however, Chapter Two takes the insights from world literature as a point of departure for the delineation of a working definition of the form. Complementing the insights from Tanoukhi and Berger, it emphasizes aspects of the form’s visualizing capacity, and begins to reframe the questions of other sub-fields of short story criticism – like closure studies and

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<sup>35</sup> John M. Ellis, *The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

recalcitrance – as contributing points of the form’s aesthetic cohesion – or what Poe referred to as “unity of impression.” It homes in on the question of brevity in particular, and how the short story’s brevity engages in a reciprocal dependency with its visualizing capacity, and some of the ways that that visualizing capacity shows up, arriving at the centrality of metaphor and epiphany, and the question of materiality. Taken together, these components point to a particular visualized textuality of the short story, which necessitates something of a trope of (in)visibility, which I will draw out through a discussion of Edward Said’s discussion of the centrality of (in)visibility in the problem of textuality.

Finally, Chapter Three serves to crystalize the broadly conceived discussions of the first two chapters, and it is also the pivot point for delving into the specific case studies of Parts II and III. The first part of Chapter Three picks up where Chapter One left off, highlighting some of the fairly recent work being done concerning Egypt and Argentina/Latin America in the broader spectrum of postcolonial studies, elucidating how those debates can assist in understanding the particular social complexities that helped to shape the short story into highly localized forms of national and cultural expression.

The second part of Chapter Three engages the discussion of form from Chapter Two, and explores how *amāra* in Egypt and mythology in Argentina/Latin America emerged as forms of postcolonial discourse that drove the short story’s formation and particular aesthetic preoccupations in the mid-twentieth century. This section explores the history of these two ideas within their respective contexts and draws them into the larger framework concerning social transformation, social discourse, and their realization through the visualizing capacity of the short story, whose particular expressions will be the main focuses of Parts II and III.

By the end of Part I, it should be clear that a capable working definition of the short story situates it as a response to specific social debates arising out of a society undergoing transition, which in the particular cases of Egypt and Argentina is constitutive of a colonial experience, though they are strikingly different from each other. This discussion is intended to situate the short story as a language of social discourse emerging out of those disparate realities, while also elucidating the contribution the short story’s potential contribution to postcolonial theory and to world literature debates.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Current Debates in Short Story Criticism and World Literature

#### Introduction

The prevailing debate in short story criticism stems from a question that is at least two hundred years old: What is the short story? Short story criticism generally shows a profound preoccupation with this question. Indeed, attempts to answer it are arguably what have *created* and continue to mold the field more than any other consideration. In particular, comparative use of the novel as an opposing partner to the short story has left a significant mark; consequently, there are a few outcomes that mark the field generally other than those related to this approach, which amount to subfields of study intended to reach a satisfactory working definition based on varying criteria. In the first place, the field is highly fragmented, especially along what I will refer to for now as temporal lines, since the fragmentation is owed to uneven conceptions of the short story according to where and most especially *when* it emerged. This fragmentation is owed to a few things: firstly, the short story's local nature (in terms of production and dissemination); secondly, the fact of its emergence at various times in accordance with local contexts, thereby giving way to pockets of localized criticism that emerge disparately; and finally, conjoining these factors, a profound underlying assumption of "Eurochronology" as a means of discussing the short story, which has compounded the field's fragmented character but has also lead to a "mystification" regarding the short story's positionality as a literary form, including its place in society and its aesthetic particularities. The first part of this chapter will delineate the field according to these and surrounding conceptions and debates, including their provenance and their outcomes.

Such questions are found to be particularly poignant when one undertakes a comparative study of the short story across non-Euro-American cultures. Fortunately, current debates in world literature that emphasize methods of reading literature over objectifying treatments of it offer intriguing starting points towards building conceptual and theoretical frameworks that circumvent some of the detrimental assumptions about the form, and take the short story's localized nature into account, while also acknowledging and valuing patterns of similarity that transcend those local specificities, particularly in matters of form, aesthetics, and social context. In particular, I will seize

on Hosam Aboul-Ela's alternate mapping of the global south that privileges spatial (over temporal) readings of materialist visions with regard to global and historical knowledge, and critiques the historicization of knowledge, particularly as it shows up through what Emily Apter refers to as "Eurochronology." Nirvana Tanoukhi furthers this conception by emphasizing the re-figuration of context as an individually suited hermeneutic of space through scale. Tanoukhi's framing owes much to John Berger's idea of history as a process of mystification whereby a piece of art becomes subsumed within dominant forms of discourse sometimes bound up in ideas of capitalism and ownership. The latter part of this chapter emphasizes the short story's "postcolonial impulse" as being located in its tendency toward moments of profound transition and dislocation, and proposes a further investigation into that topic through a look at the short story's aesthetics of social concern in the coming chapters. These "ways of reading" offer the potential for an alternative framework for short story criticism.

#### I. The comparative approach and the state of the field

In one of the most celebrated definition-focused anthologies of short story essays, *The New Short Story Theories* (1994), Charles E. May says, by way of introduction, "It seems to me the first issue about which we need to come to some understanding – if for no other reason than to call a truce on it – is the issue of definition."<sup>37</sup> May then begins framing the subsequent essays as responses to this unresolved issue through the ever-present perspective of the short story's "adjacency" to the novel. This comparative approach has firm grounding in short story studies, going all the way back at least to Edgar Allan Poe's now famous 1842 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. Poe mentions the novel only twice, briefly, in an extended discussion of what, in his opinion, marks the characteristics of a well-executed short story; in short, he points to "unity of effect" as paramount, and indicates the novel to be incapable of rendering such an impression owing to its length.<sup>38</sup> More than the novel, Poe's approach takes poetry as the short story's natural comparative partner, perceiving the two as sharing similar creative aims and processes, geared towards the achievement of what he calls

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<sup>37</sup> Charles E. May, *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994) p. xv.

<sup>38</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Review [*Graham's Magazine*, May 1842] of Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales*," in ed. Leonard Cassuto, *Literary Theory and Criticism* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1999) p. 60.

“Poetic Sentiment.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, comparisons to the novel – even Poe’s – did not come to the fore until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when short story criticism began emerging in earnest. In 1901, at a time when the short story was being ignored almost entirely in English literary histories and criticism, Brander Matthews harnessed the more familiar and popular novel as a point of comparison by means of disseminating the nature of the short story’s difference and virtues, for which he calls on Poe’s unity of impression. He says,

The difference between a Novel and a Novelet is one of length only: a Novelet is a brief Novel. But the difference between a Novel and a Short-story is a difference of kind. A true Short-story is something other and something more than a mere story which is short. A true Short-story differs from the Novel chiefly in its essential unity of impression. In a far more exact and precise use of the word, a Short-story has unity as a Novel cannot have it.<sup>40</sup>

Brander’s book established the terms that continue to dominate short story criticism, to the extent that even those seminal critical works that have put forth interesting and sometimes probing explorations of the form have nonetheless based their findings to one degree or another on an assumed relationship, or lack thereof, to the novel. For example, Frank O’Connor’s idea of the short story’s thematic focus as being aligned with “submerged population groups” is contrasted with the novel’s traditional reliance on the figure of the hero, while he attributes the short story’s literary qualities as in contrast the novel’s form, which, he says, “is given by the length; in the short story the length is given by the form [...] Basically the difference between the short story and the novel is not one of length. It is a difference between pure and applied storytelling.”<sup>41</sup> Likewise, Boris Éjxenbaum explicitly contrasts the novel’s manner of ending with the short story’s by way of pinpointing its particular effect, saying that,

the ending of the novel is a point of let-up and not of intensification. The culmination of the main line of action must come somewhere before the ending [...] The short story, on the contrary, gravitates expressly toward maximal unexpectedness of a finale by concentrating around itself all that has preceded [...] The novel is a long walk through various localities

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Brander Matthews, *The Philosophy of the Short Story* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1901) p. 15.

<sup>41</sup> Frank O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice* (Cork: Cork City Council, 2003 edition) p. 11.

with a peaceful return trip assumed; the short story – a climb up a mountain the aim of which is a view from on high.”<sup>42</sup>

Also commenting on closure, Elizabeth Bowen says, “The art of the short story permits a break at what in the novel would be the crux of the plot: the short story, free from the *longueurs* of the novel is also exempt from the novel’s conclusiveness – too often forced and false: it may thus more nearly than the novel approach aesthetic and moral truth.”<sup>43</sup> Bowen’s articulation contains hints of Poe’s original reference to the novel concerning the issue of unity and, by extension, aesthetics. Bowen was especially interested in the visual qualities of the short story (which will be addressed more extensively in the next chapter), asserting that as one of the reason she chose to write in that form rather than others. While these kinds of comparisons are useful in gleaning fragmentary insights into the form, they fall short of presenting a way of reading that values its entirety; its unity. But there are other issues as well.

In one of the most assertive essays on the topic, Mary Louise Pratt calls on genre theory to contend that the short story is only relevant insofar as it is dependent upon the novel. She takes issue with the idea that the short story is an autonomous genre, instead positing its relationship to the novel as a hierarchical, top-down one, with the novel at the top. Within these parameters, she critiques current debates in short story criticism which seek to use the novel as a comparative means of justifying the short story’s uniqueness. For Pratt, the short story’s dependency on the novel is conceptual and historical. “The conceptual aspect is that shortness cannot be an intrinsic property of anything, but occurs only relative to something else. The historical aspect is that the novel is, and has been for some time, the more powerful and prestigious of the two genres. Hence, facts about the novel are necessary to explain facts about the short story, but the reverse is not so. The novel has through and through conditioned both the development of the short story and the critical treatment of the short story, but the reverse is not so.”<sup>44</sup> The example of the short story in Egypt undermines this assumption, as will be seen in Chapter Three, but for now it is sufficient to point out

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<sup>42</sup> Boris M. Éjxenbaum, “O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story,” trans. I.R. Titunik, in eds. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971) p. 232. Original published in Russian in 1925.

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *Collected Impressions* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950) p. 43.

<sup>44</sup> Mary Louis Pratt, “The Short Story: The Long and Short of It,” in ed. Charles E. May, *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994) p. 96.

that one of the glaring issues deriving from the comparative approach to the novel is its unabashed Eurocentrism, which has rendered non-Euro-American realizations of the short story virtually invisible and silent in these purportedly authoritative, broadly conceived discourses, and therefore also does not benefit from their example, which I will show to be a detrimental discrepancy to the field. I will return to this topic in the latter part of this chapter.

Pratt's approach is in part informed by a perceived contradiction between short story critics' determination to assert the short story as autonomous while simultaneously relying on the novel to do so. She draws out certain prevalent theorists whose ideas about the uniqueness of the short story fall into this category (among them Frank O'Connor, Boris Éjxenbaum, H.E. Bates, Ian Reid) in their attempts to progress the theoretical and conceptual considerations of the genre's merits.

Indeed, Pratt's essay emphasizes the degree to which a novel-based comparative approach to short story definition has partly contributed to the fragmentation one finds in short story criticism at present. Particular comparative perspectives have given way to subfields of study. The result is a field of diverse approaches, giving the impression of vitality and movement – and possibly contributing to May's contention regarding his edited anthology that “In one way or another the essays in this collection [...] assert, deny, examine, debate, or at least allude to every theoretical issue that has been raised about the short story since Poe argued that it was a unique narrative form”<sup>45</sup> - when in fact they derive in large part from one overwhelming assumption: that the short story's definition is to be located *vis a vis* the novel. Though her intention centers more around discussions of genre and perceived hypocrisies in short story criticism as described above, Pratt's approach nevertheless illustrates the degree to which subfields of short story criticism, including some of its most influential ideas, have derived from comparisons to the novel. She breaks them down into eight categories, which are worth listing here. The first four are fairly self-explanatory and concern ways in which the short story is considered incomplete when compared to the novel. The last four, for which I have included explanatory notes in brackets, consider how short story criticism has drawn the short story as a “minor and lesser genre with respect to the novel.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> May, *The New Short Story Theories*, p. xv.

<sup>46</sup> Pratt, “The Short Story,” p. 104.

1. The novel tells a life, the short story tells a fragment of a life.
2. The short story deals with a single thing, the novel with many things.
3. The short story is a sample, the novel is the whole hog.
4. The novel is a whole text, the short story is not.
5. Subject matter [referring to the genre's general use in introducing new and possibly contentious subjects into the literary arena].
6. Orality [referring to the genre's incorporation of oral-colloquial speech into the language of narration in a way that is more conspicuous than in the novel].
7. Narrative traditions [refers to the short story's absorption of oral, folk, and biblical storytelling traditions].
8. Craft versus art [refers to the tendency to view the short story as a skill-based craft rather than a creativity-based one].<sup>47</sup>

This list does indeed provide category-based frameworks by which it is possible to break down the sub-fields of short story criticism as they currently stand. However, while Pratt's criticism of the field is salient insofar as it points to the conflict of interest that seems to have embedded itself in short story criticism by way of comparisons to the novel, when it comes to discussions of the short story irrespective of its field of criticism, she tends to fall into the same pattern as those she criticizes. Though her points are not, as she says, "yet another attempt to define that genre,"<sup>48</sup> her assessment is nevertheless informed by a value-based perspective of the short story guided most strongly by its relationship to the novel. With her hypothesis that "both the conception of and the practice of the short story are conditioned by its relation to the novel, as the smaller and lesser genre,"<sup>49</sup> she is, like other short story scholars, taking that relationship for granted, as if it is a foregone conclusion in and of itself.

The underlying reasoning for the prevalence of the novel as a comparative "partner," rather than other literary forms with whom the short story shares more in common, like poetry, folk tales, and oral storytelling, seems to be that: 1) criticism on the short story has been preoccupied with issues of genre in attempting to get at a working definition, particularly from a structuralist perspective, in which genres are defined within an "genre system;" that is, in relation to other genres;<sup>50</sup> and 2) the novel and the short story are each prose storytelling forms, one long and one short, which makes them *appear* to share a close relationship and gives the impression of a natural partnership. This first point regarding structuralism has informed Pratt's study and other

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. pp. 99-111.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 111.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 97.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 96.

subfields of short story criticism. Closure studies, for example, takes the issue of short story endings as revealing of the short story's uniqueness, as shown with Éjxenbaum and Bowen above, for example, and has been used as a way of articulating the short story's autonomy, as conceived through considerations of its brevity, as a way of presenting a picture of the whole genre. Susan Lohafer, working by way of closure studies, has attempted to turn the text into a formula whereby it may conceivably be possible to pinpoint "preclosure" points in a story, or "those points in a narrative where the *readers* feel the story *could* end."<sup>51</sup> The problem with such approaches is that they reduce the short story into fragmented pieces that are intended to be objective, but which are anything but.

The importance of endings was first articulated by Poe, who conceived of starting a short story from the end in order to achieve "unity of impression,"<sup>52</sup> and then, later, by Anton Chekhov, who wrote in a letter that "My instinct tells me that that at the end of a novel or story, I must artfully concentrate for the reader an impression of the entire work."<sup>53</sup> Of course, Poe and Chekhov were not writing from a structuralist perspective; indeed, their comments were made as part of what Pratt calls story writing "instruction manuals," which are prevalent in short story studies (relating to point eight above).<sup>54</sup> There has been throughout the short story's modern history a conflation between such manuals and actual short story criticism. This is compounded by the fact that many, if not a majority, of short story critics are short story writers themselves. In this way, many points of such advice regarding *craft* have, over time, gained a considerable presence in short story criticism as points of *theory*. And because such "manuals" often provide advice in a systematic way, so this systematization seems to have also seeped into criticism – closure endings being but one example. This is also a contributing factor to the fragmentation of short story criticism into subfields like those described above, which tend to break the text down into parts. This further appears to be one of the ways that the novel became a prime point of comparison in short story studies

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Lohafer, "A Cognitive Approach to Storyness," in ed. Charles E. May, *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994) p. 303.

<sup>52</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Philosophy of Composition" [original 1846], in ed. Leonard Cassuto, *Literary Theory and Criticism* (Dover Publications: Mineola, 1999) np.

<sup>53</sup> Anton Chekhov, "Letter to A.N. Pleshcheyev, Moscow, Sept. 30, 1889," in ed. Charles E. May, *The New Short Story Theories* (Ohio University Press: Athens, 1994) p. 195.

<sup>54</sup> Pratt, "The Short Story," p. 110.

– beginning with a passing comment from Poe, which was much later developed into a theory of the short story with Matthews.

The second point, concerning how the short story and the novel appear to share an affinity based on their prose narratives and the complementariness of their respective lengths, presents still other problems. Despite many critics' acknowledgements of the short story's closeness with other art forms, like poetry<sup>55</sup> and photography,<sup>56</sup> comparisons to the novel persist. The issue of historical context goes some way towards explaining why, and contributes to the two genres *appearing* to share a close relationship. In many places the novel and the short story began emerging in their modern forms at roughly the same time (simultaneously or within decades of one another). Among the "first" places where this took place were Europe, Russia, and the American continent. In these places the novel and the short story emerged in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, decades prior to the professionalization of literary and comparative criticism. When literary studies of the short story did start emerging at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was done almost in a spirit of rescuing the short story from being subsumed by the novel. As an introductory note to his *Philosophy of the Short-story*, Matthews states his reason for undertaking such a study as a frustration with "novelists of Great Britain and the United States," whose recent prolific discussions on stories and story writing included "abstract principles of the art of fiction," which "applied quite [as] well to the Short-story as to the Novel, yet all their concrete examples were full-length Novels; and the Short-story, as such, received no recognition at all."<sup>57</sup> In this way, the discourse taking place in 1901 at the time of Matthews' writing significantly shaped the beginnings of short story criticism as an autonomous field of literary studies, and did so in large part by framing the seminal short story works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as being historically similar to or the same as the novel. Though Matthews'

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<sup>55</sup> See: Edgar Allan Poe, "Review [*Graham's Magazine*, May 1842] of Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales*," in ed. Leonard Cassuto, *Literary Theory and Criticism* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1999) p. 60; Frank O'Connor in Hollis Summers, *Discussions of the Short Story* (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1963) p. 100; Ian Reid, *The Short Story (Critical Idiom)* (London: Methuen, 1977) p. 28; Rust Hills, *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular* (Bantam Books, 1977) p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> For example: Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento," in eds. César Cecchi and María Luisa Pérez, *Antología del cuento moderno* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1970, 7<sup>th</sup> edition); Jane Marjorie Rabb, *The Short Story and Photography, 1880's - 1980's: A Critical Anthology* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); Marian Zwerling Sugano, "Beyond What Meets the Eye: The Photographic Analogy in Cortázar's Short Stories," in *Style*, Vol. 27, No. 3, (Fall 1993, pp. 332-51).

<sup>57</sup> Matthews, *The Philosophy of the Short Story*, pp. 11-13.

work is concerned more with craft and form than with history, his study implicitly exhibits an assumption of the two genres as sharing similar social and historical trajectories; indeed, this seems to be the very basis of his assertions regarding their forms, and he appropriates the ideas of Poe into his study. These assumptions largely remain unchecked at present.

The reason I am expounding at such length on the embeddedness of the novel in short story criticism becomes clearer when one begins looking outside the so-called “western” tradition – and here is where the implications of their historical and formalistic confluences become more stark. A particular immediate problem with this approach is the fact of the short story’s emerging in different regions or cultures at different times, with “time” here referring to a point or range on a linear, chronological historical timeline. By such a “measurement” – for that is how it is frequently treated – the European, Russian, and American (continent) short stories are deemed to have emerged in their modern forms “first.” While the scope of this work excludes the ability to survey exactly when each short story tradition emerged on this linear timeline, one need only begin looking outside the aforementioned “traditions” to glimpse some of the issues that have been facilitated through such an assumption.

One issue that seems to emerge continually in new guises is that, from the perspective of such a chronology, the literary history of the short story can be reduced to formulations of cause and effect. In *Against World Literature*, Emily Apter refers to Eurochronology as “a problem arising from the fact that critical traditions and disciplines founded in the western literary academy contain built-in typologies [...] adduced from western literary examples.”<sup>58</sup> The only constant in these formulations are those authors and stories constitutive of the so-called “western” literary canon, as previously alluded to concerning the short story above with Pratt. According to this supposition, which usually shows up as an implicit, engrained presumption, the short story traditions coming from these regions constitute “firsts” because they emerged early on in the development of the modern short story. But “first” here does not refer simply to a point in time on that chronological timeline; more importantly, it is constitutive of a value statement concerning the influence, power, and centrality of those “traditions” that conflates its historically timed emergence with its importance;

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<sup>58</sup> Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso Books, 2013) p. 8

“first” here is treated as “source.” Consequently, those cultures whose modern short story emerged “later” are considered derivative and/or dependent upon the “firsts.”

Comparisons to the novel are compounded by this perceived superiority of chronology, and even feed into it. Pratt’s first four points listed previously embody aspects of the perceived dependency of the short story on the novel. Here, the short story is drawn as constituting a fragment of what might otherwise become a novel, exemplified especially in the statement that “The novel is a whole text, the short story is not.”<sup>59</sup> She refers to the short story as an “experimental genre. It is only relative to the (‘full-fledged’) novel that the short story is seen as, and used as, the controlled lab for preliminary testing of devices before their release into the world at large.”<sup>60</sup> Such presumptions go beyond the “western” critical arena. In *The Origins of Modern Arabic Literature*, Matti Moosa moves chronologically through developments in Arabic literature from “The Rise of the Arab Drama” to “The Revival of the Maqama,” and culminating in “The Growth of the Egyptian Novel” and Naguib Mahfouz as “The Voice of Egypt.”<sup>61</sup> Though short story writers and their works are included sporadically, they are done so in broader discussions of the “way” to the novel. In this way, the short story is not treated as an end in itself, but rather as a means to achieving the novel. This perception also places the short story on a Eurochronological timeline, this time as a “first” but primitively so, for its alleged incompleteness.

What all of this amounts to is a field with a preoccupation with foundational moments. It shows up as an obsession with comparing disparate genres, regions, and narrative voices in accordance with a formula of “firsts,” be it the “first” modern short story traditions, or “first” as a way of denoting incompleteness and dependency. The origins, or the beginnings of the emergence of the genre in a culture, therefore, have an exaggerated hold on the field of short story studies, creating a field preoccupied with the idea of “source” and “origins” whose potential may only be located within a Eurochronological framework. Consequently, the short story never achieves its own autonomy through comparative approaches to the novel. And yet more harmful, the

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<sup>59</sup> Pratt, “The Short Story,” p. 103.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 97.

<sup>61</sup> These summarize the trajectory of Moosa’s focus. Moosa conflates the novel and the short story as undistinguishable forms of “Egyptian fiction,” restricting his discussion of the short story – which he does not qualify as a genre in any sense – under the chapter titled “The Growth of the Egyptian Novel.” See: Matti Moosa, “The Growth of the Egyptian Novel,” in *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Second edition, 1997, pp. 253-89).

field glosses over or, as more often is the case, ignores non-Euro-American manifestations of the short story as derivative or somehow “less than” or “not yet.” However, when one breaks away from this paradigm, the short story begins presenting itself as following a trajectory quite distinct from the novel, no matter where it is found. Current debates in world literature provide a starting point for new ways of reading the short story in a way that values its wholeness, formalistically as well as in terms of its various socio-cultural manifestations.

## II. World literature and spatialized ways of seeing

Ultimately, the problem with the conflation of chronology with the study of the short story as an approach to world literature is that the genre, quite simply, does not present itself in chronological terms. Further, owing to its heightened local nature – brevity of language and form demands an implicit understanding of the work’s context – it certainly does not present itself in a Eurochronological way (even for those works composed in European contexts). My assertion is that the short story is born and reborn, each time changing shape, reflecting altogether different realities. That is to say, when one begins looking at the literary histories of respective short story traditions, discrepancies emerge between how the short story shows up in different historically determined epochs. The discrepancies surpass what might typically fall under the purview of genre “development” or “evolution;” indeed, it is possible to say that the short story does not denote a single genre in a tradition, but may constitute many – sometimes unnamed - genres. Perhaps another way to frame it, therefore, is as a “form.”

There has been a great deal of debate over the term “genre” to denote the short story. Because of its versatility and variability, some prefer to use the word “form” instead.<sup>62</sup> The word “form” also allows for a consideration of the not-insignificant multi-literary and even extra-literary aspects of the short story’s composition, including highly poetic, dramatic, oral, or even artistic aspects. Understanding the short story as a “form” opens up the possibility of considering it beyond the strictly literary, while also

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<sup>62</sup> This debate constituted part of a larger discussion at a conference I attended on the short story cycle at the University of Warwick, during which one of the conference organizers, Linde Luijnenburg, expressed her displeasure with the discrepancies between “genre” as it is generally understood in relation to literature as opposed to how the short story presents itself. Conference: *The Short Story Cycle. Circling Around a Genre?* (University of Warwick, 6 February 2016).

recognizing and acknowledging its changeable nature even within the context of a single tradition.

One of the reasons I have chosen to look at the short stories of Egypt and Argentina are precisely because of the variability they present within this as-yet unexplored paradigm. For example, the Argentine short story began emerging in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, around the same time as the “firsts.” However, its first one hundred years was mostly overlooked as a focus of critical attention (once critical attention started being paid to the short story) because as a genre it was seen – not unreasonably – as political allegory, a form of fictional pamphleteering. With Borges, however, the short story exhibited a philosophical, historical preoccupation whose expression resembled nothing so much as a poem or an essay or an anecdote from one instance to the next. In yet another, “post-Borgesian” formulation, the short story of the Boom generation, beginning in the 1950s and considered as “post-Borgesian” by some, expressed what literary critic Doris Sommer has referred to as a “nearly pathological disavowal of its Latin American literary past.”<sup>63</sup> The Boom became known mostly for its novels, however, the short stories that began emerging at that time, especially those of Julio Cortázar, displayed a radical, highly inventive approach to narrative that embodied the sociality of the time in a wholly different form, even while acknowledging some of the thematic and mimetic legacies of the larger Argentine and Latin American literary trajectories. Thus, within the old, Eurochronological paradigm, one might say that the Argentine short story presents itself in a series of “firsts.” The Argentine short story does not emerge and then evolve along a single trajectory so much as it emerges and then re-emerges, its emergence wholly contingent upon its social environment for its formalistic and mimetic aspects, but also for its re-emergence in and of itself. In this way, each re-emergence presents itself as a new language of the social. This is equally true of Egypt, and of Yūsuf Idrīs’ situation within that paradigm.

While it is true that Yūsuf Idrīs and Julio Cortázar were contemporaries, the old Eurochronological paradigm dictates that their short story “traditions” were at markedly different points of development at that time, since Egypt’s modern short story did not begin emerging as a distinctive form until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, when one begins reading the works “of the time,” particular patterns begin emerging, especially amongst Boom writers and Egyptian writers. For example, the mimetic impulse of Gabriel

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<sup>63</sup> Santiago Colás summarizing Sommer. S. Colás, *Postmodernity in Latin America: The Argentine Paradigm* (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 1994) p. 26.

García Márquez's "Un señor muy viejo con unas alas enormes" (A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings, 1955) shares a striking affinity to that of Yahya Haqqī's "Qindīl Umm Hāshem" (The Lamp of Umm Hashem, 1943); García Márquez's "La prodigiosa tarde de Baltazar" (Balthazar's Marvellous Afternoon, 1962) is almost inescapably similar to Idrīs' "Shughlāna" (Hard Up, 1953); the same between Cortázar's "Circe" (1951) and Idrīs' "al-Naddāha" (The Siren, 1969); Yūsuf Sharounī's (Glimpses from the Life of Maugoud Abdul Maugoud and Two Postscripts) and Mario Vargas Llosa's "Conversación en la catedral" (Conversation in a Cathedral, 1969<sup>64</sup>).

In looking at these two regions – the Middle East, in which Egypt was the most prolific short story-writing nation at the time,<sup>65</sup> and Latin America, in which the short story was thriving at a trans-national, continental level – they present, in Hosam Aboul-Ela's words, "a field of study with a set of parallel problems"<sup>66</sup> that persisted through a privileging of temporal theoretical frameworks as an approach to reading. It is an approach that is currently undergoing a critique through current debates on world literature. For example, Aboul-Ela has recognized the need for a framework that allows for a new way of looking at/reading literatures of the world outside of a strict temporality, and in his book *Other South*, he begins the process of building such a theoretical framework inclusive of various Latin American and Egyptian thinkers and theorists whose collective intellectual contribution he terms "the Mariátegui tradition," after the seminal Peruvian philosopher and activist José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930), to present a "materialist vision that views global culture and history in terms of spatial inequalities"<sup>67</sup> by way of critiquing the historicization of knowledge. He explores political economy as it is found in such intellectual traditions as a way of reading spatially, in response to the "acute phobia" of the economic in cultural theory. "Power is economic and political as much as it is discursive and cultural. It makes subordinate not only individual subjects, psyches, and consciousnesses but whole regions. The Other is

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<sup>64</sup> This story was published as a novel but is frequently excerpted as a short story.

<sup>65</sup> Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq were also increasingly prolific, and indeed, many citizens from these countries lived and wrote in Egypt and strongly contributed to the shaping of Egypt's "modern" literatures.

<sup>66</sup> Hosam Aboul-Ela in interview with Christopher Micklethwait. "Christopher Micklethwait Interviews Hosam Aboul-Ela in 'The Global South' and the Big Bail Out," in *E3W Review of Books*, Vol. 9 (Spring 2009) np. Accessed 25 June 2016, <<http://www.dwrl.utexas.edu/orgs/e3w/volume-9-spring-2009/global-souths/christopher-micklethwait-interviews-hosam-aboul-ela-in-the-global-south-and-the-big-bail-out>>.

<sup>67</sup> Hosam M. Aboul-Ela, *Other South: Faulkner, Coloniality, and the Mariátegui Tradition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007) p. 12.

not an individual, but a space: Other South.”<sup>68</sup> Aboul-Ela’s critique of European Marxism with regard to the Mariátegui tradition reads political economy in spatial terms rather than according to linear-temporal terms.<sup>69</sup> With an emphasis on Latin American dependency theory, Aboul-Ela offers an alternate mapping of the global south that builds on Pratt’s “third category of analysis” as neocolonialism.<sup>70</sup> Within this proposed paradigm, he reads the works of William Faulkner as global south, rather than merely south of the U.S., within the paradigm of American literature as it is typically conceived. And while his political economy approach offers an intriguing opportunity for future study related to the short story that is beyond the scope of this work, he nevertheless offers a way of seeing that conceives of the short story in Egypt and Argentina in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century not through a framework of temporality, but through one of space.

Aboul-Ela’s contribution builds on other recent approaches to the “problem” of world literature, as Moretti puts it, as one of method.<sup>71</sup> Ayman El-Desouky articulates the nature of the “radical shift” as one “from practical approaches to the literature of the world as an *object* of study to the question of *method* underlying the approaches to these literatures.”<sup>72</sup> The question of method is to do with the relationship between non-European Area Studies (under which the Egyptian short story has fallen, as well as the Argentine short story to a lesser extent, depending on the study and the audience) and the critical reach of largely European disciplines which “claim the authority of crossing national, cultural, historical, and language boundaries,”<sup>73</sup> which covers the broader work being done on the short story as exemplified in May’s corpus of work, as well as Reid’s, O’Connor’s, etc. For example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak proposes the idea of planetarity as a method of reading across borders.<sup>74</sup> And Nirvana Tanoukhi offers a

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>70</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, “Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*,” in *Social Text*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1994) p. 4.

<sup>71</sup> Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” in *New Left Review*, Vol 1. (Jan-Feb 2000) p. 55.

<sup>72</sup> Ayman A. El-Desouky, “Between Hermeneutic Provenance and Textuality: The Qur’an and the Question of Method in Approaches to World Literature,” in *Journal of Qur’anic Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Nov. 2014) p. 17.

<sup>73</sup> El-Desouky, “Between Hermeneutic Provenance and Textuality,” p. 11.

<sup>74</sup> See: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

critique of “scale” as an approach to “space” or “spaces” as the “articulation of distance within a particularly spatialized system of social relations.”<sup>75</sup>

Tanoukhi proposes a shift in the methodological approach to space in literary analysis from the metaphorical towards what she calls the “materiality of literary *landscapes*.”<sup>76</sup> In this, she is referring to the process by which Neil Smith describes geographic scales, in Tanoukhi’s words, “as they *emerge* [...] as objectifiable elements in the course of *following* the material processes that shape a landscape.”<sup>77</sup> She proposes that, “in a landscape like Africa-of-the Novel, we must reconstruct the process by which the space of the postcolonial novel becomes differentiated, gaining the contours of a place and the fixity of a cultural location.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, Tanoukhi proposes peeling away layers of appropriation assumed through the anthropological misdeeds of metaphor and genre to refigure the concept of “context” from a process of historicization – echoing Aboul-Ela – to an individually suited hermeneutic of space through scale.

Tanoukhi’s conceptualization of scale as a way of reading implicitly invokes John Berger’s seminal *Ways of Seeing* by way of elucidating how postcolonial artworks (Tanoukhi uses the example of a Yoruba sculpture but it is just as applicable across other forms of postcolonial art, including other literatures) are frequently read as novels, where the perceivably European provenance of *form* mystifies the context of the work in acts of critical analysis. In Berger’s fifth essay, he explores how the very being of the oil painting was popularized and maintained as a form of mystification in and of itself. “Mystification” according to Berger – and subsequently Tanoukhi – is “the process of explaining away what might otherwise be evident.”<sup>79</sup> His explanation is worth quoting at further length:

[W]hen an image is presented as a work of art, the way people look at it is affected by a whole series of learnt assumptions about art. Assumptions concerning:

Beauty  
Truth

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<sup>75</sup> Author’s emphasis. Nirvana Tanoukhi, “The Scale of World Literature,” in *New Literary History*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Summer 2008) p. 605.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p. 600.

<sup>77</sup> Author’s emphasis. Ibid. p. 604.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 605.

<sup>79</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, pp. 15-16.

Genius  
Civilization  
Form  
States  
Taste, etc.

Many of these assumptions no longer accord with the world as it is. (The world-as-it-is is more than pure objective fact, it includes consciousness.) Out of true [tune?] with the present, these assumptions obscure the past. They mystify rather than clarify. The past is never there waiting to be discovered, to be recognized for exactly what it is. History always constitutes the relation between a present and its past. Consequently fear of the present leads to mystification of the past.<sup>80</sup>

In other words, in seeing – or reading – a piece of art, the process of history (mystification) frequently assumes the dominating discourse of analysis *before the act of seeing/reading even takes place*. This is as true for the layperson (Berger's chosen target audience) as for art and literary critics (Tanoukhi's audience), who are assumed to have escaped such mystification through awareness and "expertise," an assumption that Tanoukhi shows may be false. In the case of oil painting, Berger expands on how such mystification can show up even without an explicit textual discourse to point to; the medium of the oil painting becomes almost an embodiment of mystification built on the idea of possession. Here Berger builds on the ideas of Lévi-Strauss in saying that, above all else, oil paintings are unique objects which can be bought and owned and offer a degree of material atmosphere to the owner that other art forms, like music or poetry, cannot.<sup>81</sup> He continues:

A way of seeing the world, which was ultimately determined to new attitudes to property and exchange, found its visual expression in the oil painting, and could not have found it in any other visual art form.

Oil painting did to appearances what capital did to social relations. It reduced everything to the equality of objects. Everything became exchangeable because everything became a commodity. All reality was mechanically measured by its materiality. [...] Oil painting conveyed a vision of total exteriority.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

Thus, Berger describes the conventions – or outcomes – of oil painting to be *a way of seeing* invented by oil painting. Yet, these conventions could be overturned as the result of a prolonged successful struggle on behalf of the painter dissatisfied with the gap in communication between his vision as an artist and the usage for which his art had been developed. “Single-handed he had to contest the norms of the art that had formed him. He had to see himself as a painter in a way that denied the seeing of a painter. This meant that he saw himself doing something that nobody else could foresee.”<sup>83</sup>

None of this is to draw a direct analogy between oil painting as an art form and the short story as an art form; rather, the point I want to draw out here concerns the centering of the question of textuality as a means of circumventing proscribed or embedded narratives. Thus, the method here is twofold: in the first instance, there is the artist’s method – the means of achieving that “prolonged struggle” – in achieving an authentic vision; in the second instance, there is the responsibility of the critic in this case to escape the mysticism of the form (the short story) and its proscribed contexts (historico-temporal) as a means of reading a work with integrity in order to recognize what it is in the present, rather than that which has been ascribed to it.

### III. The postcolonial short story and the issue of (in)visibility

One of the more recent developments in short story criticism that complements Berger’s, Tanoukhi’s, and Aboul-Ela’s methodological spatial assertions concerns the short story’s positionality *vis a vis* postcolonial studies. The 2001 publication of the critical anthology *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English* was a milestone in framing short story criticism within larger concerns of world literature through a postcolonial lens. The volume of essays is broken down to account for every region of the globe, and although it uses the novel for frequent comparative approaches, sometimes disparagingly, it nonetheless also offers interesting insights into the form’s oral roots and rhythms, issues of gender, and conceptions of home. The most pervasive trope encompassing its essays, however, has to do with the idea of transition. This is as much the case for Mary Condé’s essay on Alice Munro’s “Goodness and Mercy,” which uses a mother and daughter sea voyage from the Old World to the New to allegorize

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p. 110.

Canada's "liberation from British hegemony"<sup>84</sup> as well as the journey of a reader in the act of journeying through a text, as it is for Frances Williams's look at the deeply personal literature of Edgar Mittelholzer, whose writing exhibited the fluctuations of his own identity journey between his Afro-Caribbean and Swiss-German ancestries, eventually leading him down what Williams considers a path of rejection toward his Caribbean culture in favor of a "eurocentric culture."<sup>85</sup>

This idea of transition became more fully realized and focused in another seminal critical anthology a decade later titled *The Postcolonial Short Story: Contemporary Essays*. In the introduction, Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell articulate the postcolonial short story "as an expressive medium for themes of fragmentation, displacement, diaspora and identity,"<sup>86</sup> further noting this as a contributing factor towards an increasing sense of isolation of the short story reader from the story itself. Taking inspiration from another work by March-Russell,<sup>87</sup> Antara Chatterjee expands on the idea through a study of Jhumpa Lahiri's short fiction. She says, "The idea that short stories represent fleeting moments of change, insight or revelation or an experience of transition or realization, in short, epiphanic moments, rather than the unfolding process of change, which belongs more to the domain of the novel, is common in short fiction criticism."<sup>88</sup> What is so refreshing about Chatterjee's insight is its relatively rare focus on how the intensely reciprocal relationship between the short story's brevity, themes, aesthetics, and sociality. Her drawing on its penchant toward epiphanic moments and the issue of revelation will be more thoroughly explored in the following chapter, but what I find most important here is that the short story's *identity* as a literary expression of transition, or dislocation, is important not only in and of itself, but because it impacts the whole – the unity – of the entirety of the story, creating a pattern of influence that finds relevance in the short story around the world.

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<sup>84</sup> Mary Condé, "Voyage towards an Ending: Alice Munro's 'Goodness and Mercy,'" in ed. Jacqueline Bardolph, *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2001) p. 63.

<sup>85</sup> Frances Williams, "Colonial Literature or Caribbean Orature? 'Creole Chips' by Edgar Mittelholzer," in ed. Jacqueline Bardolph, *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2001) p. 142.

<sup>86</sup> Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell, *The Postcolonial Short Story: Contemporary Essays* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> Paul March-Russell, *The Short Story: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) p. 148.

<sup>88</sup> Antara Chatterjee, "The Short Story in Articulating Diasporic Subjectivities in Jhumpa Lahiri," in eds. Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell, *The Postcolonial Short Story: Contemporary Essays* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p. 103.

Indeed, Frank O'Connor's idea of the short story as a genre for submerged population groups, while not being couched in a postcolonial framework, nevertheless expresses a similar impulse regarding the form in his study of European and American short fiction. He says, "What it [the short story] has instead [of the hero, like the novel] is a submerged population group [...] That submerged population changes its character from writer to writer, from generation to generation. It may be Gogol's officials, Turgenev's serfs, Maupassant's prostitutes, Chekhov's doctors and teachers, Sherwood Anderson's provincials, always dreaming of escape."<sup>89</sup> He seizes on this idea to expand on the short story's restlessness, its impulse towards change. "I am suggesting strongly that we can see in [the short story] an attitude of mind that is attracted by submerged population groups, whatever these may be at any given time – tramps, artists, lonely idealists, dreamers, and spoiled priests [...] the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent."<sup>90</sup> I am not entirely sure what O'Connor means by saying that the short story is remote from the community. I tend to read this statement as having to do with his assertion of the short story's subject matter as speaking to those on the fringes of society, rather than a reference to the short story as a literary form being disconnected in some way from its communities, which it is certainly not.<sup>91</sup>

In *The Quest for Identities*, Sabry Hafez takes strong inspiration from O'Connor's hypothesis and provides a literary history of the modern Arabic short story as precisely what the book's title suggests. The title itself draws on Hans Bender's observation of the short story's emergence in societies experiencing moments of

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<sup>89</sup> O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice*, p. 4.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>91</sup> The short story's paths of publication in dailies, periodicals, magazines, and journals grant it a direct engagement with the public. Further, the short story's reception is received variably in different locales according to oral and literary tradition. An excellent example is Egyptian writer Yahya Taher Abdullah (1938-1981) who famously performed his short stories to public audiences *prior* to ever writing them down, and received much public feedback and input regarding his stories.

It is worth noting here that the short story in both Egypt and Argentina are influenced by oral tradition. Further, the two impulses that I put forward as significant catalysts of the short story in each region – namely mythology in Argentina and *amāra* in Egypt – emerged variably out of oral traditions, which my research alludes to frequently in both instances. For example, much of Borges' work, and indeed Cortázar's, revel in playing with the veracity of texts borne out of orality. Likewise, I discuss how Idrīs' success in developing an aesthetics of *amāra* through the theater is significant in part for its colloquial registers and oral delivery (see pp. 87-98). A more extensive study of these ideas would help to further develop the ideas put forth in this research, but are beyond the specific focus of this work.

significant transformation. Hafez says, “Such an objective is another way of articulating the genre’s suitability for a new beginning and a quest for a new identity.”<sup>92</sup>

The assertion of the short story as constituting – in theme, form, and aesthetics – a literary form of transition, or dislocation, is so prevalent both within and without the postcolonial frame that it is not unreasonable to assert it as an essential catalyzing impulse of the form’s existence. As will be shown, its expression in Egypt and Argentina, and in the writings of Idrīs and Cortázar, respectively, is very much in line with this idea. In the course of my research, it became increasingly evident that, as Chatterjee begins to articulate, the short story is a form whose being is determined according to the social scenarios it addresses. I will expand on this much further in Chapter Three as I begin homing in on the Egyptian and Argentine contexts. But immediately speaking, these “findings” raised questions in my mind about the relationship, if any, between the short story’s aesthetic impulses and its sociality. Its thematics have been explored extensively – indeed, both of the aforementioned postcolonial anthologies, as well as O’Connor’s, have tended to foreground the short story’s transition thematics through its plots, symbolisms, and a few more structurally-centric aspects, like endings. However, the issue of short story aesthetics is rarely addressed, either in terms of *how* all aspects of the short story work together towards a distinguished, unified whole, or in terms of the *nature* of its composition.

I will expand on my next ideas in greater depth in the coming chapters; however, it is worthwhile to preliminarily state my direction here to highlight the relevancy of this discussion. The short story’s “postcolonial impulse” towards transitory, dislocatory, and divisive or alienating social scenarios comes together in what I am referring to as an “aesthetics of social concern,” to borrow from the more commonly used “aesthetics of social change.” The reason I have used the word “concern” has to do with the short story as a mode of documentation that presents current scenarios by way of inciting a reformist impulse; however, the short story is not reform in and of itself. Rather, it engages in what John Clammer calls “visual justice.”<sup>93</sup>

Akin to photography, the short story uses its aesthetics as a means of capturing an “image” of life that speaks to the nature of one or another social conflict, be it

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<sup>92</sup> Sabry Hafez, *The Quest for Identities: The Development of the Modern Arabic Short Story* (London: Saqi, 2007) pp. 30-1.

<sup>93</sup> John Clammer, *Vision and Society: Towards a Sociology and Anthropology from Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014) p. 49.

expressive in individualistic, collective, or ecological terms. Like photography, a significant aspect of the short story's mode of art is its visualizing capacity; that is, its ability to *make language visual* as a way of expressing its sociality. This is affirmed by a persistent preoccupation in the short story with visibility and invisibility, and the various symbolic, metaphoric, metonymic, and other linguistic means it uses to achieve that message. Together, these modes of expressing visibility and invisibility, and the discourses those means presents, together culminate in the short story as a *language* of social concern, rather than merely a conduit for such a language.

This point strongly echoes Berger's ideas regarding the social vitality of art forms and the cultural discourses surrounding them. Consistent with Berger's own method of demystification, my approach to imagery in the short story – and, more briefly, photography – is to explore how the artist/writer makes the form itself into a mode of social discourse.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to draw out the key ideas and debates encompassing the field of short story criticism, the methods of arriving at and addressing those ideas and debates, and to begin offering a way of reading the short story as a demystified expression of social concern. Discourse of, around, and about the novel has permeated short story criticism from its earliest days, and while that comparative approach has led to interesting and useful insights, it has nevertheless also contributed to a preoccupation with foundational moments by emphasizing the idea of “first” as “source.” Pratt shows how these debates show up even implicitly as a way of undermining the short story as an autonomous form through an assumption that it is dependent upon and derivatory of the novel. In discussions of non-Euro-American short story traditions, this influence has proven more stark, as “the field” has almost entirely dismissed, ignored, or simply not registered the short story beyond those locales. Rather, they have been subsumed within an implicit discourse that privileges a Eurochronological framework that renders them as mere derivations of “originary” short story traditions that appeared “first” on the (imaginary) linear, historical timeline. As a result, the field “at large” has not benefitted from their example, and the short story has been mostly left out of considerations on world literature.

And yet, current world literature debates offer extraordinarily salient new methods of reading that privilege spatialized readings as a way of permeating the layers of mystification that have accumulated around certain literatures as the result of those old historical, Eurochronological conceptions. Hosam Aboul-Ela proposes spatialized reading through comparative intellectual tradition and a critiqued Marxism as a way of reading across borders and critiquing historicized modes of knowledge. Complementing this idea, Nirvana Tanoukhi points to a privileging of the novel as a form of mystification that has enshrouded other art forms, so that they are read as novels, and she emphasizes the idea of scale as a way of reading literary landscapes in a way that subverts Eurocentric or Orientalist assumptions in the interpretation of literature and art so that they may be read for what they are rather than as objects of other (often assumed) hegemonic forms of discourse. Tanoukhi's proposal takes inspiration from John Berger's ideas about art and the mystification of dominant discourses. I have borrowed his terms in my discussion of the short story.

These discourses inform my method of reading the short story as a world literature, while also acknowledging, valuing, and articulating its localized expression. To this point, my approach may be articulated in three points: 1) Taking inspiration from Aboul-Ela's method, and as a result of my own close readings and research, I find the "postcolonial impulse" of the short story, which speaks to its *raison d'être* as that of one which emerges and evolves as a manifestation of the social in times of profound transition, division, or dislocation to present the possibility of a framework for reading the short story across cultural, national, and linguistic boundaries. This framework will be further facilitated and fleshed out by a discussion of the short story's visualizing capacity in the coming chapter; 2) I propose reading against predominant comparative approaches that attempt to define the short story's place as a literary genre. The coming chapters will show that in fact the short story's evolution tends to follow socially determined trajectories rather than that of other genres, including the novel, and serves a very different function. Although this study does not engage in a comparative study to implicitly address these issues, they will be implied to anyone who wishes to engage that discourse. In reading the short story as it shows up in and of itself, it implicitly answers the question about what it is, which is a deeply engaged, socially manifested form of language; and 3) I consider the short story's preoccupation with issues of visibility and invisibility as revealing of the nature of its social engagement, with the language of that discourse serving as a vital impetus for the short story's unity of

impression. While this and the coming chapter expand on this idea to refer to the short story generally, the specific analytical examples presented in Parts II and III will explore the variability of its manifestation and highlight how it comes to embody highly localized languages of the social.

CHAPTER TWO  
The Visualizing Capacity of Form:  
Language, Aesthetics, Textuality

Introduction

While the previous chapter sought to delineate key debates and approaches in the field of short story criticism, this chapter will begin looking at the form through some of its prominent features in order to establish a working definition in accordance with the concerns of this study. The goal of this chapter is so draw out a broad aesthetic framework of the short story.

The overarching emphasis here is on the visualizing capacity of the short story's form. The term "visualizing capacity" is borrowed from Lois Parkinson Zamora as a term used to describe the effect of magical realism in a text. She says, "magical-realist texts often conflate sight and insight, thus collapsing the literal and figurative meanings of 'vision' by making the visible world the very source of insight [...] magical realism is characterized by its visualizing capacity, that is, its capacity to create (magical) meanings by envisioning ordinary things in extraordinary ways."<sup>94</sup> While I would not go so far as to say that all short stories are necessarily magical realist, I nonetheless find the term "visualizing capacity" extremely useful for its conveyance of the distilled visual effect that comes about through a particular marriage of form and language. Here, Parkinson Zamora is talking specifically about the use of magical objects in magical realist narratives, and the potency of that distilled materiality as effected through text. Although the issue of materiality will come to play a role in the analytical focuses of Parts II and III, in this chapter, I articulate the "distillation" that gives way to the short story's visualizing capacity as deriving most significantly from its brevity, whose recalcitrance necessitates a textual materiality; this is ultimately what I mean by "visualizing capacity" with reference to the short story.

Therefore it is only fitting that this chapter commence with a discussion of the short story's brevity, which is also perhaps the most centrally debated topic with regard to the form's definition. I will focus on some aspects of the short story that have

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<sup>94</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, "Swords and Silver Rings: Magical Objects in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez," in eds. Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang, *A Companion to Magical Realism* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2005) p. 31.

constituted major points of discussions of it as a craft – directives and opinions usually given by short story writers that consider its form in aesthetic or artistic terms rather than critical ones (what Pratt called “instruction manuals”<sup>95</sup>). It begins with Poe’s idea of “unity of impression,” the importance of brevity, and how these two facets work in conjunction to effect a recalcitrance of the form that privileges a heightened visuality. This discussion is facilitated by an exploration of the kinship between photography and the short story, both in terms of their visualizing capacities, but also in terms of their sociality. The second part of the chapter will delve further into the role of language in effecting the short story’s visualizing capacity, including a discussion of metaphor and epiphany as catalyzing aspects of that impulse enacted through the original prerequisite of form as brevity. Ultimately, these two aspects speak to a particular textuality of the short story that effectively enframes the text in such a way that unity of impression becomes the means of access for interpretive and formatistic expansion. As I will show, this final point is a key aspect of the short story’s ability to embody social discourse, and provides the impetus for its manifestation as a language of the social. A final, brief section of this chapter will look at the relationship between visuality as a social language in the case of photography, for which there has been substantially more work done than the short story.

### I. Outlining form: a marriage of brevity and unity

As the name itself suggests, the short story is “short.” Or is it? The adjective describing the form’s “storyness” is quite possibly the very first point of discord in attempts at positive definitions. As pointed out in the first chapter, Pratt’s argument that the very notion of the short story’s “shortness” is only valid insofar as it constitutes a relative term denoting the short story’s relationship to the novel: that is, the short story is considered short because it is shorter than the novel. Yet, the short story’s length was a topic of interest before short story criticism was established as a distinct field. Edgar Allan Poe famously attempted to define the measure of its shortness in his oft-cited review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* in 1842, in which he asserted that part of the short story’s power lay in its “requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours

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<sup>95</sup> Pratt, “The Short Story,” p. 110.

in its perusal,”<sup>96</sup> as opposed to the novel which he finds to be objectionable on the basis that it cannot be read in a single sitting and therefore “deprives itself [...] of the immense force derivable from *totality*.”<sup>97</sup>

Before continuing this argument further, it should be noted that Poe’s writings on the short story remain ubiquitous in short story scholarship. Indeed, it is hard to find another single writer or critic (perhaps more than any other literary form, the writer and critic of the short story are one and the same) whose authority on the short story remains as unblemished as his or whose works and criticism on the topic have been translated and made as widely available as his have; his opinions are frequently cited as definitive. His criticism on the topic is extensive and marks some of the earliest recorded criticism on the short story in its modern form; further, his articulation of the short story and its environs remain relevant despite the nearly two hundred years of history that has passed because, quite simply, he articulates the main problematics of the field as they were and as they remain – there has been, as yet, no resolution to the questions he laid out.

Poe’s idea that shortness is a prerequisite for the idea of *totality*, or what he otherwise refers to as a “unity of effect or impression”<sup>98</sup> continues to maintain a persistent presence in nearly every aspect of short story criticism. His writing on this score is worth quoting at length because the ideas he introduces will find relevancy throughout this and the remaining chapters.

[...] without unity of impression, the deepest effects cannot be brought about. Epics were the offspring of an imperfect sense of Art, and their reign is no more. A poem *too* brief may produce a vivid, but never an intense or enduring impression. Without a certain continuity of effort – without a certain duration or repetition of purpose – the soul is never deeply moved. There must be the dropping of the water upon the rock. De Béranger has wrought brilliant things – pungent and spirit-stirring – but, like all immassive bodies, they lack *momentum*, and thus fail to satisfy the Poetic Sentiment. They sparkle and excite, but, from want of continuity, fail deeply to impress. Extreme brevity will degenerate into epigrammatism; but the sin of extreme length is even more unpardonable. *In medio tutissimus ibis* [You will go most safely in the middle (road)]. [...]

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having

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<sup>96</sup> Poe, “Review [*Graham’s Magazine*, May 1842] of Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales*,” p. 59.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents – he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing his preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel.<sup>99</sup>

Here and elsewhere,<sup>100</sup> Poe emphasizes the importance of unity in the short story, which he considers the result of a certain intense focus on the execution of a very specific and concise “vision.” He advises the “artist” to work backwards in a sense, first establishing the “effect” one wishes to produce and then setting about synthesizing a plot, structure, and aesthetics that will meet the desired effect with an unwavering commitment; in other words relentlessly, without giving in to superfluous words or imagery.

From this, it is possible to form the opinion that Poe’s words on this subject have been frequently misconstrued as dealing with shortness as a matter of length, when in fact he is referring to the idea of brevity in the sense of conciseness or exactness of language. The difference is that brevity is the *cause* of the short story’s shortness, rather than a product of it. Poe likens the craft of short story writing to that of poetry, drawing extensive parallels between the two in terms of both form and message. This is particularly with regard to presenting a “unity of impression,” which he views as paramount for both, and especially concerning the centrality of rhythm of language and structure to this end in each, though he expresses a disinclination toward what he considers the “artificialities” of poetic rhythm.<sup>101</sup> And indeed, the short story in its modern form has frequently grown out of strong written and oral poetic traditions.

My point in bringing it up at this juncture has to do with the extent to which the artistic impulse toward “Poetic Sentiment” informs Poe’s idea of the short story as an art form. Indeed, along with poetry, he speaks of the craft in visual terms, referring to the short story as a “picture” to be “painted.” This idea is borne out of his view of the short story as a “totality,” whose unity of impression is likened to that of a visual

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<sup>99</sup> Author’s emphasis. Ibid. pp. 58-60.

<sup>100</sup> See also: Poe, “Philosophy of Composition.”

<sup>101</sup> Poe, “Review [*Graham’s Magazine*, May 1842] of Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales*,” p. 60.

composition. Indeed, Poe's American epoch saw the short story emerging in tandem with the invention of photography, in the forms of the camera obscura and daguerreotype. Poe was one of the first writers who exhibited enthusiasm about and practiced photography.<sup>102</sup> The invention of the photograph made the production of visual imagery like portraits, landscapes, and still lifes more economical and readily available to the public than oil paintings, parallel to how the short story's publication in periodicals, etc. made it an inexpensive and easy to consume literary form with wide availability.

Over time, the functional and aesthetic similarities between photography and the short story have become more explicit. More than one hundred years after Poe's death, Julio Cortázar, one of Poe's most avid writer-students,<sup>103</sup> articulated his own view of the short story regarding the kinship of short story writing and its visual qualities *vis a vis* the photograph. Photographers, like short story writers, he says:

definen su arte como una aparente paradoja: la de recortar un fragmento de la realidad, fijándolo determinados límites, pero de manera tal que ese recorte actúe como una explosión que abre de par en par una realidad mucho más amplia, como una visión dinámica que trasciende espiritualmente el campo abarcado por la cámara.<sup>104</sup>

[define their art as an apparent paradox: that of cutting off a fragment of reality, giving it certain limits, but in such a way that this segment acts like an explosion which fully opens a much more ample reality, like a dynamic vision which spiritually transcends the space reached by the camera.<sup>105</sup>]

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<sup>102</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle as well. See: ed. Jane Marjorie Rabb, *The Short Story and Photography, 1880's - 1980's: A Critical Anthology* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998) p. viii. See also: Marian Zwerling Sugano, "Beyond What Meets the Eye: The Photographic Analogy in Cortázar's Short Stories," in *Style*, Vol. 27, No. 3, (Fall 1993) pp. 332-351.

<sup>103</sup> Cortázar has spoken extensively about Poe's influence on him, and in 1956 he translated and published *Obras en prosa: Cuentos de Edgar Allan Poe* [Works in Prose: The Stories of Edgar Allan Poe] (Universidad de Puerto Rico), which has become the quintessential translation of Poe's prose works in Spanish: "Spanish-language writers born after 1960 have read Poe through Cortázar's translations" (Emron Epslin, "'William Wilson' as a Microcosm of Julio Cortázar's Poe Translations: Horror in the Doubling of the Human Will," in eds. Emron Epslin and Margarita Vale de Gato, *Translated Poe* (Lanham: Lehigh University Press, 2014) p. 259).

<sup>104</sup> Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento," in eds. César Cecchi and María Luisa Pérez, *Antología del cuento moderno* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1970, 7<sup>th</sup> edition) p. 14.

<sup>105</sup> Julio Cortázar, "Some Aspects of the Short Story," trans Aden W. Hayes, in ed. Charles E. May, *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994) p. 247.

Cortázar articulates this quality – of reaching beyond itself – as that which makes a short story meaningful, by rupturing its own limits and illuminating “something far beyond that small and sometimes sordid anecdote which is being told.”<sup>106</sup> Irish short story writer Frank O’Connor echoes this sentiment, saying that “since a whole lifetime must be crowded into a few minutes, those minutes must be carefully chosen indeed and lit by an unearthly glow [...] This is not the essential form that life gives us; it is organic form, something that springs from a single detail and embraces past, present, and future.”<sup>107</sup> Viorica Patea emphasizes the sense of mystery created by the textual voids in the short story, which contribute to the illusion of a text that expands beyond itself, accounting for the intensity of its realization. She calls it a “liminal quality” intended to dissolve boundaries between the visible and invisible, the known and the unknown, and between the surface and the “inner secret of things.”<sup>108</sup> This intensive dramatization of a moment gives the short story a heightened artistic rendering, giving a sense, as Flannery O’Connor says, that its “significant lies outside the ordinary range of experience.”<sup>109</sup> The genre is thus likened to fantastical artistic expressions related to the marvelous (ex. magical realism, surrealism), the absurd, and the psychological.<sup>110</sup> What I wish to highlight in this discussion is the extent to which unity of impression is facilitated through the very realization of *brevity* and *visuality*. Recalling the formal characteristics of the photograph in particular as articulated by Cortázar elucidates how the issue of short story definition seems to perpetually circle around the idea of boundaries and the (skillfully executed) short story’s ability to transcend itself as explicitly expressed through the text.

Prompted by the seemingly intimate connection between the short story’s textual boundaries and the production of meaning a loose sub-field of studies has emerged based on short story “endings” intended to help show how the kernel of the short story text is but a means of opening up a “much more ample reality,” to repeat Cortázar’s phrasing. I put “endings” in parentheses because while some critics have tended to focus

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Frank O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (Cork: Cork City Council, 2003) p. 7.

<sup>108</sup> Viorica Patea, “The Short Story: An Overview of the History and Evolution of the Genre,” in ed. Viorica Patea *Short Story Theories: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012) p. 16.

<sup>109</sup> Flannery O’Connor, “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” in ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969) p. 40.

<sup>110</sup> Patea, “The Short Story,” p. 16.

on short story endings – that is, where the text ends – as central to the genre’s creation of meaning, others consider the overall short story as something of an “end” in itself. Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” provides an example of the latter. In it, he meticulously deconstructs the composition process of his own poem “The Raven” for which he emphasizes unity of effect or impression as his ultimate goal. He considers the end of the story – both in terms of the plot ending itself as well as the overall impression he wishes to convey at the poem’s end – as the beginning of the composition process; or, as May explains in more generalized terms, “he emphasized beginning with the end of a work and then creating a formal pattern that inevitably leads up to that end.”<sup>111</sup> With Poe, the emphasis on structural unity developed into a formula for short story writing as well as the standard by which stories were expected to conform.<sup>112</sup> Anton Chekhov echoes Poe on this score, saying, “My instinct tells me that that at the end of a novel or story, I must artfully concentrate for the reader an impression of the entire work.”<sup>113</sup> Poe’s and Chekhov’s method accentuates the entire story as an “end” in itself, created through unity of effect, with the “effect” being the end goal.

However, even this perception privileges the conveyance of a finale, with unity of impression finally being achieved in the story’s ending, the intense climax toward which, as Éjxenbaum says, “all the details must gravitate and to a finale which must account for everything which preceded.”<sup>114</sup> He continues, “In sum, characteristic for American literature is that type of story built on the principle of structural unity with centralization of basic effect and strong accentuation on finale.”<sup>115</sup> The importance of structural unity was arguably strengthened as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, giving way to short story endings that fell short of concluding the story, in line with wider societal shifts in countries where the short story was a thriving literary form, like the United States, Great Britain, Russia, and parts of Latin America. In an essay on short story definition, Suzanne Ferguson pinpoints a key philosophical impulse behind the shift:

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<sup>111</sup> May, *The New Short Story Theories*, p. xvii.

<sup>112</sup> This was especially and immediately true in the American context, where Poe’s articulation of “unity of effect” has been repeatedly credited by critics and writers alike as having marked the beginning of a distinctly American literary voice.

<sup>113</sup> Anton Chekhov, “Letter to A.N. Pleshcheyev, Moscow, Sept. 30, 1889,” in ed. Charles E. May, *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994) p. 195.

<sup>114</sup> Éjxenbaum, “O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story,” p. 6.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

The same impulses that turned nineteenth-century philosophy away from positivism and toward phenomenology turned writers to the representation of experience as experienced by individuals. The importance of this philosophical shift in the interpretation of reality cannot be over-estimated in an attempt to understand what happened to writers' representations of reality. Imitation of how things "feel" or "seem" to the characters became the preferred subject of fiction rather than the imitation of "how things are" in the "real" world.<sup>116</sup>

This sense of the modern would eventually reach a climax in the short story with the impressionistic *Dubliners* by James Joyce. For short story endings, it meant leaving the task of ultimate interpretation to the reader, implicating them in the task of creating meaning. Susan Lohafer asserts that, "After 1914, to write a story that tied up experience, summed things up, or gave clear answers was to reveal a simplicity, a banality – not to mention an innocence – that just wasn't 'modern.'"<sup>117</sup> But this idea was already well under way prior to Lohafer's date of 1914. Indeed, as early as 1890, Chekhov wrote in a letter that he reckons on the reader to provide the "subjective elements" lacking in a story.<sup>118</sup> It was Chekhov's short stories that first exhibited this particular "less is more" impulse in the short story, following his dictum that "in short stories, it is better to say not enough than to say too much,"<sup>119</sup> and to this end he finds it good practice, once a story is finished, to "delete the beginning and the end [...] one should be brief, as brief as possible."<sup>120</sup> These ideas – or best practices of short story writing – emphasize conciseness as a central means of achieving storyness, and also of wringing out the maximum effect of few words, giving the form a particular textuality noted for its density, but also for its manifest possibilities of interpretation.

The shift to inconclusive story endings coincided with the emergence of comparative literature as a field of study, giving way to critical interpretation that would assist readers in interpreting increasingly difficult literary texts. Susan Lohafer has focused on closure as being a central component to storyness in the short story and

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<sup>116</sup> Suzanne Ferguson, "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form," in ed. Charles E. May, *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994) p. 220.

<sup>117</sup> Susan Lohafer, "How Does Story End? Introduction to Part III," in eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey, *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) p. 109.

<sup>118</sup> Anton Chekhov, "Letter to A.S. Souvorin, Moscow, April 1, 1890," in ed. Charles E. May, *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994) p. 195.

<sup>119</sup> Anton Chekhov, as quoted in Karl Aschenbrenner, *The Concepts of Criticism* (Boston and Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1974) p. 411.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

distinctive to its generic composition. In the end, however, her study on preclosure points (discussed in the previous chapter) is fairly arbitrary because it is entirely premised upon reader interpretation, which she nonetheless recognizes as paramount. “In the story sequence, the reader is called upon to expand and complicate this enterprise [of making meaning]. Each successive story, while complete in itself, is also part of an unfolding design that transcends it. [...] Readers of story sequences need to exercise their ‘pattern-making faculties’ very actively, within and across the boundaries of individual story closure.”<sup>121</sup>

Austin M. Wright focuses on how the short story activates such faculties rather than the need for them to do so to create meaning. He views recalcitrance – the resistance of the materials – as the “‘life’ of a form,” and that a story’s ability to provoke derives from “our encounter with the resistance of the materials, the recalcitrance that seems constantly to be yielding to the shaping form.”<sup>122</sup> Wright elucidates how a story’s closure contributes to this task, saying that,

In many of our most significant twentieth-century short stories, however, the ending (temporarily) aggravates it [recalcitrance], presenting a new challenge to the reader that can only be resolved by reflection after reading. This I call final recalcitrance – meaning that it is instituted by the end of the story, not that it cannot be resolved (that would be permanent recalcitrance).<sup>123</sup>

The evolving practice of writing non-definitive endings and intentionally leaving information out became known as “slice of life” stories. The shift to this mode of writing was – and sometimes still is – occasionally met with disdain and mistrust, particularly in its more impressionistic manifestations. A piece in the *Prairie Schooner* in 1936 by José García Villa argues that the “older, accepted form” practiced by the likes of Maupassant and Balzac possessed an “indisputable completeness” assisted by a “finitive ending which was not a device but a dramatic solution” resulting in stories which were “rounded out into what is called *dénouement*.”<sup>124</sup> Whereas the “modern tale

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<sup>121</sup> Lohafer, “How Does Story End?” p. 113.

<sup>122</sup> Austin M. Wright, “Recalcitrance in the Short Story,” in eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey, *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) p. 117.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.* p. 121.

<sup>124</sup> José García Villa, “The Contemporary Short Story,” in the *Prairie Schooner*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Fall 1936) p. 231.

often leads nowhere” and rather than provide resolutions “seems to content itself with the mere exposition of theme,”<sup>125</sup> leaving their threads entangled and unresolved.

What the “slice of life” writer does, when he neglects the integrative solution, is to transform the short story into a camera. But mere camera work is not the function of a short story. Where vision is absent, and dramatic completion is ignored, the “slice of life” theory is against the very essence of the short story as a dramatic art. The mere episode – functionless, directionless, and pointless – is not a story. The mere recounting of an incident, which begins somewhere and gets neither here nor there, is not a story. Mere rambling, without a sense of direction, without point or finality, expressed or implied, without completeness of substantive or significative essence, is not a story.<sup>126</sup>

Villa’s criticism, apart from questioning of the nature of storyness, is revealing of the increasing visual-centric practice of short story writing. His reference to “camera work” harkens back to Cortázar’s idea of the short story as sharing a similar *raison d’être* as the photograph. With the phenomenological shift Ferguson spoke of, Poe’s unity of impression took on more literal meaning. Interestingly, however, this was achieved by leaving the field of interpretation open to the reader and individual experience. However, even this idea of creating meaning through textual voids and elisions echoed significant photographic practice, particularly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as Dadaism and Surrealism began to predominate the artistic field with a particular emphasis on negative space.

The idea of negative space likewise came to occupy a central tenant of short story composition, increasingly so in the early and mid-twentieth century. Negative space in a short story speaks to the vitality of textual boundaries, as I have been discussing, in conjunction with the idea of visibility and invisibility. It constitutes the extra-textual: the potentialities for meaning beyond the strictly textual composition of a story, but it can also be used to address explicit silences. Owing to the short story’s brevity, the potential for extra-textual meaning is a life-blood of the genre. It at once provides the possibility of a brief story to use dense intertextuality and linguistic word-play to ensure multi-layered meaning and vast amounts of information, while also meaning that the short story is not beholden to a strict form, as it was in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but is rather capable of shape-shifting, and at times coming imperceptibly close

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. p. 232.

to resembling other literary forms, like a poem, a novella, a fairy tale, or even journalism or anecdote.

The extra-textual can present in many ways. One example is closure studies, as has already been seen, and the spaces left “open” for interpretation, particularly post-Chekhov at which point this practice became a central tenant of short story composition. Whereas closure had previously meant the tying up of loose ends to present a story as a self-contained piece of work, this new conception, which privileges individual interpretation and impression, subverts assumptions about the very idea of containment and boundaries as strict limits; this means that the textual limit of the story represents nothing more than a kernel to prompt more varied opportunities to create meaning. However, the idea is not relevant only with regard to closure; rather, closure studies is a microcosm of what is happening throughout a short story composition. Just as stories may abruptly leave off in the end, or circle back on themselves, or present ironic, riddle-like last lines, so the body of the story likewise presents minimal information. This is not a matter of personal style according to individual author, but is rather a nature of the genre itself; it is perhaps the only tenant of short story composition that every author must abide – the ability to, as May says, “say much in little.”

## II. Textual explosions: metaphor and epiphany as visual conduits of brevity

While the previous section focused on issues of form as they relate to saying much in little, this section is more preoccupied with how the issue of brevity affects the short story’s textuality and how that textuality contributes to its unity of impression while also opening up extra-textual spaces for imagination, knowledge, and analysis. I will begin with Edward Said’s discussion of textuality and the issues of visibility and invisibility, as this is ultimately the crux of the issue, before moving on to a discussion of metaphor as it relates to such textuality, and, finally, a discussion of Joycean epiphany, which is essentially a salient distillation of the issue of language, form, and visibility that preoccupy this chapter.

In “The Problem of Textuality,” Edward Said engages in a comparative study of Derrida’s and Foucault’s respective “ways” of dealing with the question of textuality in order to characterize “an exemplary critical consciousness as situated between, and ultimately refusing both, the hegemony of the dominant culture and what I call the

sovereignty of systematic method.”<sup>127</sup> His method for doing so is to look in depth at their respective approaches to make visible those aspects of a text that are customarily invisible, “namely, the various mysteries, the rules, and the ‘play’ of its textuality.”<sup>128</sup> For each, the crux of the definition of textuality exists within the text’s invisibility, or that which it does not immediately disclose; for Foucault, the point is to reveal or state the invisible aspects of the text, which he perceives as resting in networks of power – with the work of the critic in this task resembling something like that of an archaeologist -, while for Derrida the point is to deeply engage in the act of “reading” a text leading to a heightened revelation of what is *not* there. Thus, while Foucault’s approach privileges textuality as a question of that which is textual and that which is social (institutional, cultural, political, etc.), Derrida’s privileges the text itself as the end and the means to its own possibility. Said says,

Derrida and Foucault therefore collide on how the text is to be described, as a *praxis* on whose surface and in whose interstices a universal grammatological problematic is enacted or as a *praxis* whose existence is a fact of highly rarefied and differentiated historical power, associated not with the univocal authority of the author but with a discourse constituting author, text, and subject which gives them a very precise intelligibility and effectiveness. The meaning of this collision is, I think, remarkably significant for contemporary fiction.<sup>129</sup>

Said’s question in this debate is the extent to which either of these approaches sufficiently holds up to the scrutiny of their own articulation within the wider discourse of a text in society, and the extent to which they achieve critical discourse as a form of knowledge that makes allowances for texts as more than “undecidable objects.”<sup>130</sup> Said privileges Foucault’s approach as more comprehensive with regard to these questions, however, he falls quite short of a full-fledged endorsement of Foucault’s method, which he nonetheless perceives as an example of an unexamined Eurocentrism. Ultimately, despite his own conclusions, Said implicitly leaves open the question of an ulterior approach to textuality that may or may not bridge or reconcile the strengths and

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<sup>127</sup> Edward W. Said, “The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions,” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Summer 1978) p. 673.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* p. 674.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* p. 703.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* p. 713.

weaknesses of the field as produced through the as-yet exemplary positionalities of Foucault and Derrida.

With regard to the short story, the question of urgency in this debate is propelled by the genre's condition of brevity and the formalistic strictures inherent therein. The unrelenting relevance of unity of impression implies a textuality that privileges aesthetic considerations in the text, which Said does not address explicitly; indeed, Said articulates his questions with regard to the conditions of textuality as they apply primarily to the novel, whose presence in historically-centered critical discourse has been ubiquitous. This is not to say that the short story is not historical, and this question will be addressed in the following chapter and implicitly throughout, but rather, as the discussion to this point has shown, that there are extraordinary spatial considerations in the short story that dictate, at least reciprocally, an acknowledgement of the idea of aesthetic cohesion.

By "aesthetic cohesion," I refer to a form of mimesis in the short story that is potentially (though not ubiquitously) premised upon a materiality of the text that in a sense overrides the idea of textuality as exhibited through the relationships between words – and in effect subverts strict metaphoric classification. In such stories, material "objects," "figures," or "actors" appear in the text as the cohesive manifestation that binds the text, its allusions, elisions, and voids, its metaphoric referents, and its historicity and sociality. Said's closest allusion to this state of textuality comes through in his discussion of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Though neither theater nor *Hamlet* are explicitly named, Dickens still manages to communicate that the characters are attempting to act Shakespeare's play with very little grasp of the actual text, and this is understood,

because Dickens' language obliquely directs the entire scene, represents the stage and its actors, clues our responses as readers. And all this is possible because of the novelistic convention in which a special referentiality and a quasi-realistic use of language are permissible and to which readers bring quite specialized expectations and responses. In other words, the theater Dickens describes exists in the *language of the novel*, which has absorbed and taken over reality so much as to be completely responsible for it.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Author's emphasis. Ibid. p. 707.

In contemplating Foucault's situatedness *vis a vis* the question of how discourse became invisible for political reasons, Said points to the effectiveness of modern discourse as being linked to its invisibility and rarity.<sup>132</sup>

Said's point gains currency in consideration of textuality in the short story. He points to how the very manifestation of *form* shows up as a language of its own, including its visible and invisible aspects. The form itself is the distillation of the language of the story, whose textuality is not restricted within the text itself, but which expands beyond it; and it is precisely the nature of that expansion that speaks to the issue of form as textual power.

The issue of metaphor is raised here as a textuality of visibility and invisibility. Metaphor immediately speaks to the idea of negative space in literature generally, "as being the very ground on which a text constantly goes beyond itself in an uncanny fashion, saying both more and less than it knows."<sup>133</sup> Metaphor can show up in many ways: as figures of speech, in extended metaphor ("life is a journey" and "life is a game" and "love is war" being only three of the most pervasive to the extent that they have become engrained in speech<sup>134</sup>), which can lead to allegory, and through the use of metonymy, which recalls the entirety of something through a single representative element.<sup>135</sup> It is the most common way that humans translate things that would otherwise be difficult to apprehend or conceptualize into things that are more concrete or tangible, with the physical world serving as the foundation for comprehension.<sup>136</sup>

Metaphor in the short story represents an intersection of the social and the artistic, or linguistic, and the constant tension – recall Wright's recalcitrance – between the short story's form and its function; between the public and the private, the said and the unsaid, the known and the unknown, between reality and fantasy, and between the individual and the collective. It is the means by which mimesis moves through the short story. And while there is strong metonymic possibility in the short story – though less

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid. p. 708.

<sup>133</sup> David Punter, *Metaphor (The New Critical Idiom)*, Kindle Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) p. 8.

<sup>134</sup> Kövecses points to these broad categories as existing in nearly all languages, developing very early on with the respective language itself, but emphasizes cultural specificity as well, saying that "The natural and physical environment shapes a language, primarily its vocabulary, in an obvious way; consequently, it shapes metaphors as well." See: Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, p. 220.

<sup>135</sup> Punter, *Metaphor*, p. 2.

<sup>136</sup> Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 7.

so than in poetry, - the relationship is not premised upon strict binary interpretation. Punter articulates the problem in terms of the possibility for perpetual unknowing, emphasizing the boundaries of “known” knowledge.

What, at all events, we can say here is that we are confronted with a remarkable metaphorical phenomenon which I would like to refer to under the heading ‘the text instead.’ This phenomenon tends to make the reader wonder, first, whether what is being read is metaphorical at all; and, second, whether in some sense the entire text is a metaphor for something else, something ‘unwritten’ but perpetually haunting the words on the page.<sup>137</sup>

He continues:

For metaphor, we may suggest, is not simply a matter of what appears on the printed page or in, for example, the work of visual art; it is rather the bodying-forth of sets of correspondences of which, in some sense, we have all, in specific interpretive communities, been aware in what we might define as a *liminal* way, hovering somewhere around the threshold of articulation.

Metaphor, then, can be seen as a kind or way of knowledge; but like all forms of knowledge it is not a knowledge *ab origine*, if such a thing can exist, but rather a concretisation, a constellation or reconstellation of that which has previously been held in private, which returns us to the metaphor of privacy.<sup>138</sup>

With the idea of privacy, Punter is alluding to the self-referentiality of metaphor where, in order to understand another life, we turn to metaphorization in order to have the individual life stand in for wider historical forces.<sup>139</sup> But more importantly, Punter is speaking to the complexities of metaphor as an *actor*, or a living, changing thing, particularly in works of art, whose purpose is to at once “fix” meaning, while also revealing the flimsiness of such fixity; since metaphor is socially constructed, it and its interpretation are premised on “shifting sands.”<sup>140</sup> With this in mind, he points to the futility of attempting to “unpack” a metaphor because, “When that unpacking takes place, what is left is rarely of value; it seems a paltry and colourless thing when

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<sup>137</sup> Punter, *Metaphor*. pp. 59-60.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 9-10.

compared with the metaphor itself.”<sup>141</sup> Part of this has to do with isolation of the metaphor away from its surrounding contexts and allusions – significant factors in what makes metaphor alive in a text. As is so often the case, for example with Borges’ story “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” (Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote, 1939) the story itself is the metaphor, a case in matter that makes the very idea of unpacking it cause either a reduction of the text to strict allegory, or subverts the very impulse to unpack in the first place.

The discussion thus far has culminated in a conception of the short story as existing both in and outside of its text, and in some scenarios, more outside than in, with the text serving as a kernel of storyness leading to other, extra-textual possibilities. Thus, the problem of defining the issues at this point becomes a problem of textuality. In particular, if textuality is the relationships inhered in written language, then textuality in the short story has the potential to be something else. One potentiality lay in the extraordinary materiality inhered in corpuses of short story composition, such as those mentioned above, as well as those of the two authors who form the analytical focus of this research, Yūsuf Idrīs and Julio Cortázar.

Though this is somewhat preliminary consider the stories have yet to be introduced, it is worth mention that in the short stories that comprise the analytical focus of this study in their exhibiting an aesthetic cohesion achieved through a mimetic materiality, this idea of invisibility works at three levels. First, an object/figure/actor is named whose place in the story appears at a cursory glance to serve aesthetic purposes but upon a closer reading proves to constitute the crux of the story’s inter/textuality. The named object/figure/actor thus contributes meaning, symbolic or otherwise, to the surface narrative, and usually also marks an epiphanic moment or insight in the story, thus marking it out as a highly visible aspect of the narrative. At the same time, however, the fact of naming the object/figure/actor is also misleading, for submerged beneath its surface appearance and name is an invisible narrative with the potential to yield multi-layered meanings that exploit not only the associations inhered within the thing itself, but also those that derive from its engagement with the textuality of the story more generally. Thus, the objects/figures/actors represent a material meeting point at which all things exist at once, referenced through a single, physical item. I am reluctant to say that it is referenced by a single word, because there is a noticeable

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid. pp. 16-7.

discord here between words and representation. Indeed, the short story seems to thrive on subverting the association between the two to the utmost possibility. This creates a situation by which it escapes any fixity of meaning by its ability to continuously change its frame of reference; or rather, it *adapts* to society's changing frame of reference.

What I have been thus described shares a kinship with Joycean epiphany, albeit in a more materially distilled manner, similar to some of Joyce's early epiphany techniques present in *Dubliners*. In short stories like "The Sisters," "Two Gallants," and "Clay," Joyce uses material objects as the embodiment of the "whatness of a thing" on the one hand, and as a structural device and narrative catalyst on the other. The former emphasizes an aspect of essence present within inanimate objects and provides a way of seeing the object as divorced from its strict representation, thus elucidating a meaning that surpasses the object itself and exceeds the basic structure of the narrative. In consideration of epiphany is "a way of letting reality disclose itself and arrest our imagination, and as a way of defining reality through discourse" that makes the reader seize "the inside true inwardness of reality,"<sup>142</sup> objects open up new narrative and imaginative spaces from within and without the text, thus steering and progressing the narrative in a highly rhythmic way that gives an effect of aesthetic cohesiveness. Beyond the strict parameter of metaphor or metonymy, this is a fundamental aspect of the short story's form.

Irene Hendry's 1946 article "Joyce's Epiphanies" delineates the concepts of significance that Joyce had articulated as central to his conception of epiphany in *Stephen Hero*, an unfinished, the posthumously discovered, unfinished manuscript that served as a first draft for what would later become *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Three terms as imagined by Thomas Aquinas are central to Joyce's imaginings. Stephen refers to *integritas* as "wholeness" or "the perception of an esthetic image as *one* thing, 'self-bounded and self-contained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it.'"<sup>143</sup> *Consonantia* is the harmonious synthesis of divisible parts and their sum.<sup>144</sup> And *claritas*, a term speaking to the quality of "radiance," is

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<sup>142</sup> Liberato Santoro-Brienza, "Joyce: Between Aristotle and Aquinas," in Umberto Eco and Liberato Santoro-Brienza, *Talking of Joyce* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998, Kindle Edition) Fifth paragraph (n.p.).

<sup>143</sup> Irene Hendry, "Joyce's Epiphanies," *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (July – September 1946) pp. 449-50. The latter part of Hendry's quote is from *Stephen Hero*. Emphasis is Hendry's.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* p. 450.

equated with *quidditas*, or the “whatness” of a thing. Hendry cites Joyce’s explanation from *Stephen Hero* for a full explanation:

*Claritas is quidditas.* After the analysis which discovers the second quality the mind makes the only logically possible synthesis and discovers the third quality. This is the moment which I call epiphany. First we recognise that the object is *one* integral thing, then we recognise that it is an organized composite structure, a *thing* in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognise that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.<sup>145</sup>

Joyce’s description of this central conception of epiphany helps to elucidate the power of Father Flynn’s chalice in “The Sisters,” for example, and emphasizes balance as a factor in this task; balance not only of the object itself, but as a result of *consonantia* as well; a balance of the whole. The breaking of the chalice would have not held so much significance had it not been accompanied by descriptions of the priest’s shortcomings, and of the effects of its aftermath on him. Joyce’s explanation further invokes the “cinematic” aspects of the short story in tying the integrity of the object to “the vestment of its appearance,” once again echoing Poe’s “unity of impression.”

When Joyce says, “The object achieves its epiphany,” he is referring to a multi-faceted inference bestowed through the object. This is central to the significance of Joyce’s contribution. Hendry elaborates:

Basically, perhaps, there is no difference between Joyce’s final epiphany technique and the symbolism of other writers – such as the *leitmotiv* of Thomas Mann – but in its development and in its use there are very real differences. Following Freud, we have come to think of a symbol chiefly in terms of its representational qualities (Pribislav Hippe’s pencil in *The Magic Mountain*); through a combination of experimental science and philosophical idealism, we tend also to find a value of their own in “things,” which we conceive more or less as absolute. Joyce’s conception of the symbol is much closer to the conception of the medieval Church: a symbol has a specific function to perform in a given situation, and when

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<sup>145</sup> James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (London: Granada Publishing, 1982 ed.) p. 190. This passage was later expanded in *Portrait of the Artist*. See: James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2011, Thrift Study Edition) pp. 155-6.

that function has been performed, nothing prevents the use of the symbol again in a totally different context.<sup>146</sup>

Thus, the first mention of Father Flynn's chalice has it as a vestment of the church to be buried with the priest: a symbol of holiness and possibly honor. This perception is exacerbated by the fact of it being told through the perspective of a young boy who knew Father Flynn, but did not understand his standing in society or his reputation – the story is the journey of the development of his understanding. The second mention of the chalice has it being held responsible for the decline of the priest's health, which is also ambiguously attributed to the boy. It becomes a symbol of shame for him, as well as for the priest, and an object of power capable of manipulating and/or realizing fate. The third and final mention of the chalice has it once again resting with Father Flynn's dead corpse, but this time its meaning is fraught with depths of meaning that belies its position as an inanimate object, or even as a mere symbol. This is what identifies it as an object of epiphany, rather than a mere example of literary symbolism.

Somewhat apart from, but complementary to, the implications of multi-symbolism in the epiphanic quality of Father Flynn's chalice is Joyce's conveyance of it as an object capable of shaping destinies. For Father Flynn, its breaking brings about the ultimate fate – death – after a debilitating illness that leaves him as little more than a vegetable. Further, and as previously mentioned, its burial with the priest may represent forgiveness, or, contrarily, eternal condemnation; the cross he must bear for all of eternity in the afterlife as penitence for his sins. Thus, its status as an object of divine symbolism and power is secured, for it exceeds the strengths of human will and mortality. In this way, the object's function in the story surpasses mere symbolism, showing the chalice to be an *actor* within the story whose potential to create meaning is equally alive and unfixd.

Joycean epiphany has had a profound influence on the short story and contributes to the major topic of this chapter concerning brevity and unity, but more importantly it serves as a striking example of how a sub-corpus of short stories incorporate a mimetic materiality as a chief tool in the accomplishment of "saying much in little," the single agreed-upon measure by which any short story is deemed worthwhile. Further, that very materiality emphasizes the vitality of extra-textual spaces in the short story as locations of significant meaning. These patterns will become clearer

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid. p. 466.

in Parts I and II in the works of Idrīs and Cortázar, which will also show the variable possibilities of this method in form, aesthetics, and meaning.

### III. Visual justice: visibility and the reformist impulse

I have repeatedly referenced the art of photography as sharing a kinship with the short story, and while it is not my intention to engage in a prolonged comparative study of the two, a few points of similarity will help to elucidate the short story's form (in terms of brevity, unity, and boundaries) as springing from a reformist social impulse. The previous section highlighted how the very presence of brevity in a literary form *insists* upon a unity of impression in its execution; this is indeed perhaps the only tenant of short story composition that every author must abide – the ability to say much in little. And, using statements from Poe, Cortázar, O'Connor, and Patea, I have alluded to how the goal of unity of impression necessarily dictates an aesthetics that values an ability to exploit the limits of textual boundaries in order to allow the story to expand beyond itself, and it is precisely in this achievement that a powerful aspect of the short story's power lays. In this section, my goal is to make this relationship more explicit using photography as a comparative "language" of the social. The point here is to draw out *how* short story aesthetics manifest in a visually salient way, and how this visualizing capacity is not only conducive to, but is in fact *predicated upon* a reformist impulse that speaks from within moments of profound social transition. This discussion will facilitate the next chapter's focus on materiality as a mode of embodying and critiquing the modern through an aesthetics of visibility.

In recent decades, photography began gaining momentum in literary studies most noticeably with Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) and Roland Barthe's *Camera Lucida* (1980), whose analytical focuses helped demarcate the parameters of critical inquiry for art criticism more generally. Barthes work, which focuses on the impact of photography on its viewer, has arguably been more impactful in recent works that seek to draw out relationships between photography and literature, either by including photographic references in the text of the story itself,<sup>147</sup> documenting their historical partnerships<sup>148</sup>, or looking at the author's ideas about and engagements with

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<sup>147</sup> See: Jane Marjorie Rabb, *The Short Story and Photography, 1880's - 1980's: A Critical Anthology* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

<sup>148</sup> See: FranCois Brunet, *Photography and Literature* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009).

each.<sup>149</sup> Sontag focuses on the capitalist impulse of photography and most especially how the photograph serves as an appropriation of the world and a mediator between lived experience and the world. Her ideas share a dialogue with Berger, who used a similar method of inquiry into the place and function of the oil painting in society based on a Marxist model. In the essay “Plato’s Cave,” Sontag emphasizes the ubiquity of photographs and photography in society, and how the photograph facilitates the imaginary perception that, through possessing or taking a photo, one comes to possess the past or a lived space.<sup>150</sup> She draws parallels with the anthropological impulse towards discovery and commodification of the unknown subject through study of it, however this idea is directly at odds with her immediately subsequent assertion that the act of photographing something allows someone to feel a sense of participation without actually participating, saying that, “Photography is essentially an act of non-intervention.”<sup>151</sup> Indeed, her entire work is premised on an assumption of the photograph’s intervention in modern society, and this is as true for the non-artistically considered photograph of the amateur as it is for the professional who is at pains to convey a particular vision of reality.

Nearing the end of “Plato’s Cave,” Sontag moves away from the power of photography as stemming primarily from its ubiquity and individualistic viewpoint and engages in an interrogation of how the form of the photograph facilitates its impact. In particular, she emphasizes the brevity of photographs as the key to their memorability in the human imagination: “because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow” where one image is quickly subsumed into the other.<sup>152</sup> This idea of photography’s force of image through brevity serves as a premise for her discussion of the moral and/or activist potential of photography to prompt social change, but she also warns of the danger of overexposure of certain types of shocking imagery to result in desensitization. Expanding on the importance of the photograph’s form, she says,

A new sense of the notion of information has been constructed around the photographic image. The photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time. In a world ruled by photographic images, all borders (“framing”)

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<sup>149</sup> See: Ulla Musarra-Schröder, “The Photographic Image: Calvino ‘in Dialogue’ with Barthes, Sontag, and Baudrillard,” in eds. Birgitte Grundtvig, Martin McLaughlin, and Lene Waage Petersen, *Image, Eye and Art in Calvino: Writing Visibility* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007).

<sup>150</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: RosettaBooks electronic version, 2005) p. 6.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.

seem arbitrary. Anything can be separated, can be made discontinuous, from anything else: all that is necessary is to frame the subject differently. (Conversely, anything can be made adjacent to anything else.) Photography reinforces a nominalist view of social reality as consisting of small units of an apparently infinite number—as the number of photographs that could be taken of anything is unlimited.<sup>153</sup>

Here, Sontag points to the “apparent paradox” that was articulated by Cortázar – that precisely because of the recalcitrant borders that encircle the photograph’s frame, the work itself becomes imbued with the possibility to extend beyond itself infinitely. In another essay, “The Image-World,” Sontag expands on the social meanings of photography and she emphasizes how humankind’s allegiance to imagery has come to shape its demands on reality, and that the idea of an image *constituting* experience over the experience itself is a powerful impetus to this impulse.<sup>154</sup> It is made all the more powerful by the image’s ability to stand in for infinite experiences simultaneously.

In essence, despite the disparaging tone she adopts throughout, Sontag’s work poses photography not only as a product of the modern, but also as an ideally suited expression of it. Photography constitutes the modern in terms of an ecstatic visuality represented through unlimited access, in terms of point of view, subject matter, and reproduction. In terms of form, its very restrictiveness gives it access to modernness and drives the power of its imagery. Thus, its very brevity catalyzes its visuality, and together these two things, along with composition, pose the photograph as a language of the social. The nature of this language may well be considered one of social *documentation*. Not a strict recording of life, but interpretations based in reality capable of reflecting a situation, with the manner of representation (surrealism, realism, portraiture, etc.) serving as a dialect of a given epoch, school of thought, or tool of insight. These are significant aspects of its versatility, and contribute to one of the more unique aspects of the photograph as an art form, which is its ability to move in and out different agendas of representation; unlike the oil painting, or indeed the short story, the photograph may be practiced by all, and most of the time its circulation is strictly controlled within the confines of a certain audience depending on the photograph’s purpose; its representation of and engagement with the world experiences, on the whole, less mediation than other art forms, which must typically pass through some kind of cultural or institutional gatekeeper to be introduced to different audiences. This also

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. p. 121.

means that, for better or worse, photography has more avenues available to it regarding the circulation of prohibited or taboo subject matter and compositions that vary widely in “quality.”

The differences between the short story and photography are far too substantial to reduce one to the other; my primary point in drawing out this discussion of photography has been to elucidate the seemingly inherent relationship between brevity and visuality, and their social embeddedness. While Sontag implies that the photograph ultimately reveals too much, and in so doing actually *obscures* larger social currents and gives way to *illusions* of knowing, she is essentially using photography as an example of the effects of gratuitous, unmediated, infinite representations of the world in which we live. It is this aspect, perhaps more than any other, which separates photography from the short story – even more so than the “textual” versus “visual” divide.<sup>155</sup> Conversely, it may also be the case that the short story’s more traditional routes of existing in the world dictate certain aspects of quality control, and that similarly, it is not an art form that may be achieved easily by amateurs, means that it cannot so easily be manipulated or given to overexposure.

Ultimately, what looking at the photograph does, more than anything else, is to help understanding how the intersection of brevity and sociality lead to a type of textuality, as Said expressed, which is premised upon a concept of (in)visibility; where the vital aspects of the “text” actually lay outside said text.

## Conclusion

In lieu of a working definition, short story scholars – who are so frequently the writers themselves – have focused on the nature of the short story’s brevity to perceive its uniqueness. What Poe named “unity of impression” two hundred years ago remains the most encompassing term with regard to the meeting of form and function, though this idea of a cohesive, sustained unity also alludes to the substantive issues surrounding the topic of definition. The short story’s emergence and evolution in parallel to that of the photograph, as well as the passionate involvement of many short story writers with

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<sup>155</sup> While beyond the scope, it is nonetheless worth noting that the Age of the Internet is serving to facilitate an unprecedented blurring of lines between textual and visual media, raising questions about aspects of both that have until now been taken for granted, particularly concerning the nature of language.

photography, has been particularly influential, and considerations of the photograph, particularly with regard to the function of boundaries and frames in creating meaning, has been useful in creating a language with which to talk about the short story while also alluding powerfully to the short story's visual qualities. It is this visual quality that has served as my point of departure for looking at the short story, for it comes across as unique in a textual medium. My goal is to begin exploring the nature of the relationship between text and non-textual spaces to better understand the potentialities of understanding the short story as a visually significant textual genre, though this work represents only a starting point in this task, and is by no means definitive.

I take metaphor as a potentially revealing aspect of the short story, precisely for its brevity. The relationship appears to be a reciprocal one, each dependent upon the other. However, metaphor is limited in explaining the textual complexities of the short story precisely because of the discord between language and meaning. Here, the problem becomes one of textuality and reading/revealing the invisibilities inherent in short story through a grasping of the particular language of the short story. Looking at the relationship between brevity and sociality in the photograph helps to elucidate textual visuality as a fundamental occurrence leading to a particular textual visuality. Metaphor and epiphany are each central textual tenants of short story composition, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and they help to better understand the peculiar nature of language with regard to the concept of visibility as it was laid out by Said with regard to textuality.

I have so far discussed the main points of this chapter in fairly abstract terms, however these terms will be made more concrete in the following chapter, which will place them into the specific contexts of *amāra* and mythology, and, in Parts II and III, through Idrīs' objects and Cortázar's beasts. Suffice it to say for now that the working definition of the short story as I have described throughout this chapter amounts to a literary form that shares a significant historical and textual kinship with photography; although it is not strictly visual, its brevity necessitates that it is possessed of an exceptional visualizing capacity of language, made up of its textual spaces, metaphor, and epiphany, even where metaphor and epiphany are not strictly present; its textuality lies in its extra-textual spaces, and the nature of those spaces is inherited within its social context; this means not only that the story's meaning is unfixed, but also that its form – aside from the rule of brevity – is also unfixed, allowing it to shape-shift according to

the social discourse it is assumed to embody. The next chapter will expand on how the short story's sociality contributes to what it is, in terms of form and otherwise.

CHAPTER THREE  
Aesthetics of Social Concern:  
*Amāra* and Mythology

Introduction

To this point, I have focused primarily on the short story in broad strokes that circle around the persistent issue of definition. This chapter will begin the process of encasing those discussions within specific social and critical contexts. In the latter part of Chapter One I discussed some of the current debates regarding method in world literature and their potential usefulness in demystifying the short story as a literary form. I placed particular emphasis on how historicized knowledge has contributed to a Eurocentric mystification regarding the short story generally, particularly as it has shown up as reading the short story *through* the novel, thereby leaving non-Euro-American short stories to the purview of Area Studies. This chapter will begin the process of elaborating on those proposed “ways of seeing” by reintroducing them through the contexts of Egypt and Argentina, and ultimately taking shape in the comparative figures and writings of Yūsuf Idrīs and Julio Cortázar, respectively. It emphasizes the short story as a means of arriving at the modern from within transformative, if not polarized, social discourses. The first part of this chapter especially highlights the roles of the colonial legacies in Egypt and Argentina/Latin America and how they shaped discourses regarding localized modernities that the short story emerged to address.

Chapter Two was concerned with the issue of the short story’s form and proposed visuality as a unifying principle and a necessary outcome of the short story’s form and language. This constitutes a way of seeing the short story with regard to what it is rather than what has been historically ascribed to it. The latter part of this chapter will further develop the idea of “visualizing capacity” as a trope of (in)visibility that presents in the short story as a language of social concern. I will document how *amāra* became constitutive of this impulse in the Egyptian short story, which will lead into the works of Yūsuf Idrīs, whose career was largely preoccupied with figuring *amāra* as a means of artistic social critique in his fiction. In the Argentine and larger Latin American contexts of the Boom generation, I likewise identify mythology, or mythopoesis, as a visualizing trope of social significance, which will ultimately bring me to the figure of Julio Cortázar. The following Parts II and III will expand on these

two figures and particularly on the manifestation of this visualizing impulse within the broader frameworks of their social critique through narrative fictional discourse through mimetic materialities.

The aim of this chapter is manifold: to explicitly situate Egyptian and Argentine literature within current world literature and postcolonial theory debates, and to contribute to those debates through their respective contexts; to encase the short story's visualizing capacity further within specific contexts, thereby further distancing it from old Eurocentric assumptions *vis a vis* the novel and the restrictiveness of Area Studies, while also strengthening the aforementioned world literature contributions; and, ultimately, to draw out the short story's social embeddedness by applying a method of reading where visibility constitutes a means of reading its sociality.

## I. Conflicted modernities: colonial legacies in Egypt, Argentina, and the short story

### Ia. Egypt

The “moment of encounter” is frequently cited as the beginning of the “modern” era in Egypt. It refers to Napoleon's occupation of the country in 1798 and the succeeding three years of encounter between the Egyptian people and French troops, which included the introduction of some French cultural institutions and values into Egyptian society. This “moment of encounter” is frequently cited as the critical catalyst for the *nahda* - more than a century of reformative efforts to modernize the country, encompassing its institutions, politics, belief systems, cultural forms of production, and aesthetics, and leading to the formation of modern Arabic literature. However, this dominant perspective has begun to be qualified from within postcolonial theory, overlapping with world literature debates as articulated through the work of Apter, Spivak, and Tanoukhi, among others.

For example, Wail Hassan, in aiming to redress the silence proffered to colonial history with regard to Arabic literature, elucidates the assumption undergirding this perspective as one whereby Arabic literature is assumed to have “languished in

decadence and stagnation” before exposure to European literature revived Arabic letters.<sup>156</sup> He continues:

One result of this narrative has been the unquestioning application of Western periodization and interpretive procedures to modern Arabic literature.

It was not simply Arab intellectuals’ fascination with modern European civilization but also, and more urgently, its colonial threat that led to the movement known as *Nahda* (or “revival”) in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>157</sup>

Hassan goes on to emphasize that, rather than Europe “bringing” modern Arabic literature to Egypt through exposure to its own literatures, another aspect of the encounter that has not been so readily acknowledged is how the selective borrowing from Europe was accompanied by a renewed interest in classical Arabic poetry from the Golden Age of Arabic literature (the fifth to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries).<sup>158</sup> The literature that began emerging out of Egypt during the *nahda*, far from being a blind imitation of European letters, constituted a process of “making anew” established forms of Arabic literature to suit the socially dictated wants and needs of a modern reading public and a growing nation, using European literary genres and devices as tools to that end.

Hassan’s ideas raise the question of how Egyptian modernity has been conceived with regard to its literature, and particularly the role that discourse has played in reference to the Arabic short story in Egypt. In *Colonizing Egypt* (1988), Timothy Mitchell seizes on the discourse of Orientalism introduced by Edward Said to look at how the impact of the European gaze, set off by the “moment of encounter,” began manifesting and compounding colonialist attitudes toward Egypt. He focuses especially on how these attitudes lead to visualized projects intended to reorganize Egypt from within the European gaze by way of “pushing” Egypt into a European-realized conception of modernity.

In *Conflicted Antiquities* (2007) Elliott Colla builds on Mitchell’s “world as exhibition” hypothesis through a considered look at the impacts of the excavation of Egypt’s antiquities and the emerging field of Egyptology. He writes of the re-discovery of ancient Egyptian antiquities by French, German, and British archeologists in the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Wail S. Hassan, “Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature,” in *Journal of Modern Arabic Literature*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2002) p. 57.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

century and how these objects – their seizure, handling, histories, narratives, etc. – came to represent, on the one hand, the “right to rule” doctrine of colonialism, even decades prior to British colonial occupation in Egypt, while on the other hand, inspiring the formation of a renewed national identity in Egypt that would bridge a pagan past and a mostly Islamic present, without diminishing either. This renewal took place primarily in the 1920s and ‘30s amongst Egyptian intellectuals and writers. Colla points out that the discourse was not shaped solely through the dichotomously opposing colonial and national narratives, but, equally significant, through an emerging Egyptian narrative that was shaped by Egyptian elites, often as a way of exerting a centralizing, national control over rural populations.<sup>159</sup>

Discourse concerning these ancient artifacts transformed at this time into – among other things – a trope of the modern in Egyptian literature, fiction and otherwise, which Colla explores through a comparative study of the writings of Naguib Mahfouz and Sayyid Qutb to elucidate the parameters of the discourse. Vitaly, Colla frames the divergent perspectives – one secular, the other religious – as equal means of arriving at a conception of Egyptian modernity through the literary treatment of its ancient antiquities. Mahfouz’s method is to write allegorical stories of Pharaonic Egypt that have bearing on present matters. Qutb’s is to reject the ancient past as *jahiliyya*, thereby leaving the matter of antiquities in the past, and by extension marking that past as a measure of contemporary progress with regard to Islam.

In highlighting each perspective as a way of arriving at a modernity conceived through the Egyptian experience (rather than a European one), Colla is also commenting on the fraught discourse regarding modernity within Egypt, which often took form through dichotomously opposed conceptions of “modernity” versus “tradition,” which played a larger role with regard to Egypt’s emerging modern literatures in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as will be seen. However, Colla also offers a critique of “tradition” by considering Qutb’s Islamically-centered framing of Egypt’s ancient past as *jahiliyya*, or a state of “ignorance,” as a way of figuring Egypt’s modernity in religious terms. For Colla, Qutb’s contribution is possibly more lasting and relevant to Egypt’s modernity than Mahfouz’s because it reads against the intellectually dominant conception of religion as constituting the “tradition” end of Egypt’s social divisions and, consequently, as something to be rejected, modified, or subsumed into other, perhaps

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<sup>159</sup> Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007) p. 18.

more conventional, conceptions of modernity as being tied to Europe and in particular to science. Colla says, “I would suggest that the innovation in Qutb’s thinking has everything to do with the issue of allegory as [Fredric] Jameson describes it, at least insofar as his reading of the Jahiliyya loosened it from its literal grounding and offered it as a figure living in the present, and living beyond the narrow confines of Cairo’s elite print culture.”<sup>160</sup>

The “elite print culture” Colla refers to is Egypt’s intellectual literary establishment who were engaged in the task of reforming Egyptian literature as a way of “writing” its modernity within an Egyptian voice. Writers of fiction were not merely artists, but artists who viewed their role as a public and national service. Immediately following Napoleon’s departure from Egypt in 1801, the Khedive of Egypt, Mohammed ‘Ali Pasha (1769-1849), sought to continue and accelerate the modernizing project of the nation and sanctioned numerous projects in this effort, which included the sending of emissaries abroad to Europe (notably Paris)<sup>161</sup> on cultural and educational missions, as well as projects at home concerning land reform, literacy, the education of women, and especially science and medicine. The role of the intellectual took on added importance as men and women of letters were tasked with assisting in the re-writing of cultural practices, histories, and, indeed, aspects of the national collective memory. Thus, the role of the writer following *al-nahda* had transformed into that of educator<sup>162</sup> and expanded to include a strong historical urgency in bridging Egypt’s past(s) and present(s)<sup>163</sup> and writing Egyptian modernity.

One of the emergent literatures in Egypt in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the short story, which shared significant commonalities with other, more long-standing Egyptian literary forms, like oral storytelling, folktales, and the *maqāma*. In literary histories, it is commonly considered as a “practice” literary form, intended to eventually arrive at the novel. However, the short story and the novel in Egypt emerged along disparate trajectories. Section IIIa of this chapter will look at how the modernizing discourses occurring within Egypt, beginning during the *nahda*, contributed to ideas that

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid. p. 272.

<sup>161</sup> Most notably Rifa’a al-Tahtawi, from 1926-1931, whose writings about his experiences and observations abroad significantly influenced later thinkers and activists, like Mohamed Abduh, and the general trajectory of Egyptian conceptions of modernity into the twentieth century.

<sup>162</sup> Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt*, trans. David Tresilian (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008) p. 88.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. p. 89.

would emerge as prominent tropes of literary mimesis. Of these, it will look at how *amāra* - a conceptual term referring to the ability to embody and “speak” from within the knowledge of the “people” – emerged as a basis for a literary impulse of the modern that would shape the Egyptian short story in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Ib. Argentina

European colonialism played perhaps even more substantial and complex roles with regard to Argentine conceptions of modernity and the creation of modern Argentine literature. However, unlike in Egypt, where the “moment of encounter” is cited as a catalyzing factor for the shift, in Argentina it was rather marked by the “moment of cessation” as Spanish colonial rule ceased and Argentine independence was declared. The turn of the nineteenth century saw Argentina in the throes of a difficult and divided social and political transition culminating in an eight-year war for independence from Spain (1810-1818) and the issuing of the Declaration of Independence in 1816. Before the Declaration had been issued and the war from Spain won, the country – under the name of the United Provinces of South America – also experienced war on additional fronts, in a series of civil wars intended to settle the identity and governance of the country, and that would last for decades (1814-1880). The primary warring factions in the civil wars were the Unitarian party, who advocated a centralized government based in Buenos Aires to oversee the rest of the country, and the Federalists, who demanded that the provinces be permitted to govern themselves.

At stake in these wars was not only the nature of governance, but the very identity of the country and its citizens. The division was marked by dichotomously opposing polarities concerning the culture, ethnicity, language, and social structure of the country: one that privileged the urban outlook and control of Buenos Aires versus one that privileged the localized governance of *caudillos*.<sup>164</sup> In the face of such stark opposing realities, the intellectual base of the country was overwhelmingly Unitarian in both breeding and outlook, privileging a mostly European, upper class perspective on the above matters, and contributing to one of the most prevalent tropes of Argentine literature and social and political discourse in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which would be

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<sup>164</sup> The word *caudillo* is often translated in negative terms, like “warlord,” “dictator,” or “strongman,” but it can also be translated as “leader” or “chief.” *Caudillos* were local landowners capable of wielding power over their individual provinces.

encapsulated in Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's seminal text, *Civilización y barbarie* (Civilization and Barbarism, 1845). This discourse favored the Unitarians as the former, and the Federalists, and their *caudillos*, as the latter.

The place of modern Argentine – and Latin American – literature, including the short story, within world literature is complex and inconsistent. Works by Latin American writers are frequently included in fictional and critical anthologies that otherwise center on European and/or North American writers and works. This is no doubt facilitated by the fact that many Latin American writers have achieved international renown as important literary pioneers, and several (eight) have been awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. However, there is a noted silence about Latin America with regard to world literature debates and postcolonial theory – a peculiar absence given the continent's powerful colonial legacy and seeming straddling of the east/west divide. Latin America and its literature seems to occupy an in-between space in these debates, to the extent that it has been rendered invisible. Indeed, this complex overlapping, between European and non-European, postcolonial and colonial, modern and “not-yet” modern, also formed the crux of the early debates that dominated Argentina's political and cultural spheres throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup>. The question with regard to modern literature is particularly fraught owing to the perceived “white European” racial makeup of most prominent modern Argentine authors who are sometimes assumed (it seems) to share a natural affinity with European forms of cultural expression, extending to its literature.

The issue of race has become a foundational starting point from which recent significant conceptions of the question of Latin American modernity and the question of the postcolonial have evolved. In his seminal work, *The Invention of the Americas* (1995), Enrique Dussel writes against the dominant perspective that the European Reformation and the Renaissance marked the beginning of modernity – what he calls the “myth of modernity –, instead positing the beginnings of European modernity with the conquest of Mexico in the early sixteenth century. He asserts that Europe did not already possess the qualities that made it “modern” or powerful, but rather that the conquest of the Americas enabled European development of the institutions, systems, and world views that would become associated with modernity through conquest and violence. He says,

The birthdate of modernity is 1492, even though its gestation, like that of the fetus, required a period of intrauterine growth. Whereas modernity gestated in the free, creative medieval European cities, it came to birth in Europe's confrontation with the Other. By controlling, conquering, and violating the Other, Europe defined itself as discoverer, conquistador, and colonizer of an alterity likewise constitutive of modernity. Europe never discovered (*des-cubierto*) this Other as Other but covered over (*encubierto*) the Other as part of the Same: i.e., Europe. Modernity dawned in 1492 and with it the myth of a special kind of sacrificial violence which eventually eclipsed whatever was non-European.<sup>165</sup>

Dussel begins the first part of his study through a European perspective, systematically pinpointing key ideas that emerged from conquest – including the very notion of “conquest” – and the resulting shift in European worldview, which became encapsulated in the philosophies of influential European thinkers, from Kant to Habermas. The second part of his study is from the perspective of what he calls “Amerindia” – the conquered Americas inclusive of the Caribbean and the West Indies. Frustrated by the boundary to the East marked by Islam, to which Europe was secondary and peripheral,<sup>166</sup> European conquest spread westward at the end of the fifteenth century, and it was the European’s encounter and treatment of the natives of the Americas that gave way to European conceptions of modernity.

In Dussel’s view, the conquest of the Americas constituted the “first modernity,”<sup>167</sup> but it also gave way to the first postcolonial theorists.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Enrique Dussel, *Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of the “Other” and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995) p. 12.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.* p. 88.

<sup>167</sup> José H. Bartoluci and Robert S. Jansen, “Toward a Postcolonial Sociology: The View from Latin America,” in ed. Julian Go, *Postcolonial Sociology, Political Power and Social Theory*, Vol. 24 (Bingley: Emerald, 2013) p. 208. Dussel, Bartoluci, and Jansen de-link their respective conceptions of modernity from the European enlightenment. Instead, they point towards the rise of European colonial projects, beginning in the Americas in the 1500s, and the economic, racial, and class outcomes of those colonial projects as the impetuses that have come to define modernity. “First, Latin American postcolonial scholars have demonstrated that neither the Eurocentric imaginary nor the material relations of colonial power were exclusive products of the 18th century. Rather, these had their roots much earlier, in Spain and Portugal’s 16th century establishment of colonial control over the indigenous populations of the New World and peoples who had been forcibly imported from Africa. The neglect of this “first modernity” by postcolonial scholars was, to Latin Americanists, a critical oversight; and in taking this first modernity into account, postcolonial scholars of Latin America have underscored the region’s central role in the development of a new system of colonial power relations” (Bartoluci and Jansen, “Toward a Postcolonial Sociology,” p. 208).

Building on Dussel, Anibal Quijano asserts race as a significant foundational aspect to emerge from European colonial projects in the Americas, from which all other systems developed to some extent, and were justified. The *construction* of social classifications by race was assumed by the conquistadores as “the constitutive, founding element of the relations of domination and that the conquest imposed.”<sup>169</sup> Quijano emphasizes that the modern meaning of race was developed during the conquest of the Americas and had not existed prior to it.<sup>170</sup> The construction of race would become a vital and effective feature of European colonialism in the coming centuries, situating people as dominant/dominated in accordance with their phenotypic traits and cultural features, thereby subsuming other modes of social hierarchization, like gender or religion.<sup>171</sup> “In this way, race became the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society’s structure of power.”<sup>172</sup> Quijano coined the term “coloniality of power” to refer to the encompassing worldview and institutions arising from these assumptions.

Both Dussel’s and Quijano’s studies situate modernity as a necessarily Eurocentric construction, whose very conception came about initially as the result of *Europe’s* “moment of encounter” with the Americas, rather than the other way around. “The idea of ‘America’ – and especially conceptions of the indigenous and African populations of the Latin American colonies – represented a fundamental ‘other’” for the

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<sup>168</sup> “Thinkers such as José Martí, José Carlos Mariátegui, Gino Germani, Florestan Fernandes, Leopoldo Zea, and Edmundo O’Gorman, for example, dedicated most of their careers to the development of comprehensive interpretations of the histories of Latin American societies that took very seriously the problem of ‘colonial difference’ and that, at the same time, served to critique the popular and sociological discourses of modernity that had been developed with reference to Europe.” (Bartoluci and Jansen, p. 207.)

<sup>169</sup> Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” in *Neplanta: Views from the South*, No. 3 (2000) p. 533.

<sup>170</sup> Quijano identifies “race” as one of two historical processes of colonialism that gave rise to the new space/time of the new model of power that came to constitute modernity. He calls this, “the codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the idea of “race,” a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others. The conquistadors assumed this idea as the constitutive, founding element of the relations of domination that the conquest imposed” (Ibid. pp. 533-4). The other historical process he refers to is the structure and control of labor and its resources.

Quijano’s argument does not detract from previous historical conceptions of race; rather he emphasizes that the European conquering of the Americas gave rise to a political and economic use of race that was new and constituted a fundamental underpinning of “modernity.”

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. pp. 533-5.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. p. 535.

constitution of European civilization from the 15<sup>th</sup> through the 18<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>173</sup> While this fact would have a profound impact on Europe’s colonizing projects after the Americas, the longevity and the integrated aspect of Europe’s presence in America contributed its own legacy that would have a profound impact on nationalizing discourses and nation building, post-independence, for Latin American countries.

In post-independence Argentina, the fault lines drawn between the Unitarians and Federalists were compounded by a discourse that recalled the legacy of three hundred years of colonization along racial lines. The Unitarian writer and intellectual class in Argentina overwhelmingly looked to Europe for the source of their own modernity, which was compounded by continuous emigration of Europeans (but also Arabs, Eastern European Jews, and other groups) to Argentina. The “civilization and barbarism” trope was given voice and distinct feeling and parameters through Sarmiento, though he had himself inherited it. However, Sarmiento’s Europe was not inclusive of Spain, Portugal, or Italy, whom he considered as barbarous as the *caudillos* of the *pampas*; instead, the conception of modernity had shifted to privilege the “new” colonial powers of France and England.

Argentine literature emerged from the fault lines between these complex but nevertheless polar divides. The turn from essay and other documentary forms of non-fiction writing like colonial and then state law documents, known as *cartas de relación* (which have nonetheless been referred to as “the first fictions of and about Latin America”<sup>174</sup>), to prose fiction was a result of the political atmosphere under the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793-1877) in Argentina. “The hectic succession of real-world dilemmas facing educated individuals impelled them toward more pragmatic forms of writing, documents intended to communicate meaning in an immediately useful way.”<sup>175</sup> Intellectual and political opponents were increasingly required to mask their opinions behind a veil of fictionalization, thus rather unwittingly giving rise to modern Argentine literature, with the short story emerging in tandem with the novel.

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<sup>173</sup> Bartoluci and Jansen, “Toward a Postcolonial Sociology,” p. 209. See also: Walter D. Mignolo, *Local histories/global designs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>174</sup> Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) p. 10.

<sup>175</sup> Naomi Lindstrom, “The Spanish American Short Story from Echeverría to Quiroga,” in ed. Margaret Sayers Peden, *The Latin American Short Story: A Critical History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983) p. 35.

## II. The short story and the struggle for modernity: *amāra* and mythology

### IIa. *Amāra*: The narrative of an idea

Growing from the “moment of encounter” and the Khedive’s modernizing projects, intellectual activities contributed to a shifting of public sentiment regarding Egyptianism, Egyptian nationalism, Egyptian modernity, and Islamic sentiment and adherence in consideration of the former. The 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of a dramatic shift in world-view in light of these debates, and fictional narrative became a mode of social reform where debates over European influence and “Egyptianism” took place. As these debates developed, older literary forms were reformed and others “adopted” in order to better convey ideas to the Egyptian people, and new literary tools were developed accordingly. The short story represents an example of the former, mostly considered an “adopted” European form, while the concept of *amāra* would eventually come to represent the latter. This section will document the evolution of *amāra* as an idea in tandem with the evolving conception of modernity in Egypt in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This section culminates in identifying *amāra* as a vital impulse that would mark the short stories of Yūsuf Idrīs, and the role of the short story to that end. In so doing, I will also partly challenge the hegemony of the prevailing discourse that suggests the short story as a foreign literary form. Instead, I identify social realism and then *amāra* as the pivot points around which, through a prolonged struggle, the short story came to embody an organic Egyptian sociality.

In his book *The Intellectual and the People in Egyptian Literature and Culture: Amāra and the 2011 Revolution* (2014), Ayman El-Desouky defines *amāra* as a means of speaking and *embodying* the language of the (Egyptian) people. He says,

The question of *amāra* is a question of the production of signs, verbal and visual, and of narratives that originate in a deeply shared social condition, signaling a shared destiny, and speaking to that condition, not representing it, with both speaker and addressee fully present. It is not simply a question of the people being made aware or brought to knowledge, but first and foremost a recognition that the people already know and that they do indeed speak their knowing, beyond a specified content or demand.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> El-Desouky, *The Intellectual and the People*, p. 107.

El-Desouky's research pivots on the question of language and "untranslatabilities" as they relate to *amāra*, particularly in light of the 2011 revolution in Egypt. As part of his investigation, he looks at the language of literature as "an aesthetic force of the concept of *amāra*,"<sup>177</sup> especially in the works of Lāshīn and Idrīs, partly to firmly ground the concept in Egyptian cultural production, and also to elucidate how these literary depictions foreground the "tension inhering in the mediatory function"<sup>178</sup> – referring here to the role of the author-intellectual as a mediator of *amāra* between the Egyptian "people" and intellectual class.

El-Desouky's approach to *amāra* is grounded in the 2011 revolution, and so emphasizes a contemporary conception of the term, while hinting at an historical process. El-Desouky begins his discussions with Lāshīn and then Idrīs, citing their literary conceptions of *amāra* as something of an historical precedent for immediately pre- and post-2011 usages and intertextualities. Yet, the modern understanding of *amāra* put forth by El-Desouky began emerging in Egypt in tandem with the very conception of modernity, as this section will demonstrate. Indeed, the struggle to figure modernity in Egypt is inextricable from the struggle for modernity itself.

The concept of *amāra* in modern Egyptian fiction is not new, although it has not always been explicitly named. For example, in *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985*, Samah Selim argues that the structural and thematic components of the Egyptian novel were "intrinsicly linked to the historical process by which the *fellah* emerged as a subject of social science and of a new narrative discourse, as well as an insurgent force in modern Egyptian history."<sup>179</sup> Somewhat echoing Hafez, Selim's study emphasizes the increasing imperative of writers to speak from within the voice of the people. Seen as potential weapons against colonial threats, the *fellah*, or peasantry – what El-Desouky calls "the people" – were frequently romanticized as safeguards of Egyptian national identity.<sup>180</sup> As will be seen in this chapter and throughout Part II, however, the "voice of the people," which so often referred to the *fellah*, did not guarantee them an actual voice. Rather, at least literarily, the result was often a crude objectification of on behalf of writer/intellectuals of "the people" as a nameless,

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Samah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004) p. 3.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

faceless, homogenous mass. This, while writer/intellectuals sought to combat the colonial threat, on the one hand, they often ended up working (problematically) to tame and harness – even *co-opt* or *subsume* – the *fellah* within their own voice and sensibility.<sup>181</sup>

Hassan's assertion that Egyptian modernity was largely shaped as a response to the colonial threats of France and Britain, which resulted in a return to older expressions of (mostly) Islamic cultural expression from bygone eras becomes evident in the figure of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897). Al-Afghani was concerned with political reform in response to European pressures and to this end he called for Muslim liberation from Europe and the re-formation of an Islamic caliphate, emphasizing Muslim solidarity and in the process becoming a significant figure involved in conceiving Egyptian modernity *vis a vis* Islam. On the literary end of this endeavor, Mohamed Abduh (1849-1905), his "most devout follower"<sup>182</sup> was a reformer who advocated the novel as a means of reform; however Abduh himself did not engage in fictional writing.<sup>183</sup>

Abdallah al-Nadīm (1845-1896), another of al-Afghani's disciples, had a tremendous impact in revolutionizing existing literary styles, including poetry, oration, essay writing and drama, as avenues of social reformation. He recognized that the ideas of al-Afghani and others reached only other intellectuals, and he sought to break this barrier and conceive of a literature capable of tapping into the lives and realities of everyday Egyptians.<sup>184</sup> Nadīm traveled widely and mingled across social classes. He used the colloquial as a tool of popular expression,<sup>185</sup> however he also reformed the use of Arabic, and "stripped it of its traditional rhetoric and ornamentations" so that it was an "economical and functional language that deliberately refrained from attracting attention to itself or to its writer."<sup>186</sup> This gave the effect of the literary work being an

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<sup>181</sup> I subsume the varying references to "the people" and the *fellah* within the broad categorization of the "Egyptian people" throughout the majority of this project. While overly broad, it nonetheless captures, better I think than the other two terms, the complexity and diversity underlying it. This terminology is useful here, because my focus is on the literary aesthetics that emerge out of the struggle to figure *amāra* in the Egyptian short story, rather than the individuals and groups of people for whom it was intended to "capture."

<sup>182</sup> Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, p. 15.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16.

<sup>184</sup> Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse A Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature*, trans. Sabry Hafez (London: Saqi Books, 1993) p. 116.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.* p. 113-14.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 116-17.

“autonomous and complete entity,”<sup>187</sup> emphasizing the faithful representation of external reality because, as he said, “the reader is only interested in what touches his own daily life.”<sup>188</sup> Nadīm capitalized on the use of periodicals as a tool to connect him directly to his readers, and he introduced many of his fictional works through his magazine. However, in discussions of Nadīm’s influence, Sabry Hafez carefully refrains from referring to these works as short stories, instead asserting that Nadīm’s narrative contributions were embryonic in modern fictional discourse.<sup>189</sup>

And yet, the strides Nadīm made in Arabic fiction paved the way for the emergence of the short story and other literary forms after his death. And, vitally, Nadīm’s narrative practices mark a point of departure with regard to the emergence of social realism and *amāra* as socially driven forms of literary mimesis. His use of the colloquial is perhaps the most prominent indicator of this, however his treatment of themes also subverted intellectual practices. Nadīm dealt with real, everyday issues that reflected the experience of individuals, saying that “‘*idā‘at al-lughah taslīm li-l-dhāt*’ (neglecting language jeopardizes national identity).”<sup>190</sup> His work emphasized disparities between classes, the susceptibility of Egyptians to value foreign material elements above Egyptian ones, and the subjugations of Egyptians by foreign visitors to the country.<sup>191</sup>

These were themes that had also been narrativized in the dramatic comedic works of playwright Yaqub Sannu‘, another disciple of al-Afghani and Abduh. “San[n]u’s characters are lively, and truly express the problems of their society. The extreme generality of the settings, though portraying a very limited section of the society, does reflect the universality and significance of his central ideas. The characters need no specific location in time and place to be understood.”<sup>192</sup> Further, Sannu‘ “faithfully captures the thoughts and life-style of the class he portrays. He knows the language and topics of conversation of the peasants, bourgeoisie, and high society” and is adept at reproducing speech patterns, accents, and dialects particular to certain people and places.<sup>193</sup> His dramas attracted large audiences who took an active role in the

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid. p. 117.

<sup>188</sup> Nadīm quoted in Hafez, p. 117.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid. pp. 117-18.

<sup>190</sup> Nadīm quoted in Hafez, p. 119.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid. p. 126.

<sup>192</sup> Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, pp. 63-4.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid. pp. 64-5.

performances, shouting encouragement, incitement, or requests. Significantly, with time his works reached across classes, from peasants to the intellectual classes. He used “familiar rather than classic situations. His social comedies reflect his profound understanding of the ethos of the Egyptian people.”<sup>194</sup> Nadīm built and expanded the reformative efforts marked by Sannu‘’s legacy.

Entering into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, works by al-‘Aqqad, al-Māzini, and Taha Husain presented “an unprecedentedly rational approach to their subject, and a new value judgment formed on the basis of the world-view which had been taking shape throughout the previous decades. The idea that deep human experience was essential to any work of art gained ground, while the notions which identify literary standards with reference to paranomasia and grandiloquent expressions of various kinds fell into disrepute.”<sup>195</sup> The old conceptions of the “verbal nature of literature” were replaced by a call for new forms of literary discourse based on a new understanding of “the function of literary work and an assimilation of the valuable achievements of European culture.”<sup>196</sup>

The dissemination of these ideas led to new literary forms that were responsive to the reading public. The short story’s emergence had been occurring in fits and starts, and its solidification as a distinctive genre was delayed for some time, until a favorable climate, following the destruction of the revolutionary spirit after 1919, fed a state of frustration that provided a space for it.<sup>197</sup> Its evolution in the early stages was a conscious, collective effort to disentangle it from its European roots in order to turn it into an Egyptian literature that, building on Nadīm’s and Sannu‘’s legacies, would be capable of tapping into Egyptian lived experience by way of social and national reformative efforts.

Significantly, many of the early pioneers of the short story (like Mohamed Taymūr, Mikhā’il Nu‘aymah, Haddād, ‘Īsā and Shiḥātah ‘Ubaid, Mahmoud Ahmad al-Sayyid) were first- and second-generation Egyptians, whose parents had come from other countries, including Turkey, Albania, and Syria.<sup>198</sup> The ‘Ubaid in particular emphasized authenticity of representation in their works, and pioneered “an approach based on knowledge, study and considerable experience of the subject and character” of

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid. p. 66.

<sup>195</sup> Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, p. 159.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. p. 160.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid. p. 162.

Egyptians.<sup>199</sup> However, these early works struggled in the transition between storytelling and narrative writing, and in their attempt to accurately portray authenticity of the Egyptian lived experience, their narratives were burdened with the weight of irrelevant or superfluous detail.<sup>200</sup> Thus, the question plaguing the short story was one to be one of aesthetic achievement of an organic Egyptianness rather than descriptively focused narrative techniques.

In the 1920s, these questions took on greater urgency amongst the intellectual class, particularly as the impact of individuals' foreign education inside and outside Egypt and exposure to other cultures and ideas through travel and reading contributed to a growing rift in society between the intellectual class, who sought to continue and expand reforms begun under the *nahda* in order to create a "modern" society from within their perceived "enlightenment," and the "people," who were increasingly seen by the intellectual class as being held back, or even enslaved, by a blinding adherence to "tradition" which they perceived as preventing modernization. For the *gil al-udaba'*, or the "generation of men of letters,"<sup>201</sup> the ability to best effect reform was seen as contingent upon the solidification of a fictional realism capable of intervening in social realities. Formed in 1919, *Jama'at al-Madrassa al-Haditha* (the New School), which included amongst its members Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Lāshīn, Yahya Haqqī, and the Taymūr brothers, Moḥamed and Aḥmed, sought to tap into Egyptian reality as a means of holding a mirror up to society to effect reform through fiction - to produce a more effective realism, a truer "truth" that might find resonance and gain a social foothold where previous practices had not. They conceived the short story as way of achieving this end, through the distillation of a language that would embody social realism as they perceived it.<sup>202</sup>

The short story initially arrived in Egypt through translations (many by New School members) of established European and American writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century like Maupassant, Balzac, Melville, James, and Poe. Russian formalists like Turgenev,

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid. p. 182.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid. p. 196.

<sup>201</sup> Also known as the 1919 generation. Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, p. 8.

<sup>202</sup> Separate but coexistent with the New School was the "Modern School," which also sought to modernize Egyptian society and tap into social reality as a means to do so, but their practices emphasized education and also included non-fictional forms of literature like essays and articles. Notable members included Taha Hussein, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, and Ibrahim Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini. See: M. Moosa, "The Egyptian Modernists and the Novel," in *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, pp. 291-343.

Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, and Gorky were especially influential in the latter stages of the group's "cultural development,"<sup>203</sup> since the concerns and "spirit" of Russian literature were viewed by members of the group as being closest to those of Egypt and Egyptians.<sup>204</sup> The path to consolidating the short story into ' *adab qaṣāṣī qawmī* (national fictional literature) consisted of a two-pronged approach of, on the one hand, translating and publishing Russian authors in the group's literary journal *al-Fajr, Sahifat al-Hadm wa al-Bina* ' (The Dawn: A Journal for Destruction and Building),<sup>205</sup> which exposed reading circles in Egypt to their style and subject matter and encouraged the publication of Egyptian short stories, thus granting the genre increased visibility as a form of national and "modern" relevance; and, on the other hand, providing artistic inspiration and practical modes of integrating and nativizing the Russians' literary devices into existing Egyptian literary contexts.<sup>206</sup> It helped that the short story shared critical characteristics with "traditional" literary forms in Egypt, like oral storytelling, poetry and the *maqāma*; the latter of which is often considered its predecessor, though this perspective tends to conflate the genres' distinct literary histories and trajectories. Nonetheless, the short story perfectly embodied the dichotomous polarities between "tradition" and "modernity" that it was adopted to reconcile in the service of social change and the establishment of a "modern" Egyptian literary form, or ' *adab qaṣāṣī qawmī* (national fictional literature). Rather than pointing towards an already-conceived "imagined community,"<sup>207</sup> short literature published in press outlets was tasked with helping to shape an un-seeable future; a new Egyptian social and political reality different to that which currently existed. As a compact prose form, the short story was the most feasible for inclusion in periodicals, dailies, and journals, and it was also the most direct, barring only non-fictional journalistic and essay forms. It thus subverted the

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<sup>203</sup> According to Sabry Hafez, the first stage included reading from French, American, Italian, and English authors and was mainly theoretical in focus (ibid.). In reference to writers of the *nahda* more generally, Richard Jacquemond says, "In the spirit of eclecticism that characterized the period, they thought at first that in order to establish a national literature it would be enough to assimilate European literary forms and techniques and give them an indigenous content," and cites Mohammed Husayn Haykal's series of essays on *al-adab al-qawmi* in the 1920s as examples of the push in this direction. See: Jacquemond *Conscience of the Nation*, pp. 10-2.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> El-Desouky, *The Intellectual and the People in Egyptian Literature and Culture*, p. 24. For more information on *al-Fajr*, see: Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, pp. 217-9.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. pp. 368-9.

<sup>207</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

restrictions placed on those latter forms because, as fiction, it possessed the ability to create and imagine that which did not already exist.

Sabry Hafez calls “Ḥadīth al-qaryah” (Village Small Talk, 1929) by Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Lāshīn (1894-1954) the first mature, distinctly Egyptian short story. Hafez’s look at the story underlines the influence of European writers and techniques, especially the Russians’, which the New School members readily acknowledged. The use of social realism as a means of conveying truthfulness, or *ṣidq*, and Lāshīn’s techniques that help him to achieve that mimetic vision, however, are distinctly Egyptian. In a subsequent, full-length book on the Egyptian short story, Hafez engages in a prolonged discussion of the particularities of Egyptian realism.<sup>208</sup> He points to the fact that, in Egyptian literature, realism is especially difficult to pinpoint for its overlapping with all other manner of artistic approaches, which in European traditions are delineated as historical epochs – chronological markers of the development of a particular tradition or genre – that do not exist to nearly such a degree in early modern Egyptian literary genres like the short story and novel. This is due in large part to the degree of experimentation and influence of different European and Egyptian and Arab traditions on early modern Egyptian literature, which came all at once and influenced different writers and stories in widely varying degrees, as well as the influence of traditional Egyptian literary forms which are located very much outside of such European classifications altogether. In *Quest*, Hafez goes to some lengths to delineate the multifaceted layers of realism as a literary epoch and then as a broader concept, gradually narrowing the discussion down to its relevance with regard to Arabic – and in this case, Egyptian – literature. In particular, Hafez emphasizes the centrality of realizing a certain spirit or degree of faithfulness to a localized reality through literary means (through written language) as an expression of the deepest level of knowledge and understanding. Therefore, realism is conceived as a form of radical possibility; not a mere trapping of the world with words, but rather a means by which to create a new reality that draws on aspects of the material world, but remains different from it.<sup>209</sup>

Chapter Five will expand upon Lāshīn’s accomplishment with regard to Egyptian literary realism in terms of aesthetics, but for now suffice it to say that, despite the inroads made with the New School’s realistic short story, it nonetheless fell short of

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<sup>208</sup> “Chapter Two: The Realistic Short Story” in Sabry Hafez, *The Quest for Identities*, pp. 68-198.

<sup>209</sup> Hafez, *The Quest for Identities*, p. 88.

embodying the revolutionary spirit the New School hoped for – this is true not only for Lāshīn’s story, but also for his contemporaries. One of the most significant problems concerned the issue of narrative voice and perspective, which posited the stories’ protagonists as apart from the communities in which they are engaged, lending a patronizing, hierarchical aspect to their attempts to “bring” their fellow citizens to modernity, or to allow for it to happen, which is compounded by a dismissive complacency regarding representations of the Egyptian lower class, who are represented as the impediments to progress. Recognizing this problem, Yahya Haqqī (1905-1992) set about rectifying it by acknowledging the arrogance of the intellectual classes and conceding certain aspects of Egyptian modernity as also existing within traditional belief systems, for example in his story “Qandīl Umm Hāshem” (The Saint’s Lamp, 1944). In the process, however, he expands the short story’s length<sup>210</sup> to account for dual perspectives and to establish the polarities of Ismail’s experiences. Although social realism was proving particularly successful in the novel of the time, short story writers struggled to make it work within the recalcitrant borders of short narrative.

The task at hand was to embody the Egyptian lived experience and the Egyptian imaginary in a realistic way within the short story; to implicitly tap into that which was already there through a literary medium that required brevity. Yūsuf Idrīs emerged in the early 1950s as a writer of a particularly varied background, for whom the concept of *amāra* was an engrained aspect of his existence (see Chapter Five). Idrīs saw *amāra* as a way of tapping into Egyptian reality from within the Egyptian collective experience.

The larger trajectory of Idrīs’ career constitutes a prolonged attempt to figure *amāra* as a textuality of the short story. Like Haqqī before him, he found it easier to embody in the theater, on stage, where the use of the colloquial was more readily accepted and the use of material objects in the form of props was able to communicate non-verbal meanings that would resonate with the imaginary of the Egyptian people. As Nadīm had done in previous century, Idrīs began using the Egyptian colloquial and varied dialects in his short stories. El-Desouky says, “To achieve his visions, Idris took Mahfouz’s formally accessible style to daring levels, effectively forging a unique style and point of view that is ‘empathetic’, lying between first-person and third-person, and is signaled in syntactic transitions in the multilayered registers of language.”<sup>211</sup> These

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<sup>210</sup> “Qindīl Umm Hāshem” has been published as a novel, a novella, and as a short story as part of a collection.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

registers manifested in Idrīs' revolutionary use of the vernacular in his dialogues,<sup>212</sup> which communicated dense amounts of information and symbolism about class, geography, gender, and social status without the need for explicit or prolonged explanation. El-Desouky continues:

This style [of writing dialogue in colloquial registers] made not only for powerful characterization but also, and more aesthetically crucial, for powerful resonance in the short story itself, with Idrīs effectively achieving his own version of Joyce's epiphanies.<sup>213</sup>

Idrīs defended his use of the vernacular in the face of criticism, saying, "in my writings I stick to the rules of life, not to those of grammar."<sup>214</sup> Yet, aside from his use of the colloquial, Idrīs made no concerted attempts to revolutionize literary language, instead firmly rooting himself and his expression in the language of the people. A significant part of this was gleaning *amāra* from within the fundamentals of narrative, plot, and symbolism, which would prove to be a far more difficult task. Chapter Five will explore how Idrīs engaged in a prolonged struggle to subvert the hierarchical, intensely individualistic aspects of the short story – legacies of its Euro-American initiations – in order to develop an aesthetics of *amāra* in the short story, and thereby not only finally Egyptianizing it, but also turning it into a language of Egyptian modernity.

#### Iib. Mythology: The creation of a new narrative discourse

In the mid-1950s with the commencement of the Cuban Revolution, a Pan-Latin American literary "moment" began emerging that would come to be called the Boom, which included Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Julio Cortázar,

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<sup>212</sup> Idrīs' use of the vernacular in his writing was controversial and sparked debates related to anxieties about the use of colloquial in written mediums, which had, until that time, been mainly the purview of the educated and elite classes. Tāhā Husain, Idrīs' mentor and one of the most respected men of letters in Egypt in 20<sup>th</sup> century, chided Idrīs' use of the colloquial publicly in his preface to the second edition of Idrīs' *Gumhūriyyat Farahāt* (Farahāt's Republic, 1956), saying, "How often our young writers mistakenly believe that in order to depict the reality of life they should make the characters of their books speak the language of the street and the coffee-houses." Cited and translated in P.M. Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs: A Modern Egyptian Author*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981) pp. 114-15. See Kurpershoek pp. 114-24 for an extended description of this exchange, as well as Idrīs' linguistic controversies and prescriptions.

<sup>213</sup> El-Desouky, *The Intellectual and the People*, p. 30.

<sup>214</sup> K. ash-Shināwī, "at-Tabīb al-fannān," *al-Akhhbār* (24 Aug. 1954) p. 8, as cited in Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 114.

among others. The Boom constituted something of a renaissance in Latin American literature because it announced what seemed to be an entirely new trajectory in Latin American narrative. Its most persistent trope showed up as a kind of mythology, with a pronounced preoccupation with the idea of origins and the impossibility of writing. Though it has come to be associated strongly – almost to the point of being synonymous - with magical realism and surrealism, those were just a couple of the tools Boom writers used to reconceive Latin American modernity through an incorporation of the continent's origins that had been lost to centuries of colonialism and the historicization of knowledge it had produced. In this way, mythologizing became a way for Boom writers to write against predominant conceptions of Latin American literary history and Latin American modernity up to that point. In the case of Argentina, it was the way in which Cortázar – Argentina's representative Boom writer – challenged the pronounced privileging of European conception of modernity as it had manifested in Argentine literature since it began emerging in its modern form. That is where this section will begin, building on section IIb's description of the social debates occurring in post-independence Argentina, in order to contextualize the short story's emergence in that country, before delving further into the Boom and its mythology of writing.

The prevailing trope of Argentine literary discourse in the early nineteenth century, as Latin American literature began emerging in written prose form for the first time since the European conquests, was premised upon a political disunity encapsulated in the struggle between the Federalists and Unitarians, articulated by Sarmiento as "*civilización y barbarie*." The turn from colonial documents, known as *cartas de relación*, to prose fiction was a result of the political atmosphere under the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas in Argentina, under whom numerous intellectuals and writers had gone into either forced or voluntary exile. They increasingly masked their opinions behind a veil of fictionalization in novels and short stories.

The *Asociación de Mayo* (May Association), formed in 1840, played a significant role in fictionalizing political discourse and establishing the close, nearly indistinguishable relationship between artistic – including literary – production as a means of political and intellectual discourse and a means of achieving power. This was true in Latin America more broadly; in Argentina, the May Association's means of political discourse meant a conflation of the roles of creative writer, intellectual, and

political figure.<sup>215</sup> The result is that, “Intellectuals in Latin America, particularly writers, have contributed to the political arena since the time of the Foundation of the Nation.”<sup>216</sup> The May Association was made up of Unitarian intellectuals, many of whom were in exile in other countries from the Rosas regime; important members included its founder, Esteban Echeverría (1805-1851), and future Argentine president, Sarmiento. The group’s aims were laid out in a manifesto written by Echeverría called the *Dogma socialista* (The Socialist Doctrine, 1846). Dedicated to Argentina’s youth, the Doctrine, which is the culmination of previously issued doctrines,<sup>217</sup> lays out what the Association of May deems necessary for the achievement of a perceived progressive, modern Argentine state, including the nature of legislation and the “emancipación del espíritu Americano”<sup>218</sup> [“emancipation of the American spirit”].

Two of the fictional texts to emerge in line with the goals of the May Association were written by Echeverría and Sarmiento, and these texts are considered foundational not only with regard to modern Argentine identity, but also with regard to Latin American literature. Echeverría wrote what is acknowledged to be Argentina’s first fully realized, modern short story, called “El matadero” (The Slaughterhouse<sup>219</sup>), in the 1930s.<sup>220</sup> The story is something of a fable, using animal imagery to criticize the Federalists and outline the moral righteousness of the Unitarians, the party to which Echeverría belonged. Echeverría wrote “El matadero” while in exile in Uruguay during the Rosas regime.<sup>221</sup> About a decade after Echeverría wrote “El matadero,” Sarmiento published his seminal text *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* (Facundo: Civilization and

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<sup>215</sup> Angel Rama has been an influential figure in articulating the role of the written word – and those who write it – in forming Latin American societies, referring to the intersection of urbanization and state power as negotiated thought he written word as the “lettered city.” See: Angel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Hanover: Ediciones del Norte, 1984).

<sup>216</sup> Maria Odette Canivell, “The Crisis of the Intellectual? Nation Building, Intellectuals and Political Contributions in Europe and Latin America: A Comparative View” a paper from *INTER: A European Cultural Studies Conference in Sweden*, organized by the Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden (ACSIS) (Norrköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 11-13 June 2007) Accessed 13 June 2016, <<http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/025/018/ecp072518.pdf>>.

<sup>217</sup> Including *El dogma socialista a la juventud Argentina* (1837) and an earlier version of the Doctrine published in 1839.

<sup>218</sup> Esteban Echeverría, “Dogma socialista” in ed. Carlos Casavalle, *Obras completas de Esteban Echeverría* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta y Librería de Mayo, 1873) p. 165.

<sup>219</sup> The literal translation is “The Slaughter Yard,” or “The Slaughtering Grounds,” by which title the story is also known.

<sup>220</sup> Possibly 1838 (see N. Lindstrom, “The Spanish American Short Story from Echeverría to Quiroga,” 1983), decades prior to its much later 1971 publication.

<sup>221</sup> He died in Montevideo, Uruguay the year before Rosas was overthrown.

Barbarism,<sup>222</sup> 1845), whose very title encompasses the prevailing binary discourse of the time as honed through the *Asociación de mayo*. *Facundo* is considered perhaps the single most prominent foundational text concerning Argentine national identity, Argentine literary history, and the literary history of Latin America more generally. This is owed in part to the fact of the text itself transcending generic classification, being at once “a sociological study of Argentine culture, a political pamphlet against the dictatorship of Juan Manuel Rosas, a philological investigation of the origins of Argentine literature, a biography of the provincial *caudillo* Facundo Quiroga, Sarmiento’s autobiography, a nostalgic evocation of the homeland by a political exile, [and] a novel based on the figure of Quiroga,”<sup>223</sup> and I would add to this that it is also something of a travelogue and an identity-making document.

Similar to Echevarría, Sarmiento wrote *Facundo* while in exile in Chile from the Rosas regime. “Facundo” refers to Juan Facundo Quiroga, a federalist *caudillo*, whose life and deeds provide allegorical purpose in Sarmiento’s painting of the countryside as a source of barbarism and a breeding ground for warlords, as he considers both Facundo and Rosas. By contrast, the city is painted as a civilizing place, with Sarmiento himself, as both narrator and main character, portrayed as embodying the ideal outcome for Argentine citizens and leaders who embrace the urban influence. Quiroga’s story ends when he is assassinated on the road, apparently by henchmen of Rosas, giving way to commentary by Sarmiento concerning the ills of Argentine society – American barbarism – and propounding his vision for the future, embodied in a European and urban ideal, explicitly juxtaposing what he views as the civilization of France against the barbarism of Argentina.

Apart from marking seminal moments in modern Argentine – and Latin American – literature, the above examples of “El matadero” and *Facundo* highlight aspects of the emerging Argentine literary imagination that would develop into something of a national aesthetics. The most obvious of these is the impulse towards political allegory, out of which modern Argentine literature was born; however, in the service of this task, at least initially, other aspects emerged. One was the eagerness with

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<sup>222</sup> The title has undergone numerous revisions and is available under a wide array of titles. The one I am using above is one of the simplest, used in a variety of recent editions, along with that of simply *Facundo*. Its original 1845 title was *Civilización i barbarie: Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga y aspect físico, costumbres y hábitos de la Republica Argentina*. For a more detailed discussion, see: Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive*, p. 98.

<sup>223</sup> González Echevarría, *Myth & Archive*, p. 97.

which both Echeverría and Sarmiento used fiction as a means of distorting facts in the service of painting powerful imagery that would appeal to Unitarian sentiment. For example, without having ever visited the Argentine *pampas*, Sarmiento writes of them with clarity, drawing the non-urban peoples of Argentina as foreigners, even going so far as to repeatedly refer to them as “American Bedouins” and “Arabs” and the *pampas* as being like that of a Middle Eastern desert. Thus, he treats rhetoric as equal to experience, and as a valid stand-in for any kind of subjective “fact” or “truth” based in experience. He treats his conceptions of foreign lands similarly at times, as well as the lives of those he names, including Quiroga. Thus, Sarmiento creates an aesthetic that surpasses the strictly allegorical and that conflates fact and fiction into a creative type of nation-building document.

Another factor that emerges from these texts is the extent to which European thought and literature informed the Argentine literary aesthetics. Indeed, in the warring discourse of “civilization and barbarism,” European culture and tradition was drawn as the epitome of the former, something to aspire to, and a guiding light in the creation of a national identity. This idea was compounded by the colonial history of the country. Equally important in this discourse was the sharp turn away from considerations of “indigenous” culture, which included those of Mesoamerica as well as Spain. Both Echeverría and Sarmiento approached Argentine culture and society as a something to be created, and consciously built up – something that did not already exist - and this perspective was articulated explicitly in their *Socialist Doctrine*, which outlines the *Asociación de mayo*’s directives to Argentina’s youth and patriots to create laws, education systems, democracy, and social imperatives to achieve a society that encapsulates what they articulate as God’s preference for progress, encapsulated in European systems and institutions.<sup>224</sup>

Further, “exile” appears as something of a figure in itself in these works. There is the obvious fact that they were written by authors in exile, however the aesthetic conveyance goes deeper than that. Indeed, it might be argued that the most persistent social scenario driving Argentine literary production is that of exile. Situated alongside powerful political currents, exile creates a scenario of persistent distance, in geography, in body, and in psychology. It is a scenario of alienation in which one’s reality becomes fragmented, aided by one’s own imagination and the written word in the form of books,

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<sup>224</sup> Echeverría, “Dogma socialista,” p. 165.

newspapers, and journals. For many Argentines, and particularly the writing class of Unitarians, who were ethnically European or *mestizo*, this resulted in a kind of double exile in which Argentina was considered the Fatherland and Europe the Motherland.

The above aspects were presented disparately and inconsistently in Echeverría's and Sarmiento's writings, serving primarily as a means of achieving a political message; however they were be transformed in the poetry and fiction of Borges into a powerfully cohesive and expansive literary aesthetics. Vitally, Borges managed to do this using the short story as his primary prose vehicle. Through it, he loosened what had been to that point a traditional use of fiction as political allegory, and instead began a sustained engagement with texts, histories, and ideas in which the allegorical threads were less obviously delineated. Yet, one aspect of Sarmiento's style that seemed to have a deep impact on Borges' was the penchant for playing with the idea of factuality,<sup>225</sup> and in this he was more ambitious than Sarmiento, playing with "facts" that were less obviously subjective, particularly the written word. Like Sarmiento, Borges also played with genre, writing short stories that closely resembled other forms, like essays, biographical insights, or even poems. Further, in a manner, Borges' preference for short prose takes the disunity of *Facundo* almost to its logical extreme in his embrace of the cycle. This meant that he freed himself up from the restrictions of an extended metaphor bound within the confines of a single narrative trajectory.

One of the important questions that was gaining momentum in Borges' early career was the question of European influence, particularly in light of the prominently ethnic European make up of Argentina and Argentine writers' penchant for spending significant time based in Europe. Further, the topics of Argentine writing, particularly in Borges' writing, dealt unabashedly with European historical, philosophical, literary, and other cultural texts and "traditions." In a now famous 1951 essay addressing the topic of *el escritor argentino y la tradición* [the Argentine writer and tradition], tackling what was perhaps the greatest literary question mark in Latin America in the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> For excellent discussions of this topic concerning *Facundo*, Borges, and in Argentine literature more generally, see: Ilan Stavans, "Introduction," to Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo: Or, Civilization and Barbarism*, trans. Mary Mann (London: Penguin Books, 2002); Diana Sorensen Goodrich, *Facundo and the Construction of Argentine Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Sergio Waisman, "Jorge Luis Borges's Partial Argentine Ulysses: A Foundational (Mis-)Translation," in *TTR : traduction, terminologie, redaction*, vol. 19, no. 2 (éruudit.org: 2006, pp. 37-51) <<https://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/2006/v19/n2/017823ar.pdf>>; Sergio Gabriel Waisman, *Borges in Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005).

century: that of *what* history, *whose* history, and *how* history constitute(s) Argentine literary and cultural identity. He is somewhat flippant about the question that plagues so many others. He says, “Creo que podemos contestar fácilmente y que no hay problema en esta pregunta. Creo que nuestra tradición es toda la cultura occidental, y creo también que tenemos derecho a esta tradición, mayor que el que pueden tener los habitantes de una o otra nación occidental”<sup>226</sup> [“I believe we can answer this question easily and that there is no problem here. I believe our tradition is all of Western culture, and I also believe we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have”<sup>227</sup>]. The thrust of his argument is that Argentine writers should not feel the need to restrict themselves to Argentine subjects, for whatever quality writing Argentine writers produce will necessarily come to constitute Argentine culture and literature. “Nuestro patrimonio es el universo”<sup>228</sup> [“Our patrimony is the universe”<sup>229</sup>], he says.

Borges’ articulation of the influence of Western culture and literature on Argentina’s expresses, on the one hand, a pragmatic outlook with regards to that patrimonial legacy, and on the other hand an outmoded consideration of Europe as the “source” of Latin American identity. Both of these signify the legacy of Sarmiento and the post-Independence Unitarian perspective that profoundly influenced Borges,<sup>230</sup> and also highlights the extent to which exile continued to be informed, albeit implicitly, through the century-old trope of civilization and barbarism. Borges’ literary approach looked outward toward the “universe” for engagement and creativity, even in creating imaginary worlds, like “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” However, Borges’ universe did not include Mesoamerica; indeed, though he took such glee in manipulating the written

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<sup>226</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “El escritor argentino y la tradición,” in *Discusión, Obras Completas 1923-1972* (Emecé Editores: Buenos Aires, 1974) p. 272.

<sup>227</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates, trans. James E. Irby (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000) p. 218.

<sup>228</sup> Borges, “El escritor argentino y la tradición,” p. 274.

<sup>229</sup> Borges, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” p. 219.

<sup>230</sup> Of course, the case is more complicated than mere cultural inheritance. Borges lived and studied in Europe for some years, like Cortázar and a vast number of other notable Latin American authors, speaking to an affinity that is more than simply historical in nature. Further, Borges was hugely influenced by his readings, which went deeply into Western philosophy and literature, but also extended to Eastern traditions, including, notably, *The One Thousand and One Nights* and the *Qur’an*. The point here is by no means to dismiss the multilayered nature of Borges’ literary influence, but rather to highlight a trajectory of outlook that included Borges and, after the Boom, came to be considered as “foundational” with regard to conceptions of modern Latin American and Argentine literature.

record through his fictions, his outlook nevertheless privileged the European as “source” and as the gateway to the modern.

The literary moment known as the Boom came about as a response to the shifting political situation in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Latin America – its dictatorships and, significantly, the Cuban Revolution. Latin American writers had played major roles in national narratives from the beginning (i.e. since independence from Europe and the emergence of modern literature), but the situation of post-WWII South America, particularly with regard to the neo-liberal colonialist role of the United States as practiced through corporations and state governments, highlighted anew the need to reckon with the questions of Latin America’s history, or perceived lack thereof. The “coming” of the Boom has been called “post-Borgesian” to denote its departure from the post-Independence political outlooks and influences that had so marked Argentine literature in the modern era up to that point.

It is partly owing to these departures that the Boom developed a reputation for “re-starting” history. In her work on Latin American “foundational fictions,” Doris Sommer describes the Boom’s “nearly pathological disavowal of its Latin American literary past”<sup>231</sup> in a section cleverly titled “An Archeology of the ‘Boom.’” She says,

When Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Julio Cortázar, among others, apparently burst onto the world literary scene of the 1960s and 1970s, they gave the impression that nothing really notable preceded them in Latin America. That impression was reinforced at home by a regional euphoria created, in part, by Castro’s triumph in 1959. Revolution promised immediate liberation after the frustrations and disappointments with the gradual evolutionism of older liberal projects. Together with the mass consciousness industries that spread the celebratory mood, the new politics produced an inflated belief that Latin America had finally come of age. It had finally begun to overcome economic dependency by naming it, and to formulate a cultural independence by cannibalizing the range of European traditions, turning them into mere raw material in purposefully naïve American hands. Believing that the new literature, known as the Boom, had *invented* a truly proper language, it seemed that the Adamic dream had come true. Latin Americans could finally (re)name the world and, in doing so, name themselves. Caliban could at last possess his own kingdom.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Santiago Colás, *Postmodernity in Latin America: The Argentine Paradigm* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994) p. 26.

<sup>232</sup> Author’s italics. Doris Sommer, “Irresistible Romance: The Foundational Fictions of Latin America,” in ed. Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990, edition year 2013, pp. 71-98) p. 71. There is a modified version of this section on the

In consideration of Sommer's articulation, the Boom's impulse to recreate a new language, a "new man," and a new society is what drove the narrative and aestheticism of its epic novels, like García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (One Hundred Years of Solitude, 1967), Fuentes' *Muerte de Artemio Cruz* (The Death of Artemio Cruz, 1962), Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros* (The Time of the Hero<sup>233</sup>, 1963), and especially Cortázar's *Rayuela* (Hopscotch, 1963). Santiago Colás points to the Boom's utopian impulse, as conveyed through these epics, as the source of their unraveling. "Both eventually generated an internal contradiction between, on the one hand, the *purity* each required and declared realized of its new social space, of its new man, the *totality* each demanded and proclaimed of its break with materially and spiritually impoverished past, and, on the other hand, the *partiality* of what they actually realized."<sup>234</sup> But for Colás, the unraveling, or rather, the site of such contradictions or "impurities," is precisely where the Latin American postmodern is located.

There was a powerful pull at this time to find "beginnings." The nation-building preoccupations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century literary establishment had worked towards a conception of modernity that privileged the post-colonial, post-Independence nation-state. In so doing, the foundational writers, like Echeverría, Sarmiento, and even Borges, looked to Europe as a guiding light for their own potential modernity, leaving behind the unknown and unimagined pre-colonial Mesoamerican civilizations, whose history seemed irrelevant to such considerations. However, the end of WWII and the rocket-like ascendancy of the United States set off, or rather accelerated, North American involvement in Latin American countries through trade agreements, political pressure and interference, and corporate overreaching that had pronounced and frequently detrimental impacts on economic growth and cultural and political freedoms. The neo-colonial situation in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Latin America, and the relentless resistance to it through social and political channels, created an altogether new scenario for Latin American writers, most of whom had run afoul of their local governments,

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Boom in Sommer's book, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (University of California Press: 1991, paperback edition 1993).

<sup>233</sup> The literal translation of the title would be "The city and the dogs."

<sup>234</sup> Colás, *Postmodernity in Latin America*, p. 27.

including Cortázar, who went into voluntary exile in France in 1952, where he remained until his death in 1984.<sup>235</sup>

The idea of “return” to an elusive past through the present is transcendent in Boom literature, and constitutes something of a foundational trope in Boom myth-making. In *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative*, Roberto González Echevarría proposes an alternative literary history of the Latin American novel, one that takes as its point of departure the assertion that “non-literary forms of discourse are much more productive and determining than those it has with its own tradition, with other forms of literature, or with the brute factuality of history.”<sup>236</sup> From here, he draws intimate connections between the development of a distinct Latin American narrative and contemporaneous “discourse” of scientific discovery and an increasingly anthropological imaginary, narrativized through an origin in *cartas de relación*. Here, citing Alejo Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos* (The Lost Steps, 1953) and Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad*, the novel becomes an embodiment of what González Echevarría refers to as “the Archive,” which he describes as “the legal repository of power and knowledge” from which the Latin American novel sprung.<sup>237</sup> Speaking of *Los pasos perdidos*, he says, “Just as the narrator-protagonist of the novel discovers that he is unable to wipe the slate clean and make a fresh start, so the book, in searching for a new, original narrative, must contain all previous ones, and in becoming an Archive return to the most original of those modalities.”<sup>238</sup> This process of archive and return is articulated through a conceptualization of myth-making, as allegorized through the examples of Carpentier’s and García Márquez’s exemplary novels cited above.

In a closer look at the archival aspects of narrative of *Cien años de soledad*, González Echevarría seizes on the figure of Melquíades, whose room in the Buendía household is characterized as a kind of library, or archive, containing parchments in other tongues whose cumulative comprehension is presumed to encompass or be revelatory of an as-yet elusive “truth.”

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<sup>235</sup> France, and particularly Paris, has been a place of significance in Latin American literature, as a location of freedom and community for writers, as a site of artistic inspiration, and as a figure of the Latin American imaginary. See: Marcy E. Schwartz, *Writing Paris: Urban Topographies of Desire in Contemporary Latin American Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); and Jason Weiss, *The Lights of Home: A Century of Latin American Writers in Paris* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>236</sup> González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive*, p. ix.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.

Old beyond age, enigmatic, blind, entirely devoted to writing, Melquíades stands in for Borges, the librarian and keeper of the Archive. [...] Planted in the middle of the special abode of books and manuscripts, a reader of one of the oldest and most influential collections of stories in the history of literature, Melquíades and his Archive stand for literature; more specifically, for Borges' kind of literature: ironic, critical, a demolisher of all delusions [...] <sup>239</sup>

The Archive, then, is like Borges' study. It stands for writing, for literature, for an accumulation of texts that is no mere heap, but an *arché*, a relentless memory that disassembles the fictions of myth, literature and even history. <sup>240</sup>

Several of Borges' most notable stories ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius;" "El milagro secreto;" *El Aleph*; and "La muerte y la brújula") are given a nod at the end of the novel upon Aureliano's translation of Melquíades' manuscript, <sup>241</sup> implicitly, as aspects of the story's intertextuality. It is but one of the ways that García Márquez enfolds the substantiveness of Latin American storytelling into the novel to create myth, as Carpentier had done before him. In this way, independent stories and storytelling techniques, themselves shot through with intertextual threads of their own being and time, are brought together to tell a story of creation; the beginning of "modern" Latin America, whose past, as it has commonly been perceived, has been severed from its present by centuries of genocide, colonialism, and corporate dominations.

Lois Parkinson Zamora modifies and builds on González Echevarría's archival focus in her book *The Usable Past: The Imagination of History in Recent Fictions of the Americas*, which includes literature of the United States as well as Latin America. Though she falls short of rejecting his suggestion that novelists are Archivists, and, like anthropologists, stand outside their own cultures in order to capture them, she nevertheless contests the totality of his theory, saying that, "Whereas González Echevarría's metaphor of the Archive is useful in thinking about intertextual aspects of Latin American fiction, it is not useful when it comes to narrative modes with mythic aspirations."<sup>242</sup> She points to the tendency of certain Latin American works of fiction to elude "the European assumptions about history and literature that have created the very

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, *The Usable Past: The Imagination of History in Recent Fiction of the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 125.

Archive to which González Echevarría refers.”<sup>243</sup> And she describes, in particular, how this concept of the Archive privileges the written word over other forms of historical and narrative influence, like oral and audiovisual. She asserts that consideration of an Ancestral impulse, “inspired by forgotten languages,”<sup>244</sup> would fill this void; the “Ancestral” constituting the “ancestral presences, the echoes and antiphonies and murmurs of buried belief systems that still resonate in contemporary culture.”<sup>245</sup> Therefore, “An adequate interpretive paradigm, then, must include the Ancestral as the necessary complement to the Archival,”<sup>246</sup> in order to capture Latin America’s usable past.

For Parkinson Zamora, Borges’ exploration of infinity – a major recurring theme of his work – in his masterwork short story/novella *El Aleph* is representative of her conception of the usable past – the Archival and the Ancestral, together. In particular, Borges’ lists – seeming inventories of things, places, and ideas – belies the Ancestral in favor of a structurally Archival, scientific form, yet a closer look at these lists shows them to be metaphors for endless associations, ideas, and histories, thereby encompassing not only written, textual history, but also their “ghostly residents.”<sup>247</sup> A salient image – “I saw the delicate bone structure of a hand...I saw the rotted dust and bones that had once deliciously been Beatriz Viterbo”<sup>248</sup> – concisely conveys the narrative possibility of Parkinson Zamora’s thesis. She concludes,

Borges did, of course, create something new by virtue of his reconstitution of the very idea of newness as return, repetition, and recuperation; for Borges, originality is (already) inscribed in “universal History.” Aware of his oblique relations to European and American traditions – to “universal History”<sup>249</sup> – the Argentine writer obeyed the impulse, both Archival and Ancestral – to conserve and include it all, magically, at once.<sup>250</sup>

Each of these modes of inquiry – the Archival and the Ancestral – are articulated as modes for locating the novel as constitutive of the historical and mythological in Latin

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid. p. 125.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid. p. 124.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid. p. 125.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid. p. 135.

<sup>248</sup> Borges excerpted in Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> A nod to Lukács.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid. p. 136.

American literature. Parkinson Zamora's articulation of the relevance of Borges in a study on the novel is interesting, particularly with regard to the justification that his relevance derives from his ability to conserve all aspects of "universal History" "magically, at once." Vitaly, Parkinson Zamora's articulation of Borges' contribution with regard to universal history undermines the idea that Boom literature – and its mythologizing impulse – were a-historical, or even post-Borgesian.

Very little attention has been paid to the Boom short story; one might question if indeed a Boom short story even exists. While many Boom writers wrote short stories, they have always been secondary to or rendered invisible in the wake of the Boom novel. The Boom's epic novels form the site of its delineation as a movement – socially, politically, and in terms of its narrative. It is also partly for this focus that *Rayuela* has, to a degree, eclipsed Cortázar's short fiction in terms of critical attention. However, while the Boom novels were undertaking the notably utopian task of writing a new society, the "Boom" short story was a site of extraordinary experimentation, a place for playing out utopian and not-so-utopian motivations and outcomes; inspired by the same political and historical questions as the novel, but without such extended commitment to an ideal vision; in other words, without the self-consciousness of the novel. Many of the short stories produced during the Boom are artistically self-indulgent compared to their novelistic counterparts. However, the artistic impulse was not so much the 19<sup>th</sup> century bohemian "art for art's sake" as it was a mode of revealing the social through linguistic renderings of material objects and figures. This was as much to do with the prevalence that magical realism and surrealism were achieving through Latin American literature as it was a method of grappling with the historical questions that so far had remained nameless.

Julio Cortázar was the only Boom writer whose literary career focused almost exclusively (at that time) on the short story. Unlike Idrīs in Egypt, Cortázar's vision did not start out as a concerted attempt to figure an Argentine or even Latin American modernity, but rather constituted an intensive psychologically-driven mythopoesis that could be read as deeply personalized political allegory. Over time, Cortázar became more concerned with modernity as a collective phenomenon to be realized through a universalizing humanism and the values of socialism. Nevertheless, his first three collections of stories provide a consistent, persistent cycle of myth-making, where the psychological represents both the Archival and the Ancestral. And despite his Borges-like assertions of universality, Cortázar's cycle engages deeply with the issues of Latin

American – and Argentine, though less explicitly so – modernity. He uses the psychological as a means of writing a mythopoesis that accounts for the “lost history” of Mesoamerica, portraying it as coexistent with and constitutive of the modern. Chapters Six and Seven will explore the aesthetic preoccupations of his task.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to concretize the broadly conceived ideas from the first two chapters, on the one hand, and to pivot the focus of this study towards the topics of analytical focus to come, on the other. At the center of both of these discussions has been the persistence of Egypt’s and Argentina’s respective colonial legacies, which have made the struggle for modernity a fraught endeavor. The short story emerged in each case as a tool for figuring the an organic modernity, with *amāra* and mythology emerging in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as means by which Idrīs and Cortázar harnessed and critiqued existing discourses. The second half of the chapter gave a history of those ideas as they emerged over time. Cumulatively, this chapter begins the task of delineating the prolonged struggle on behalf of writers from the global south to disentangle the short story from its Euro-American expressions in the service of localized realities, and particularly the struggle for modernity to emerge out of societies in transition.

In Egypt, the *nahda* was prompted not only by the “moment of encounter” with Napoleon’s troops at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but also as a response to the colonial threat posed by Britain and France. The short story did not emerge as a foreignly adopted literary genre out of the blue that would be arbitrarily made into an Egyptian literary form; instead, I emphasize that the short story emerged out of a prolonged *discourse of ideas* – both literary and otherwise – that were reshaping Egyptian reality and cultural production, including literature, in the fight for its own conception of modernity. The short story had been simmering beneath the surface of Egyptian narrative for a while before it finally started taking concrete shape with the concerted efforts of the New School. However, it still required a prolonged struggle with the plot, structure, language, and aesthetics of the form to make it capable of embodying Egyptian reality and serving as a tool of social reform. Idrīs’ genius was his ability to recognize *amāra* as the underlying social impulse of the prolonged struggle, from the beginnings of the *nahda*, to figure Egyptian modernity. Idrīs reconigzed *amāra* as an

expression of Egyptian modernity, and his job was that of revealing the modernity that was already there. Idrīs began his own prolonged struggle of harnessing it from a social impulse into an aesthetics of social concern.

Conversely, Latin America served as ground zero for the making of European conceptions of modernity, which would later pose such a threat to other colonized nations and those threatened with colonial aspirations. Three hundred years of the European presence in Latin America had, by the “end,” left more persistent legacies stemming from the racialization of the population as a method of control, and from which many colonial institutions grew and persisted into post-Independence Latin American countries. In Argentina, the struggle for modernity was encapsulated in the “civilization and barbarism” discourse, where civilization constituted Europe as the site of modernity. The short story emerged as a tool of this discourse, privileging the Unitarian perspective. The emergence of the Boom generation in the 1950s, spurred on by the Cuban Revolution, marked the beginning of a Pan-American narrative, encompassed in a mythologizing impulse, preoccupied with addressing the repercussions of colonial and neo-colonial projects and attempting to refigure a lost Mesoamerican reality into conceptions of the modern; in short, the Boom aimed to overturn the social and literary discourse that had dominated post-Independence Latin American countries whose intellectual class took European conceptions of modernity not only as a given, but as a birth right. Julio Cortázar emerged as the only Boom writer who focused predominantly on the short story, and he began harnessing the recent works of psychology and psychoanalysis as means of writing a new mythology, a universal history that bridged precolonial realities with those of modern man.

In the succeeding Parts II and III I will delve further into *amāra* and mythology and their development through the short story into a visualizing language of the social harnessed to arrive at the modern. They will each pinpoint particular aesthetic patterns that Idrīs and Cortázar respectively employ to that end, thereby elucidating significant aspects of their aesthetics of social concern.

## PART TWO

YŪSUF IDRĪS:

### The Aesthetics of *Amāra* in a Three-Story Arc

وفى تقديري أن قصص يوسف إدريس وأدبه عامة هي محاولة مسئولة لكي يعرف الأمانة ويمتلكها، أي يعرف ويمتلك القانون الذي يتيح للشعب المصرى أن يتبوأ كرسية التاريخي الذي يحمله على كاهله طوال هذه السنين، وأن يصبح صاحب الأمر والنهي في النهاية<sup>251</sup>

[In my assessment, the stories of Yusuf Idris, and more generally his art, constitute an engaged attempt at figuring out the *amāra* and possessing it. That is, his is the attempt to recognize and master the law that enables the Egyptian people finally to claim the historical chair, the burden of which they have endured for ever so long, and to have the last word at the end.<sup>252</sup>]

Mahmoud Amin Al-‘Alim

#### I. An extended introduction

The previous chapter described a history of the concept of *amāra*, an Arabic word referring to the implicit knowledge of the people as conveyed through language, symbols, and situations. Although *amāra* emerged as a concept far before the short story was ever conceived in Egypt – at least in its “modern” form -, the two became partners in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the short story providing the closest thing to an ideal textual medium for the realization of a textual aesthetics of *amāra*. Indeed, one might even say that the short story emerged as the concretization of the history of that idea as it evolved throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, being catalyzed first by Egypt’s “moment of encounter” with French troops and then as a response to the colonial threat posed by Europe, spawning the *nahda*. What had begun as a broad call for social reformation in the country in order to conceive of an organic modernity, using new tools, including the scientific, from Europe, but also historically “native” tools (i.e. those related to the historical trajectory of the country and its cultural production, including Golden Age poetry, Islamic dictates, and Egyptian antiquities, etc.) towards that end, had begun, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to coalesce into a particular kind of

<sup>251</sup> Mahmoud Amin Al-‘Alim, *Arabu’un ‘aman min al-naqd al-tatbiqi (Forty Years of Applied Criticism)* (Cairo: Darl al-Mustaqbal al-‘Arabi, 1994) p. 106.

<sup>252</sup> Cited and translated in El-Desouky, *The Intellectual and the People*, p. 19.

social realism in literature borne out of that reformist impulse. The need to reform “old” forms of literature to make them relevant and informative regarding Egypt’s then-current sociality manifested powerfully in the theatrical works of Sannu‘, followed by Nadīm, who permeated his fictional works with colloquial dialects as a first order of reform, as well as portrayals of the Egyptian working and peasant classes. Although Nadīm’s stories are not considered in line with Egypt’s “modern” short story, he set the groundwork for its later formation into a distinctive literary form, and it is telling that the socially focused manner of his reformation efforts took shape primarily through short stories and the theater.

The theater has played a vital role in the development of the short story in Egypt. While it is beyond the scope of this work to explore this topic in much depth, it is nevertheless worth mentioning that many, if not most, of Egypt’s short story writers have also been playwrights, going at least back to Nadīm, whose work was profoundly influenced by Sannu‘’s plays. This is also true for many of the New School members, including Lāshīn and Haqqī, and it was also true for Yūsuf Idrīs. Many of the *ideas* and corresponding *aesthetic impulses* present in Egyptian theater *also* informed the Egyptian short story. Indeed, the theater proved immediately more successful in many cases toward expressing some of the aspects of sociality that were more difficult to convey through a purely textual medium, including *amāra*. Part of this was owed, no doubt, to the restrictiveness of language in Egyptian fiction, which was written almost exclusively in *fusha*. Nadīm had attempted to punch a hole in this practice; however, he did not manage to make writing in the colloquial an acceptable literary practice. It was not until Yūsuf Idrīs essentially picked up where Nadīm left off in this regard, and did so with much success, that writing in the colloquial would truly begin taking hold as a literary practice outside of the theater. Another aspect of the theater that made it successful in conveying *amāra* was the ability to use visual symbolism – through body language, gestures, and props – as a way of conveying what in a text would remain invisible. Indeed, this is precisely what Egypt’s short story pioneers were aiming to accomplish in the short story – to visually convey through a textual medium that which made the theater so socially salient.

The New School looked to Russian social realism for tools and techniques to effectively tap into Egyptian reality, consciously experimenting with various ways of producing meaning in a way that would exploit and maximize the brevity of the short story. In other words, they sought to achieve a unity of impression in the short story

capable of communicating a reformist impulse. Symbolism became one way of achieving this - of communicating “much in little,” and also as a means of structural cohesion. However, they struggled to tap into the socially inherited knowledge of the Egyptian “people” effectively, never quite managing to escape the intellectual voice that sought to “bring” the people to modernity; indeed, some of the popular stories of this time provide apt allegories for that intellectual struggle for modernity. Nevertheless, the New School’s pioneering use of symbolism, which, for whatever its shortcomings, still managed to convey aspects what was at stake in the discourse surrounding Egypt’s struggle for modernity, proved a lasting and informative aesthetic starting point for the next generation of short story writers.

Yūsuf Idrīs was among that next generation, which is alternately called the 1950s generation and the ‘60s generation, and also included Naguib Mahfouz and Idwār al-Kharāṭ.<sup>253</sup> Idrīs seemed to implicitly grasp the nature of the problem facing the short story and also Egyptian social reality. As I will discuss shortly, Idrīs’ somewhat unique upbringing and subsequent experiences, which straddled vastly different strata of society, gave him access to an understanding of *amāra* as encompassing a shared experience and a shared fate. As the epigraph from al-‘Alim above conveys, Idrīs’ career largely came to constitute a struggle to figure *amāra* as a textual aesthetic language of the Egyptian short story. In so doing, he aimed to Egyptianize the short story – that is, imbue it with organically Egyptian modes of expression, including language, symbolism, structure, and narrative – but also use it as a tool for social reform. While these goals were very much in line with those who had gone before him, and indeed even throughout the *nahda*, what made Idrīs’ contribution unique was the implicit assumption undergirding his aesthetic choices that Egypt’s modernity was not something to be achieved or something to which the lower classes needed to be enlightened about or “brought to;” instead, Idrīs conceived of Egyptian modernity as something that already existed and only needed to be revealed. He viewed his ability to

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<sup>253</sup> The generation of the men of letters and the 1950s generation are sometimes considered as constituting a continuous moment of literary development in Egypt: “Rather than having been part of a succession of ‘schools’ or styles of thought, the different generations of intellectuals that have emerged since the first third of this century have actually had a sort of ‘simultaneous’ existence” (Alain Roussillon, “Intellectuels en crise dans l’Egypte contemporaine,” as quoted and translated in R. Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, p. 8). Nonetheless, it is important to note here that this generational grouping does not take into account differences in style or school of thought. While Mahfouz is predominantly writing within a realist tradition, al-Kharāṭ is a modernist.

encapsulate the implicit, often invisible or unseeable aspects of *amāra* within a narrative textuality as the realization of that revelation.

This was a steep goal. As the New School had experienced before him, the short story seemed to exhibit a natural inclination towards highly individualistic, sometimes alienating perspectives. This was part of the European and Russian legacy of the short story that the New School used as their point of departure for achieving an Egyptian expressiveness in the form. While the emergence of the Egyptian short story was owed to particularly Egyptian historical and social trajectories – as discussed in the previous chapter – when it finally emerged as a distinctive genre in Egypt, it was done so from its European model, where one of the outcomes of the Enlightenment was an evolving powerful individualism, not to mention anthropological and hierarchical perspectives with regards to class and race. Indeed, in Europe and America, it was precisely these transitional shifts with regard to their own conceptions of modernity – according to Eurocentric views, the *only* modernity – that had given way to the short story in those places. Idrīs recognized the need to peel back those layers and to evolve an aesthetics of *amāra* to use the short story to Egyptian ends. This meant infusing it with an aspect of collectivism that it was not immediately suited to accommodate, and *amāra* represented, as a pure concept, an encompassing collective impulse capable of speaking to Egyptians by exploiting, subverting, and manipulating aspects of language to “get at” the prevailing socially inherited knowledge of the Egyptian “people.” In order to free the modern short story from its European heritage, and from that particular worldview, Idrīs engaged in, to borrow Berger’s words, a “prolonged struggle” to effect his vision as an artist and the usage for which his art had been developed. “Single-handed he had to contest the norms of the art that had formed him. He had to see himself as a painter in a way that denied the seeing of a painter. This meant that he saw himself doing something that nobody else could foresee.”<sup>254</sup>

The following chapters will document elements of that struggle as manifested through aspects of Idrīs’ uses of symbolism. This is by no means an exhaustive study of Idrīs’ *amāra* aesthetics, but is intended to present an informative starting point, and along the way I will also mention other significant patterns in Idrīs’ work that would themselves be worthy of further study. I have particularly chosen to focus on Idrīs’ use of the light code, which was codified in the short story with the New School, and how

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<sup>254</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 110.

that light code eventually gave way to a heightened symbolic materiality. These elements are indicative of how Idrīs used and manipulated aspects of visibility and invisibility in order to communicate knowledge; how he used certain symbols for their abilities to “say much in little” by alluding to other, socially powerful aspects of Egypt’s modernizing discourses, especially regarding ownership, capitalism, the colonial threat and appropriation.

I will look at Idrīs’s career through three representative stories, “Abū al-Hawl,” “Qā‘ al-madīna,” and “Ḥammāl al-karāsī,” also mentioning other of this stories throughout where appropriate to highlight the larger patterns in his work and point to the greater relevancy and prevalence of the ideas herein. Indeed, these three stories are not intended as a definitive or restrictive corpus of Idrīs’ aesthetics of *amāra* but, hopefully, offer kernels of insight that open up more robust interpretative possibilities that include a broader look at his corpus. The first chapter will introduce the light code by looking at how it turns up in the stories of Lāshīn and Haqqī as a subversive symbolic language regarding Egyptian modernity. This will provide the foundation for looking at the story “Abū al-Hawl” from Idrīs’ early career. Its narrative and aesthetic similarities with Lāshīn and Haqqī’s stories serves as an entry point for exploring how Idrīs both built on aspects of the modernizing discourses that had preoccupied them, while also pointing to how he used the tools they pioneered to subvert some of the alienating aspects that had plagued their narratives. The second part of this chapter will use the story “Qā‘ al-madīna” as a pivot point, a milestone in Idrīs’ use of narrative that marks an evolution in his use of symbolism, conjoining a basic use of the light code with more material manifestations. Here we see him beginning to really exploit visibility and invisibility as an aesthetic trope of *amāra* by intersecting the light code with the idea of vision and blindness, and expanding that out into discourses of ownership and capitalism that were becoming increasingly urgent in Egypt in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The second chapter uses “Ḥammāl al-karāsī” as embodying a culmination of these elements, while also calling on the idea of “artifact” as described by Elliott Colla as an “actor” caught in the process of Europe’s and Egypt’s respective modernities.

Ia. A briefly sketched life: a personal biography of *amāra*

The short story is Yūsuf Idrīs' primary literary means of communicating a reconceived modernity, with *amāra* as his social and mimetic guide. However, his *positionality* as a writer and as an Egyptian is a precursor to both of these things, for Idrīs' lived experience occurred across many social divides that most Egyptians did not experience, usually being confined to one side of the divide or another. This aspect of his experience should not be used as a psychoanalytic means of interpreting his fiction, but it is insightful when considering how his position in life informed his general approach to the social issues of Egypt, for which he used the short story as a means of communication. This section will begin by briefly looking at aspects of Idrīs' life and positionality as a writer, which will lead directly in to his position as a modernist and the nature of that modernism, with *amāra* constituting a central aspect. In the section that follows this one, the discussion will lead into Idrīs' integration and critique of the discourses around Egypt's modernity and sociality, including antiquities and custodianship, and the use of the light code as a means of achieving an aesthetics of *amāra*, as they have been discussed up to now.

Growing up, Idrīs had the uniquely varied experiences of living in a wealthy household and then in a poor one, of experiencing life in a small village and then in a city, and of a multi-faceted career as a medical doctor, as a writer of fiction, as a social and political activist, and as a journalist. He was born on May 19, 1927 in the small Nile Delta village of al-Bairūm to a well-to-do family.<sup>255</sup> His father had attended Azhar University before becoming a self-made man as a senior official who governed large areas of land. When Idrīs turned five, he was required to go and live with his mother's impoverished family so that he could attend school, for there was no school within a reasonable distance of his parents' home. In a statement written in English to the journal *World Literature Today* dated November 15, 1983, Idrīs describes how his life changed in traveling the mere 25 miles from his family home to live with his grandmother:

I had come to one of the very poorest families in the village. Had I grown up since childhood in such a family environment, I would not have noticed the dreadful difference between this life of poverty and the life of comfort I had enjoyed in my father's house. However, it now seemed to me that I had gone down the social scale, from the rank and family status

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<sup>255</sup> Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 19.

of a crown prince to the level of the ordinary peasants and workers over whom I had been able to lord it in my previous home. [...] Deprived of my father's and mother's presence and protection, I found myself compelled to live with the ugly reality of poverty. All of us thirty people used to sleep together in a single large room [...] Everything repulsive and inhuman seemed to be gathered together in this small, totally dark room, unventilated except for a tiny hole somewhere in the ceiling.<sup>256</sup>

He further talks about what it was like attending school with his poverty plainly showing up in the clothes that he wore and aspects of his behavior. And he speaks about the alienation he felt as a result of being away from his parents, but also the alienation he felt concerning his position as a relatively privileged member of a his mother's family, of whom he was the very first to attend school. He refers to his family members as "strangers," while he recalls himself being called *khawāga*, or "foreigner" by other children in the village for being different.<sup>257</sup> Thus, the discourses regarding modernity and tradition – even in their most polarizing and alienating forms - found a very real and merged realization in Idrīs' lived experiences from his earliest childhood.

Idrīs names a penchant for constant daydreaming, his grandmother's storytelling, and applying himself as an exemplary student as means of survival and "escape" during the years spent with his mother's family, until he went away to Cairo for medical school.<sup>258</sup> During his time as a student he found solidarity with others like him who had also lead lives marked by intense suffering, and he became politically active. He says, "I devoted myself to the Nationalist movement against the British occupation of Egypt, thus joining hands with liberals throughout the world in their demands for freedom from poverty, tyranny, and misery."<sup>259</sup> His political awakening further lead him to the realization that his true calling was in writing, and particularly in the writing of short stories and plays, which became the means by which he endeavored to change the reality of his country.

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<sup>256</sup> Yūsuf Idrīs, "Yusuf Idris on Yusuf Idris," in ed. Roger Allen, *Critical Perspectives on Yusuf Idris* (Colorado Springs: Three Continents Press, 1994) p. 9.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid. pp. 11-13. Kurpershoek also reveals that, although Idrīs did not make friendships amongst his fellow pupils, he became close friends with an elderly crippled man named 'Abd as-Salām, who kept abreast of much gossip from the townswomen who confided in him and he was thus a well-spring of endless stories. The lasting result of this friendship was that, "Not only had [Idrīs'] budding talent for story-telling received fresh encouragement, but the period in Dumyāt with a man who had surmounted formidable physical handicaps also convinced him of the infinite resources of the human mind." See: Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, pp. 21-2.

<sup>259</sup> Idrīs, "Yusuf Idris on Yusuf Idris," p. 13.

Although an in-depth exploration of Idrīs' political motivations is beyond the scope of this work, the political atmosphere that attended his emergence as a writer is important in consideration of his authorial motivations. Idrīs, as well as the Egyptian left, was overjoyed at first when a military *coup d'état* overthrew the King and established Gamal Abd el-Nasser as the President of Egypt in July of 1952. However, relations soon soured when the new regime took to prosecuting members of the Communist Party, before eventually cracking down on others they perceived as opponents, which included Idrīs himself as a contributor to the left-wing magazine *at-Taḥrīr* and the daily *al-Miṣrī*. Idrīs was arrested and kept in prison for over a year from August 1954 until September 1955.<sup>260</sup> Upon his release he set about distancing himself from some of leftist organizations he had previously been an active member of, which also coincided with Nasser embarking on a course "which came closer to [Idrīs'] own nationalist and socialist views."<sup>261</sup> For some years thereafter, "Idrīs reconciled himself to the régime and eventually became one of its warmest defenders."<sup>262</sup> However, this relationship would experience many ups and downs, most especially following Egypt's catastrophic defeat to Israel in 1967, which will be revisited further on. All of this is to say that one of the most complex aspects of Idrīs' sociality was his relationship to national politics; it was not only a motivation for his writing, but also constituted one of the most powerful measuring sticks by which he perceived the progress of Egypt, or its lack thereof, with regard to the ends that he wished to achieve for it through his fiction.<sup>263</sup>

The social complexities of Idrīs' lived experiences perhaps preclude the possibility of his writing simplistic or one-sided narratives, and the infusion of the social and political into his work speaks to his commitment in integrating and harmonizing them.<sup>264</sup> Even in occupying a position as "intellectual" in adulthood, his position as a doctor kept him abreast of the lives of the varying social classes, while his own background informed a profound empathy of the realities of those lived experiences. All of this is important when considering his motivations as a writer, because for Idrīs, the social polarities inhered in the short story's – and the theater's –

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<sup>260</sup> Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, pp. 26-8.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.* p. 29.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>263</sup> See Kurpershoek for an in-depth study of Idrīs' political activities, personal political values, and their impact on his writing, both fiction and otherwise.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.* p. 51.

embodiment found realization in a personal, organic way. Possessing *amāra* thus became not a matter of perfecting a language “of the people” in order to win them over, or to critique their position in order to “bring them to” modernity; instead it provided a means of reconciling the dualities of his own existence, a self-reflexive mode of figuring the modern through a salient literary mimesis that recognized the modern as a revealing of *that which already exists*.

What is radical about his position is that he conceived of this modernity as already having an intuitive presence within the Egyptian people, from the wealthiest to the most destitute. Modernity for Idrīs was not something to be learned, or integrated, or borrowed, or adapted, but was instead an intuitive knowledge that would show Egyptians into a “future” of their own sensibilities, traditions, and ideas. *Amāra* for Idrīs was a mimetic guide by which he could re-introduce the Egyptian people to themselves, to elucidate the problems they faced within organically Egyptian scenarios.

Yet what he saw through his own experiences was a citizenry whose sensibilities of the modern were shrouded in varying degrees of mystification that had begun accumulating with Napoleon’s three years in Egypt and had continued throughout a century and a half of foreign intervention that had privileged European conceptions of modernity. Revealing the modern thus became a matter of making visible what had until then remained invisible, an uncovering of a truth, or *ṣidq*, by permeating that mystification. In one of the most comprehensive studies of Idrīs’ life and works, P.M. Kurpershoek remarks on the importance of truthfulness to Idrīs’ writing:

Idrīs holds that the quality of truthfulness (*ṣidq*) is of paramount importance to the real artist, i.e. he is to live in conformity with the values he propagates in his writings and moreover he must be at pains to convey a truthful picture of his visions to the reader. An artist endowed with these faculties, he says, is like a candle in the darkness, illuminating what hitherto had been hidden from the common man.<sup>265</sup>

Idrīs’ focus on the importance of *ṣidq* as a matter of revealing invisible truths recalls El-Desouky’s articulation of enacting *amāra*, in saying, “It is not simply a question of the people being made aware or brought to knowledge, but first and foremost *a recognition that the people already know and that they do indeed speak their knowing*, beyond a

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid. p. 52.

specified content or demand.”<sup>266</sup> In this way, *amāra* constitutes a realization of the modern. Achieving it therefore took on a heightened urgency for Idrīs, both as a continuation of the project of writing ‘*adab qaṣaṣī qawmī*’ that had begun with the New School through the short story, but also as an intervention in the modernizing, or the making modern, of Egyptian society, which had become more divisive as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, particularly in the wake of increasing foreign interventions and influences that created new kinds of economic and cultural tensions.

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<sup>266</sup> My emphasis. El-Desouky, *The Intellectual and the People*, p. 107.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Light Code as a Visualizing Textuality

“...style is not a decorative embellishment upon subject matter, but the very medium in which the subject is turned into art.”

David Lodge<sup>267</sup>

#### Introduction

This chapter will analyze stories from Lāshīn, Haqqī, and Idrīs through their uses of the “light code” – a metonymic use of lightness and darkness to convey meaning by calling on deep associations of the popular imagination, which also serves to add structure to stories and effect the all-important “unity of impression.” I will enter into the light code as it was used by the New School as a meta-language used to compound and complicate meaning as a point of comparison to mark Idrīs’ departure in using the light code as an evolution of an aesthetics of *amāra*, encapsulated in the trope of visibility and invisibility. Using “Ḥadīth al-qaryah” and “Qindīl Umm Hāshem” as comparative foundations will help me to then elucidate Idrīs’ contribution as he had begun conceiving it fairly early on in his career with “Abū al-Hawl.” I will emphasize some of the embedded aspects of short story narrative that Idrīs struggled against as conveyed through that story, but also supplemented through his own words, ideas, and conceptions. At the center of my analyses of stories in this chapter is the evolving trope of visibility and invisibility as indicators of knowledge and ignorance, and it is the assumed parallelisms of this relationship that I will begin to discuss Idrīs’ points of departure.

#### I. Seeing and knowing in the popular imagination

The idea of visibility and invisibility as respective metonyms for knowledge and ignorance is one of the most basic metaphorical correlations, with deep roots in Arabic

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<sup>267</sup> David Lodge, *Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analyses of the English Novel* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 edition) p. 31.

popular literature, going back at least to the oldest storytelling traditions, including those which eventually became codified in *Alf layla w-layla* (the One Thousand and One Nights). For example, the frame story of *Alf layla w-layla* immediately signals the idea of “seeing” as “knowing,” and connects that idea to one’s power. When kings (and brothers) Shahriyar and Shahzaman discover their wives cheating on them in their own palaces, they are witnessing their own weaknesses. In *seeing* their wives deceiving them, they are made to know their own lack of power. Their weakness is presented as a lack of understanding. For example, one reading places the master-wife-slave triangle at the center of the frame tale, where the king is shown as unable to understand that his wife is not a slave and that her life is a complex dimension beyond his knowledge, and therefore his lack of understanding regarding her and her world constitutes his weakness.<sup>268</sup> The frame story sets up a trope of seeing as knowledge, which permeates the stories of *Alf layla w-layla*, all the time navigating a discourse of knowledge and power.

The idea of seeing and knowing is also addressed in the Qur’an. In one of the most exceptional readings of Idrīs’ story “Bayt min laḥm,” Fedwa Malti-Douglas seizes and elaborates on the centrality of the Qur’an reciter’s blindness as the centering trope of the story. She marks the Qur’an as a persistent subtext to this trope, citing Idrīs’ renderings of the “Surat al-nūr” as pivot points around which the complexities of the ideas of seeing and knowing rest.<sup>269</sup> However, here the emphasis is not on power *per se*, but rather on the issue of seeing/knowing and its bearing on one’s moral responsibility. If one cannot see (if they are blind like the Qur’an reader) are they also unable to know, or to claim that they do not know? According to hers and others’ interpretations of “Surat al-nūr,” the blind, being considered amongst the physically handicapped, are exempted from performing certain Islamic dictates, like *hajj* and *jihād*, but this does not translate into a parallel mental incapacity, and so one’s lack of vision does not correspond with reduced moral responsibility or reduced knowledge. Malti-Douglas further cites the geographer and cosmographer al-Qazwini’s (d. 1283) assertion that

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<sup>268</sup> Daniel E. Beaumont, *Slave of Desire: Sex, Love and Death in the 1001 Nights* (Madison – Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002) pp. 47-9. See also: Celeste Gianni, *Gender Conflict in Popular Arabic Literature: The Interplay between Knowledge and Power* (Unpublished Master’s dissertation. London: SOAS, University of London, 2011).

<sup>269</sup> Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Blindness and Sexuality: Traditional Mentalities in Yusuf Idrīs’ ‘House of Flesh,’” in ed. Roger Allen, *Critical Perspectives on Yusuf Idrīs* (Colorado Springs: Three Continents Press, 1994) p. 93.

what is deficient in one area is increased in the other.<sup>270</sup> She cites this with reference to a classical Arabic proverb concerning the virility of blind men, however it also follows that if one's vision is decreased, their knowledge should be strengthened.

European colonial projects and Eurocentric ideas regarding modernity introduced a racialized aspect to the ideas of lightness (of skin) as representing knowledge and darkness (of skin) representing ignorance, particularly in the wake of the Enlightenment (the term itself a conflation of “lightness as knowledge”), compounding colonial “right to rule” doctrines while also sneaking their way into the imaginations of the colonized or those under threat from colonialist projects, feeding localized conceptions and discourses concerning modernity.<sup>271</sup> Although this racialized discourse was less pronounced in Egypt than in Argentina, it nonetheless contributed, if only implicitly, to powerful ideas concerning social class. Here, those with access to European conceptions of modernity were correspondingly associated with “enlightenment,” while those operating on more traditionally based value systems, practices, and beliefs came to be associated with darkness, corresponding to a perceived lack of progress. This dichotomously opposing discourse sharply marked the atmosphere that accompanied the short story's emergence in Egypt.

All of this is to say that the correlation of vision or seeing with knowledge, and lack of vision or blindness with ignorance had deep and consistent roots in the Egyptian (and Islamic, Arab, etc.) imaginary by the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It constituted a powerful aspect of implied, inherent knowledge that surpassed social divisions. The New School writers began calling on this implied discourse to propel the social force their short narratives. Settling the idea of “vision” as represented through lightness and “blindness” as represented through darkness, they began writing a corresponding light code into their stories. As will be seen, however, they, and Idrīs to follow did not shy away from interrogating dominating presumptions about modernity by accompanying blindness with a heightened burden of knowledge, which was equally implicitly understood. Using this sub-language of light, a textuality of *amāra* began emerging that tapped into the Egyptian imaginary.

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid. p. 90.

<sup>271</sup> A few of the most notable works of fiction that play with, intervene in, reify, or otherwise employ the the tropes of skin color and knowledge are Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Indeed, these works go some way toward conveying the extent to which the trope of skin color and knowledge has become mimetic language of its own, which exceeds national boundaries. For more on this topic, see:

## II. The light code in “Ḥadīth al-qaryah” and “Qindīl Umm Hāshem:” the evolution of a symbolic sub-language

New School writers incorporated a “light code” as a structurally significant, symbolic sub-language<sup>272</sup> that tapped into this intuitive knowledge and understanding regarding (in)visibility to convey extra-textual information as contributing to the surface narrative of the text. Aside from its structural purpose, they played with the ideas of light as something that bring vision and hence knowledge, and of darkness as something that obscures and therefore causes ignorance. This was a particularly salient way to distill aspects of the modernizing discourse into short story form, particularly as it regarded the fraught relationship between the intellectual class of the country – including its fiction writers – and the “everyday” people. The short stories of New School writers were particularly adept at commenting on and/or mediating the relationship between the Egyptian intellectual class and the Egyptian people, or more generally in showing the impact of society on the individual.<sup>273</sup> Their applications of the light code as a mode of commenting on this discourse will be elucidated through the following analytical examples.

New School member Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Lāshīn’s (1894-1954) “Ḥadīth al-qaryah” (Village Small Talk, 1929) is considered the first mature, modern Egyptian short story.<sup>274</sup> The story follows two learned, urban young men into a village where they join a group of poor villagers and their local sheikh in the evening at the local mosque. The young men are at first horrified by the destitution and ignorance of the villagers, then angered by the false prophet leadership of the village leader, Sheikh Muhsin, towards whom the villagers demonstrate complete faith and loyalty. Finally, the young men are humiliated by their own inability to enact what they consider educated and enlightened perspectives upon the villagers in order to emancipate them from their own perceived ignorance.

The story is a demonstration of societal rifts occurring in Egypt and Lāshīn’s language is intended to *show* rather than explain the nature of the mutual frustrations, particularly from the perspective of the writer-intellectual represented in the figures of

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<sup>272</sup> See: Ghazoul as quoted in Hafez, *Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, p. 254.

<sup>273</sup> Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, p. 289.

<sup>274</sup> See: Hafez, *Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, pp. 215-68.

the two young men. They represent the alienation of educated Egyptians like Lāshīn and others of his generation, who understand the motivations of “regular” Egyptians for having grown up one of them, but now find themselves isolated and even rejected for their “modern” viewpoints, which they view as necessarily ingredients in the task of “making” Egypt’s modernity. These include rational thinking, scientific inquiry, and secularity – traits increasingly attributed to urban populations. The problem is exacerbated by the young men’s self-appointed mission to educate the “people” – here, the villagers – however, as Lāshīn’s story so adeptly illustrates, they lack the language to do so, instead coming across as foreign and out of touch, compounding their isolation and deepening the rift. For writers and intellectuals, it is an allegory: “In this short story we have one of the first direct and frank portrayals of the struggle of the liberal educated elite of the crucial first three decades of the twentieth century to reach out to and to communicate with the people.”<sup>275</sup> “Ḥadīth al-qaryah” has proved a landmark precisely for its ability to demonstrate “a new mode of existence and a different social and political reality”<sup>276</sup> that was “emerging out of the struggle with the old one-dimensional approach to reality and the static vision of truth. This struggle has been at the heart of the genesis of the new narrative discourse in Arab culture and has led to the strong tendency, from the early days of its formation, to integrate the elements of realistic presentation with elements of assessment.”<sup>277</sup>

A little over a decade after “Ḥadīth al-qaryah,” another New School member, Yahya Haqqī (1905-1992) published “Qindīl Umm Hāshem” (The Saint’s Lamp<sup>278</sup>, 1944). Following many of the same themes so expertly displayed in “Ḥadīth al-qaryah,” Haqqī’s story documents the struggles of a young man named Ismail who goes abroad to England<sup>279</sup> to study ophthalmology and returns home with a newfound sense of scientific enlightenment in the face of his family’s traditional beliefs in ritual and faith. They admire his accomplishment and status, but are distrustful of his scientific belief system, which is so different from what they know. Their differing perspectives converge on the figure of Fatima, to whom Ismail has been long promised in marriage,

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<sup>275</sup> El-Desouky, *The Intellectual and the People*, pp. 25.

<sup>276</sup> Hafez, *Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, p. 261.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.* p. 259.

<sup>278</sup> Alternatively called “Umm Hāshem’s Lamp,” which is a more literal translation.

<sup>279</sup> A dominant strain of criticism regarding the story concerns its intersection between the east and the west as represented through the figure of Ismail. See: M.M. Badawi, “Qindīl Umm Hāshem: The Egyptian Intellectual between East and West,” in *Modern Arabic Literature and the West* (London: Ithaca Press, 1985, pp. 83-97).

and who suffers from trachoma. In Ismail's absence, his parents had been treating her with the oil from the lamp of Umm Hāshem, but upon his return Ismail insists on treating her with medication. He suffers a severe blow to his confidence when his treatment causes Fatima to go blind. In desperation, he concedes to his family's insistence on treating the girl traditionally once more, with the oil from Umm Hāshem's lamp. To the young man's surprise, the girl's eyesight improves and she is seemingly cured of her affliction.

Each of these classic stories speak from within the trope of "the intellectual and the people" as a discourse that conveys the rift in society, both literally and allegorically.<sup>280</sup> The historical basis of the rift is shown to be the "moment of encounter." However, the site of that historical moment is now located within the individual who must now navigate two seemingly contradictory approaches to life. Haqqī expands on these internal debates to a greater extent than had been done previously, giving voice to the individual's (i.e. the intellectual's) emotional upheavals as his Egyptian self undergoes a deconstruction and then reconstruction in the west, and then is forced to repeat that process again, in reverse, upon returning back to his community. Sabry Hafez emphasizes Haqqī's use of the individual perspective in the short story to a greater degree than his New School counterparts, saying that "[Haqqī] discovered that the nature of the short story made it more relevant to questions of the individual personality, than those of social problems. He sought to express through his short stories the interests and anxieties of this individual personality, which was suffering in Egypt at that epoch from the contradiction between its reality and its ambition."<sup>281</sup> As will be seen, the impulse to yield to the individual-centricity of the short story is something that Idrīs would fiercely resist, and his struggle to do so marks one of his greatest struggles and contributions.

Haqqī's story also shows the heightened stakes of this debate as Egypt moved into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas the young men in Lāshīn's story are easily

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<sup>280</sup> The story is often read through the lens of East and West, which is one of the tropes encapsulated within the "intellectual and people" idea put forth by El-Desouky. However, this mode of reading has its limitations, particularly with regard to labeling. One of the best-known critical analyses of the story offers a deconstructive reading of "Qindīl Umm Hāshem," offering harmony as a guiding structural principle tied explicitly to the East/West trope (see: Muhammad Siddiq, "'Deconstructing' the Saint's Lamp," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 17, (1986, pp. 126-145)).

<sup>281</sup> Sabry Hafez, "Innovation in the Egyptian Short Story," in ed. Robin Ostle, *Studies in Modern Arabic Literature* (Wilts, England: Aris and Phillips Ltd, 1975) p. 101.

dismissed by Sheikh Muhsin and the villagers, who leave them behind with the paraffin lamp that has done them no good at the end of the story, in Haqqī's story, Ismail's insistence upon his newfound belief system causes harm, and rather than being left alone in his beliefs, he is forced through the circumstances of Fatima's blindness to abdicate. Nevertheless, Haqqī's story, like Lāshīn's, is not about the primacy of one "way" over another, but rather the failure of Egypt's new intellectuals to communicate effectively with the people; this failure of communication is thus presented as a significant and persistent factor in Egypt's social strife.

While the tension of the stories is created through plots that draw opposing "sides" against one another that represent the modernity vs. tradition discourse, symbolism is used in the story to comment upon, critique, or alter the that discourse. This is important, because the stories display dialogue as alienating, bound as it is within the constraints of individual experience, while symbols are shown as possessing the ability to exceed such polarizing constraints. Lāshīn's story tangles and fuses light codes from nature (fire), science (the paraffin lamp), and religion (the crescent moon, which is also a symbol of Islam) to complement, enforce, and catalyze the text of "Ḥadīth al-qaryah." Coming into the village, the two educated young men find the villagers, a silent, indistinguishable mass, whose

وقد أُخْفِيَ الشفق وساد الظلام<sup>282</sup>

[world was in darkness,<sup>283</sup>]

we are told, until Sheikh Muhsin arrives

حتى جاء المُنْتَظَر، يتقدمه الرسول وفي يده فانوس<sup>284</sup>

[preceded by the messenger holding up a paraffin lamp.<sup>285</sup>]

<sup>282</sup> Literally: "Twilight was concealed and there was darkness." Lashin - Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Lāshīn, "Ḥadīth al-qaryah," in ed. Sabry Hafez, *Maḥmūd Ṭāhir (1894-1954): al-a'amāl al-kāmilah* (Cairo: al-majlis al-Ala al-Thaqāfah, 1999) p. 233.

<sup>283</sup> Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Lāshīn, "Ḥadīth al-qaryah (Village Small Talk)," trans. Sabry Hafez, in Sabry Hafez, *Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: A Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1993) p. 263

<sup>284</sup> Lāshīn, "Ḥadīth al-qaryah," p. 233.

<sup>285</sup> Lāshīn, "Village Small Talk," p. 263.

Immediately, Lāshīn presents his use of the light code as inverted, with light corresponding to the Sheikh, who is shown to value power over knowledge but who nevertheless knows how to speak to the villagers from within their own knowing. Hereafter, the light symbols follow the Sheikh, intensifying as his speech reaches its apex. The narrator – one of the young men speaking retrospectively – recounts:

وكان الهلال قد انحدر حتى قارب النار المشبوبة، واستحال لونه إلى حمرتها، كأنما كان يلتهب،  
وكان منظرا فذا شد إليه بصري، ولكن سمعي كان مع الخطيب، وقد شرع يفند ما قلت<sup>286</sup>

[The crescent moon had sunk close to the blazing fire and turned red in its glow, as if it was burning fiercely. It was an extraordinary spectacle and my eyes were instinctively drawn to it, but my ears were focused on the speaker, who had begun to take my speech to pieces.<sup>287</sup>]

After desperate attempts on behalf of the two young men to persuade the villagers that the Sheikh has been taking advantage of them, and that they should free themselves, the villagers turn their backs on the young men. The story ends with the villagers walk away with the Sheikh, as the two young men are left in darkness. Thus, the light code in “Ḥadīth al-qaryah” is primarily used as a means of commenting on the strength of language to communicate across barriers; the young men may be knowledgeable but they do not speak *amāra*, and therefore they remain in the dark just as they found the villagers. In this way, the subjectivity of knowledge is emphasized, and that subjectivity is shown as being wholly contingent upon the knower’s ability to speak that knowledge in the language of the people’s own knowing. The intricacies of this dynamic between the intellectual and the people in Egypt are at the essence of El-Desouky’s study. He sums up some of the polarities that Lāshīn’s story comments upon, which the light code is used to emphasize:

The challenge in communication [of the educated elite trying to communicate with the people] is also framed by a dramatization of the struggle between the modern, liberal and secular intellectual and the hold of traditional societal forces, always abbreviated in religious terms and the figure of the conniving religious scholar or sheikh. The use of the classically laden term *hadith* in the title is significant. The term religiously denotes Prophetic traditions, but in classical Arabic literature it also refers to a short narrative genre of reported accounts and legends. Attaching the term to the village as a social space suggests remoteness

<sup>286</sup> Lāshīn, “Ḥadīth al-qaryah,” p. 235.

<sup>287</sup> Lāshīn, “Village Small Talk,” p. 265.

from the cultural imaginary and sensibility of the urban space that is underlying the theme of encounter between the educated urban intellectual and the people of the village.<sup>288</sup>

At the heart of this struggle was the fact of the writer-intellectual actually *living* the frustrations of their protagonists, and empathizing deeply with their failures. Their empathy, however, manifested as a top-down narrative, privileging the intellectual's perspective and quest even as they were thwarted repeatedly.

Haqqī's story, "Qindīl Um Hāshem," which was published 15 years after "Ḥadīth al-qaryah," nevertheless communicates the same inhering tension between "the intellectual and the people." This time, however, the setting is more intimate and elaborate. The characters have names, and we find them in (mostly) pre-established relationships. Haqqī uses a more sophisticated light code as a visualizing textuality that corresponds to the heightened degree of intimacy. Here, darkness is embodied in Fatima's trachoma. However, there are layers of this symbolism, for it is not solely the trachoma that causes Fatima's blindness, but rather the medical treatments that Ismail administers to her that do it. In this way, the educated young man is related to darkness; but this time it is Fatima who is left in the dark by actions of Ismail; thus, Ismail is the bringer of darkness. The repercussions of the growing societal rift are being exacerbated over time, and Ismail's ability to *practice amāra* – not just to speak it – is shown as detrimental. Meanwhile, the "traditional" aspect is shown in the figure of Umm Hashem's lamp. Again, there are multiple layers here, for the lamp's light is not important; rather the lamp's oil is the remedy that eventually cures Fatima's blindness. The lamp's oil is the bringer of light, and is the mediator between Ismail's knowing and that of his family and community. Haqqī goes a bit further, though, because his narrative requires that Ismail first *see* and then *accept* and *embrace* the traditional values and modes of knowledge that he had so harshly judged after returning from his European medical education. The lamp's oil is what makes him bear witness, and therefore offers something of a solution with regard to the question of the intellectual possessing *amāra* by insisting that he/she cannot turn away from their traditions for the sake of modernity; that to do so amounts to another form of darkness.

The benefit of the light codes in these stories is twofold: firstly, they provide layers of meaning not otherwise communicated through narrative or dialogue; secondly,

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<sup>288</sup> El-Desouky, *The Intellectual and the People*, p. 25.

they provide a versatile atmosphere that complements the narrative and clarifies it. When Lāshīn's young men arrive in the village shrouded in darkness the reader is able to sense their horror at the villagers' destitution and ignorance; it is a world of darkness. The Sheikh's emergence with the paraffin lamp preceding him, and his appearance wearing brilliant red - a color of flamboyance, of visibility, and the color of the blazing fire and the crescent moon – communicates a powerful message that causes the reader empathizes with the villagers' awe in his presence. Before he opens his mouth, he communicates his ability to speak the villagers' knowing and his commitment to that end. One senses the darkness falling over the educated young visitors long before it literally enshrouds them in the end. In this way, the light code is a precursor but it is also an active participant in creating meaning through the narrative. Similarly, the condition of Fatima's trachoma and the peripheral darkness she experiences prior to Ismail's treatments, combined with Ismail's callous attitude, communicates to the reader the danger of his administrations before they take place; Haqqī's light code, though more subtle and varied than Lāshīn's, and also more thinly applied owing to the length of the story,<sup>289</sup> nevertheless communicates darkness as being Ismail's condition rather than Fatima's.

What makes the light code so effective is its ability to draw on implicit knowledge. In so doing, it builds a bridge between the lived experiences of the story's characters and those of its readers. This is the way that the short story makes inroads in possessing *amāra* through a visualizing textuality akin to that of the theater. The theater presents imagery supplemented through oral narrative. It calls primarily on the sense of sight to affect its message. The power in this is that it is more readily able to subvert the untranslatabilities of textual language through displays of being and action. Further, the theater is able to create layers of meaning through a combination of speech and visuality. This is precisely what the sub-language of the light code is intended to achieve; to imbue the story with a visibility to create meaning in the voids and elisions of untranslatable textual spaces using modes of implicit, collective knowing. It is the most basic of symbolic sub-languages, harnessed towards the achievement of a sophisticated, modern Egyptian narrative.

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<sup>289</sup> "Qindīl Umm Hāshem" has been published as a novel, a novella, and as a short story as part of a collection, emphasizing once again the arbitrariness of defining the genre according to length.

While the young educated visitors to Lāshīn’s village are left with the lamp at the end of the story as the villagers follow Sheikh Muhsin into the darkness, Lāshīn has nevertheless demonstrated the uselessness of their enlightenment, both in their inability to effectively communicate with the villagers in a way that they instinctively connect with, and in their failure to recognize the individualities of the villagers. That the villagers appear as a dark, collective mass to the visitors itself indicates their inability to see the villagers effectively, and to therefore understand their needs and motivations. Haqqī’s story follows a similar trajectory, but with far more contextual details. In his story, the light code is not so much a structural element as it is a continuation of Lāshīn’s use of the light code as an interrogator of knowledge and modernity, but with heightened urgency. Here, the “intellectual” figure – Ismail – is not accompanied by lightness or darkness, but is instead portrayed as the *bringer* of darkness when he causes Fatima’s blindness. Similarly, the lamp’s oil, which returns her vision to her, is not portrayed as lightness itself, but rather as the *bringer* of lightness. Thus, Haqqī’s use of the light code is infused with an aspect of extra-human participation and agency, rather than a mere accompanying symbol. Nevertheless, neither of these stories manages entirely to escape the tendency toward individualistic, hierarchical narratives, and therefore, despite their efforts using the light code and other aspects of narrative to incorporate the collective lived experiences and imagination of the “people” into their stories, the overwhelming perspective remains that of the isolated intellectual.

### III. (In)visibility as an emerging aesthetics of social concern

The use of lightness and darkness was particularly salient in Idrīs’ conception of modernity because of its ability to enlighten or obscure; to make visible or to mystify; and in so doing to communicate *ṣidq* through surprising correspondences between the master narrative and the light code sub-narrative. Recall the futility of the “enlightenment” of Lāshīn’s two young men as signaled by the lamplight as Sheikh Muhsin and the villagers happily walk off into the darkness at the end of “Ḥadīth al-qaryah.” Further recall Haqqī’s use of blindness as a way of communicating a similar message through the figure of the foreign-educated Ismail whose complete faith in science is shown to be “blind” and misguided, but also harmful, while the traditional

treatment of Umm Hāshem's lamp's oil returns Fatima's vision, thereby vindicating a source of local knowledge that Ismail had dismissed.

Idrīs was familiar with the New School, and the stories of several of its writers, including Lāshīn and Haqqī, had a significant influence on him, which was sometimes blatant. In fact, it appears that Idrīs occasionally used other writer's stories as a way of experimenting with narrative and message, and as a way of progressively uncovering his own style. While this in itself is not significant, it does provide a particularly useful way of entering Idrīs' work as he begins endeavoring to possess *amāra* in the short story, and especially presents an opportunity for looking at his conscious integration of a light code into his own work as the beginning stage of an evolving sub-language of symbolisms. The rest of this section will provide a comparative look at "Hadīth al-qaryah" as an inspirational starting point for Idrīs' use of the light code in a story titled "Abū al-Hawl" (1956), and how that light code is used to reveal and conceal knowledge, and what those dynamics reveal about Idrīs' motivations regarding modernity and the nature of knowledge.

First, it is worth mentioning that "Abū al-Hawl" does not represent Idrīs' only efforts using the light code as a sub-language. Some of his most well-loved and critically appreciated stories incorporate the light code in one manner or another, attesting to Idrīs' success with this particular method. Among those stories are the namesake of his first collection, *Arkhās layālī* (The Cheapest Nights, 1954), "Lailāt ṣaif" (All on a Summer's Night<sup>290</sup>), "Qā' al-madīna" (The Dregs of the City, 1956), which will serve as the second case study herein, as well as some of his later stories: "Al-naddāha" (The Siren, 1968), the case story of the next chapter, "Ḥammāl al-karāsī," and also "Akana labudd an tud'i al-nur ya Li-Li?" (Did You Have to Turn on the Light Li-Li?, 1971) and the immensely popular "Bayt min laḥm" (House of Flesh, 1971). Many of the points explored in this chapter and the next have a wider relevancy in Idrīs' body of work, not only with regard to those stories that use the light code, but also in stories where more prevalent sub-languages, like the medical sciences, topography, or religious symbolism, are used to similar ends. Because of Idrīs' strong stance as a writer, these sub-languages can be viewed as varying attempts at figuring *amāra* in the short story. The stories I focus on here offer a selected, progressively effective canon of Idrīs' use of the light code within the broader corpus of his works that use this

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<sup>290</sup> Originally in *al-Gumhūriyya*, 25 June 1956, p. 3.

technique. Thus, I present the light code as a significant, representative aspect of Idrīs' aesthetics of *amāra*, as a part of a larger whole (with the "whole" constituting the entirety of a given story) that communicates the short story as a *language in itself* of social concern.

"Abū al-Hawl" represents an in-between area of Idrīs' early usage of the light code as a sub-language based on lightness and darkness, building a textuality around the idea of (in)visibility as an indicator of knowledge or a lack thereof. It is slightly more sophisticated than the symbolism of "Arkhās layālī," where lightness is used to represent an unrealized future and darkness represents the harsh present, yet it still presents Idrīs' phase of playing with the light code as represented through the use of "creators of light," like lamps and moonlight. It is partly for this reason that "Ḥadīth al-qaryah" serves as a useful comparative partner when looking at the light code in "Abū al-Hawl," since their symbolisms are similar in this regard. However, it also appears that Idrīs may have used "Ḥadīth al-qaryah" as a kind of inspirational starting point for writing "Abū al-Hawl," since the plotlines of the two stories run parallel, at least in the beginning. Near the middle, Idrīs breaks away from Lāshīn's narrative trajectory, and his use of the light code accompanies this departure and helps bring depth to his own conception.

"Abū al-Hawl" begins with a medical student returning to his native village for a funeral, for which the entire town shows up. As evening falls, the medical "professionals" among the guests proceed to engage in a competitive verbal sparring to show off their medical knowledge to the village onlookers. The medical student known to the villagers as "Doctor," who is also the narrator, brazenly makes up a long, fictional tale about the finer points of *rigor mortis*. He exaggerates and veers away from facts under the assumption that the ignorant villagers won't know the difference. But his boasting comes back to haunt him when some nights later one of the villagers, the story's namesake, shows up at the Doctor's family home in the middle of the night with a dead body in tow, hoping to make good on the Doctor's boastful claim to the villagers previously that such a body would be worth a sum of five pounds as a practice specimen for a medical professional. The horrified Doctor denies to Abū al-Hawl that he ever said such a thing, and brusquely turns the man away, refusing either to pay him or accept the body.

Both Lāshīn's and Idrīs' stories begin with educated young men entering a village shrouded in darkness as night falls. The symbolism here is atmospheric, but it also communicates the narrators' impressions of the villagers as being equally "in darkness," i.e. ignorant, unknowing, and lacking autonomy. Lāshīn's villagers' "world was in darkness" until Sheikh Muhsin arrived "preceded by the messenger holding up a paraffin lamp."<sup>291</sup> The Sheikh represents the bringer of light (read: enlightenment). Early in Idrīs' story the funeral tent

والكلوبات نورها يعانني شحوب الانيميا الحادة<sup>292</sup>

[was lit by gas lamps that gave a pale, anemic light.<sup>293</sup>]

Rather than describe the villagers' lives, as Lāshīn had done at the outset, Idrīs instead suffices comment that,

والذين لم تتعود عيونهم ابداء الضوء في الليل فما بالك بنور الكلوبات<sup>294</sup>

[They [the *fellaḥīn*] were not used to the lights so that they were momentarily blinded...<sup>295</sup>]

Idrīs' villagers are described as a faceless, nameless mass who

كنا نتكلم نحن فقط، وكان بلدياتنا الفلاحين ساكتين يسمعوننا ويضحكون، وينظرون الينا،<sup>296</sup>  
ويتأملون كلامنا

[could only look on and listen, keeping well out of the conversation.<sup>297</sup>]

<sup>291</sup> Lāshīn, "Village Small Talk," p. 263

<sup>292</sup> Yūsuf Idrīs, "Abū al-Hawl," in *Qā' al-madīna* (Cairo: publisher unknown, n.d.) p. 166. This collection was originally published under the title *A laysa ka-dhalīk?* (Isn't it so?) by Markaz Kutub ash-Sharq al-Awsaṭ, Cairo, July 1957. It was subsequently published as *Qā' al-madīna* by Markaz Kutub ash-Sharq al-Awsaṭ as well as Dar al-Kātib al-'Arabī, n.d. (Source: Kurpershoek, p. 193). The edition I used could be either of these, but it is in rough condition and any copyright page has either been lost or never existed, nor does the SOAS Library have this information on file.

<sup>293</sup> Yūsuf Idrīs, "The Caller in the Night," trans. Wadida Wassef 1978, in ed. Denys Johnson-Davies, *The Essential Yusuf Idris: Masterpieces of the Egyptian Short Story* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009) p. 59.

<sup>294</sup> Idrīs, "Abū al-Hawl," p. 166.

<sup>295</sup> Idrīs, "Caller in the Night," p. 59.

<sup>296</sup> Idrīs, "Abū al-Hawl," p. 169.

<sup>297</sup> Idrīs, "Caller in the Night," p. 61.

In referring to the temporary blindness of the villagers in the wake of the lamp's light, Idrīs gives the slightest hint at using blindness as an indicator of silence – a theme he would eventually develop into the powerful sense-intensive unity of “Bayt min lahm.” Here, however, the reference is fleeting, but it is enough to symbolize the potentiality of harm or violence that may occur when what had previously been shrouded in darkness is then brought into the light, thus evoking Haqqī's use of blindness here as well. However, Idrīs' insistence on the villagers' silence is a more sustained form of symbolism in his story, as it had been in Lāshīn's as well.

In both stories, the insistence on the villagers' silence is a symbol of their lack of autonomy and a dismissal of their knowledge by preventing them from having a voice, and this is emphasized by the persistent speech of the “educated.” However, Idrīs' story departs at this point. While the Doctor is permitted to expound at length on allegedly “medical” matters during the funeral, late that night Abū al-Hawl, one of the silent village onlookers, comes to the Doctor's home and breaks his silence. It is possible to perceive what follows in Idrīs' story as a critique of the outcome and assumptions of “Ḥadīth al-qaryah” regarding Lāshīn's representation of the villagers as blind – and invisible – followers of powerful men capable of manipulating them. Yet, there is also a self-reflexivity in Idrīs' narrative, so that what he may actually be critiquing is the story itself up until that point. That is, it is more likely that Idrīs set his story up early on along common assumptions regarding the *fellaḥīn* as they were commonly represented through the frequently one-sided narrative structures of the short story up to that point as a consciously created foundation of folly, whereupon he could then critique the wider narrative discourse of the short story, rather than just Lāshīn's. In so doing, he is also critiquing himself, since his earlier work had similarly used darkness as representative symbolism for the state of the rural poor.

At the end of the story, Idrīs grants agency to the villagers through the representative figure of Abū al-Hawl. He arrives at the Doctor's home accompanied by the light of the sun, but this time it is the Doctor who is unable to see (recall how the villagers were blinded by the tent lamps in the beginning):

الصوت مألوف، ولكن رغم ان الليل كمن وجود بأخر أنفاسه وشعشعة الفجر قد أوشكت، لم  
أستطع التعرف على صاحبه<sup>298</sup>

<sup>298</sup> Idrīs, “Abū al-Hawl,” p. 178.

[The voice was familiar, but I couldn't distinguish the face although it was the small hours of the morning and the light of day was beginning to come through.<sup>299</sup>]

It is at this moment that the story's social critique crystalizes. The Doctor recounts:

وأخيرا جدا ... بعدما ارتفع صوتي، وبدا الغضب واضحا تماما في ملامحي استطاع أبو الهول أن يفهم أنني لا أساوم، وأن عليه أن يعيد الجثة الى المصرف في الحال... وهنا تجمدت ملامحه، وعادت الى جدها الذي لا ينفك، وأغمض عينيه وقال:  
"كده ... بقى تعملها في كده يا دكتور ... هم الافندية كدا باين يا اخواتي ... تحلف ع المصحف انك ماقلت الواحد بخمسة جنيه ... تحلف ... قلت ولا مقلتش ..."  
وثار بيننا جدا طويل ... أنا أصر على أنني لا أذكر شيئا، وهر يعيد على مسامعي ما قلته كلمة كلمة ويعطى الامارات والشواهد ... ولم أوفق في اقناعه بارجاعها اذ كبت أتعثر وأنا أقنعه، في الخجل الشديد الذي كان يملأ نفسي، ولما لم أجد فائدة هددته بإبلاغ الامر للعمدة ...  
وحينئذ اربدت ملامحه وبدا كأنه سينور ثورة لا يعلم الا الله مداها وقال:  
"كلام ايه ده يا ولاد ... بقى تعملها في كده ولاخر تبليغ ... طب ورحمة أبويا محمد أبو صيام مانى مرجعها واللى معلق اعمله ... وبلغ مطرح ما تبليغ ... انت مش قلت الواحد بخمسة جنيه ... قلت ولا ما قلتش ... بقى تعملها في كده وتبليغ ... طب بلغ ... ورحمة أبويا محمد لاسيهاالك وماشى ... قلت والا ماقلتش ..."<sup>300</sup>

[At long last, after my voice had risen to a roar, and he could see from my face that my fury was genuine, he was able to realize I wasn't haggling and that I meant what I said about his taking the body back immediately. His face froze and he resumed his usual grim expression, shutting his eyes.

"Is that a proper way to treat me, Doctor? Do Effendis tell lies? Did you or did you not say a body was worth five pounds? Would you swear on the Qur'an that you didn't? Would you?"

There followed a long argument where I insisted I remembered nothing of the kind and where he repeated everything I had said word for word giving proof and evidence. I couldn't persuade him to the return the body as my growing embarrassment was making me falter. But when I saw he was adamant I threatened to inform the Omda. His face darkened at that and he looked on the point of a tremendous explosion.

"This is no way to treat me," he broke out. "No indeed. After all, it's you who asked for it, and now you say you'll go and report me. I'm not taking it back. I tell you. I swear by my father's head, I'm not. You can do what you like."<sup>301</sup>]

Here, there is something of a role reversal in evidence. Not only does Idrīs give voice to the "ignorant" villagers through the figure of Abū al-Hawl, but he is also shown as a man with a mind and convictions of his own, in direct contradistinction to Lāshīn's villagers, who cling to the purveyor of misinformation as a man of learning. In the end,

<sup>299</sup> Idrīs, "Caller in the Night," p. 67.

<sup>300</sup> Idrīs, "Abū al-Hawl," pp. 180-1.

<sup>301</sup> Idrīs, "Caller in the Night," pp. 68-9.

Lāshīn’s villagers leave the two learned interlopers behind with the lamp, as the villagers are “happy to follow their teacher into the darkness;”<sup>302</sup> they remain as “in the dark” in the end as they had been in the beginning, and presumably will continue to be. But Abū al-Hawl, formally unlearned though he is, having genuinely believed the Doctor’s words on *rigor mortis* at the funeral, is nonetheless able to call on his attuned sense of dignity and intuitive social knowledge to defend himself. More than that, he turns the Doctor’s own methods on their head, by giving “proof” and “evidence” [*al-shōwāhid*] – the very method one might have expected the Doctor to use in his discourse on *rigor mortis* – in order to cite the Qur’an and his own memories of the event. It should be noted, however, that the Arabic word that Wadida Wassef mistranslates as “proof” is *amārāt*, the plural of *amāra*. In other words, Abū al-Hawl is giving evidence in the form of the “language” and “knowledge” of the collective, which the Doctor himself seems unable or unwilling to do. Indeed, the Doctor rejects the validity of Abū al-Hawl’s claims, while Abū al-Hawl finds himself (though he may only just sense it) in the position of the “enlightened.” Nevertheless, the story has him finally ceding to the Doctor:

وكان قد خرج من الباب، وكاد يختفي في الظلام حين فوجئت به يتوقف ... ثم يستدير  
ليواجهني ويقول من تحت الزكبية:  
- "بس افكر كويس يا دكتور ... بدمتك يا شيخ وديانتك والامانة عليك ... قلت ولا ما  
قلتش؟" ...<sup>303</sup>

[He went out of the door and had nearly disappeared in the darkness when he suddenly stopped and turned to face me.

“Only try to remember, Doctor. By the Prophet, and your conscience and all that’s holy, did you or did you not say you were looking for a body?”<sup>304</sup>]

Although the Doctor succeeds in turning Abū al-Hawl away in the end, and Abū al-Hawl appears to be the one who will return to the darkness, the exchange between the two men has altered both of their perceived realities. Instead of entering back into a world of darkness represented by a deep, long night, Abū al-Hawl is now returning to the darkness of early morning, where the sun will emerge and fill the world with light imminently. But, far from being transformed by the Doctor’s overwhelming scientific

<sup>302</sup> Lāshīn, “Village Small Talk,” p. 268.

<sup>303</sup> Idrīs, “Abū al-Hawl,” p. 183.

<sup>304</sup> Idrīs, “The Caller in the Night,” p. 70.

knowledge – which Abū al-Hawl initially showed an interest in, despite not understanding – Abū al-Hawl is “enlightened” instead by the contrary example of the Doctor’s behavior, and particularly his blatant refusal to adhere to social codes of engagement. Meanwhile, the Doctor, who had so brazenly dismissed the villagers as ignorant and pliable, has now been held to account by one of them, and has been forced to give voice and physicality to the discrepancy between his own perception of himself and how he actually is in his own community. This becomes a recurring theme in Idrīs’ work at this time, as will be shown with the example of “Qā‘ al-madīna” in the coming chapter

The example of “Abū al-Hawl” represents a departure for Idrīs in using the light code to critique the established top-down social narrative between the intellectual class and the Egyptian “people.” Similar to those before him, he uses simple symbolic references for lightness and darkness that are intuitively understood across all segments of society in order to accompany, compound, and add depth to his narrative. But he seizes on the implicit relationship between seeing, visibility, and lightness, on the one hand, and blindness, invisibility, and darkness, on the other hand, as a means of critiquing more simplistic narratives based on the “modernity” and “tradition” divide by using it to illuminate the intuitive knowledge of “the people” in the figure of Abū al-Hawl. The driving point of this critique is to show the people’s modes of knowing as already embodying the modern, and being capable of critiquing and even refiguring the layers of mystification that had been masquerading as the modern. In this way, Idrīs uses the light code as a way of figuring *amāra* and thereby figuring the modern through the “knowing” of “the people.”

With “Abū al-Hawl,” Idrīs effectively picks up where the New School left off, in quite a literal sense. Using the idea of a village gathering and setting up opposing “intellectual” figures who vie for supremacy in front of villagers who appear as a nameless, faceless mass, for whom “knowledge” allegedly constitutes one’s ability to best entertain with novelty, Idrīs strongly invokes Lāshīn’s setting. In the beginning, he uses the light code in a similar manner to Lāshīn as well, but it soon becomes apparent that he’s doing so for the sake of contrast, to highlight his departure from that narrative part way through. The villager Abū al-Hawl’s challenging of the Doctor by showing up at his door in the middle of the night with a corpse effects a role-reversal, where the Doctor, though he doesn’t admit it, is brought face to face with his own deception. Further, he is confronted with a man who, though not intelligent in terms of education,

nevertheless embodies a firm set of ideals that assist him in, not only challenging the Doctor, but also in educating himself as to the flimsiness of that intellectual's position: in other words, although the Doctor might be "intelligent" and "enlightened," he is also shown to be incapable of embodying the values of his community, and therefore his engagement with them is dishonest in Abū al-Hawl's eyes. When Abū al-Hawl goes off into the darkness of early morning, it is with the understanding that a new dawn is on the horizon, implying the imminent "enlightenment" of Abū al-Hawl, though not in the way that the Doctor intended.

This is important, because Abū al-Hawl's "enlightenment" is not contingent upon him being "brought" to an intellectual understanding of modernity and its promises; instead, in his act of bringing the corpse to the Doctor in the middle of the night, he is challenging the Doctor to "show" him this intellectualized – in this case, scientific and medical – version of modernity that the Doctor had so proudly and gratuitously flaunted at the village gathering. Abū al-Hawl is calling the Doctor's bluff, but without intending to; rather, in his perspective, he is simply holding the Doctor to his words, which exposes the limits of the Doctor's own understanding – not only in terms of science, but in terms of his community as well.

However, inasmuch as Idrīs' departure is made clear in "Abū al-Hawl," the story is nevertheless only a starting point. It essentially lacks the unity and clarity of an accomplished short story, and it is frequently overlooked in studies of Idrīs' work. I have used it here precisely because it shows Idrīs' process toward figuring *amāra* and elucidates Idrīs' early process of experimenting with aspects of symbolism to communicate meaning: in this case, his uses of lightness and darkness to create a textuality of (in)visibility that interrogates the very idea of knowledge and its fraught relationship to conceptions of modernity.

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to progressively show how the light code constituted one of the ways that Egyptian short story writers endeavored to harness the idea of (in)visibility into a textuality, to effect an aesthetics of social change. The implied relationship between seeing and knowing and blindness and ignorance, established in the Egyptian imaginary over millennia, provided a foundational point to begin complementing, subverting, or complicating aspects of the larger narrative using

lightness – associated with vision and seeing, and therefore knowledge – and darkness – associated with obscurity and blindness. I used New School members Lāshīn’s and Haqqī’s short stories “Ḥadīth al-qaryah” and “Qindīl Umm Hāshem,” respectively, as representative examples of how they incorporated aspects of lightness and darkness to comment on the seemingly opposed “modernity” versus “tradition” discourse that continued to dominate Egyptian social reality in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In so doing, their stories also serve as allegories of the struggles of the intellectual class to “bring” the Egyptian “people” to their own conceptions of modernity, and highlighted the problems with that project.

“Abū al-Hawl” is representative of the goals Idrīs held for his short story writing in achieving an aesthetics of social concern. It clearly shows his knowledge of New School techniques and his innate understanding of the problems facing the intellectual class, and this is his starting point. But more importantly, he gives a voice to what had until then been mostly a nameless mass of ignorant villagers, and attempts to draw their own knowledge and imaginary into the discourse on equal footing with that of the intellectual. In this way, he is validating “traditional” avenues of knowledge, practices, and beliefs and therefore pointing to the *existing* modernity already embodied within Egyptians themselves.

What he struggles to convey is the collectiveness of *amāra*; to dislodge the short story from its individualistic narrative and infuse it with the community impulse of *amāra*. The light code goes some way to assisting this along; after all, the dawn is imminent not only for Abū al-Hawl, but for all of Egypt. Abū al-Hawl is clearly intended as an allegorical figure here. However, the focus on strictly individual perspectives is limiting in really embodying the *amāra* impulse in all its complexity and in relation to the multi-faceted and rapidly changing social discourse of 1950s Egypt. However, the short story, because of its brevity, is not a literary form naturally given to expansive or multi-charactered stories; above all, it privileges a conciseness of vision. “Abū al-Hawl” highlights the challenge Idrīs faced in his early career to subvert this individualism. It shows him attempting to do so using plot and symbolism as expansive possibilities, while still restricting the narrative within the Doctor’s individual perspective.

The following chapter will continue to document Idrīs’ struggle in this regard, which is really where the barrier to his effective realization of *amāra* lays. It will pick up where this chapter leaves off, in highlighting how Idrīs evolves the light code into a

more profound and multi-faceted symbolism, turning it into an even more *active participant* in narrative. And, vitally, I will emphasize how his solidification of the light code into a mimetic materiality through the use of objects assists him in, finally, subverting the individualism of the short story while also allowing him to write *amāra* as a fictional discourse. It is this achievement that marks the culmination of Idrīs' achievement.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Material Symbolism and the Discourse of Artifact: Visibility, Knowledge, and Egyptian Modernity

#### Introduction

This chapter will mark a moment of evolution in Idrīs use of the light code to effect more complex realities, which will then culminate in a material symbolism to imply what had until that point been an elusive collectivity. This latter point further marks a culmination of Idrīs’ prolonged struggle to Egyptianize the short story and free it from its individualistic leanings. I have used “Abū al-Hawl” to exemplify the early stage of a transition that was occurring in Idrīs’ work in the mid-1950s as he reconceived the concept of modernity through attempts at realizing an *amāra* textuality, and the nature of that transition becomes more obviously apparent in consideration of another of his stories, “Qā‘ al-madīna” (The Dregs of the City), which was published about seven months later.<sup>305</sup> To my mind, “Qā‘ al-madīna” marks a moment of mimetic evolution in Idrīs’ career. The thematic focus of the story is one of the most recurring tropes in Idrīs’ corpus, and concerns the moral corruption of the powerful, and particularly the impact of that corruption on society’s less fortunate. It is a long and meandering story whose plot veers off in various directions, and whose characters appear sharp at one moment, and dull and blurred the next. However, two aesthetic aspects of the story make it memorable, despite its lack of unity. The first is Idrīs’ use of the light code as a sustained metaphor. The use of lightness and darkness, particularly at the apex and conclusion of the story provides a reliable sub-language whose mimetic force grants a layer of consistency to the narrative, occasionally even intruding in on the narrative at certain points as a mode of intervention. The second is the sustained use of an object as a driving force in the story. This is particularly notable for Idrīs because he uses objects in a sustained way in only a few of his stories, whereas the majority of his stories focus on the actions, relationships, and dialogues that take place between people. Particularly, the Judge’s watch in “Qā‘ al-madīna” functions as a physical manifestation of the light code outside of strictly light-based symbolizers (like lamps, the moon, etc.). It is a

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<sup>305</sup> It was published in six installments from 16-30 August, 1956 in *al-Gumhūriyya*.

further compounding of the relationship between the light code and visibility and invisibility, which is granted heightened force through the concept of ownership. These two aspects engage in a relationship of convergences and divergences, where it seems that Idrīs is playing with new aesthetic possibilities in the service of building of a more forceful language of the short story.

The middle of this chapter will pivot on the issue of material symbolism, shifting from the watch in “Qā‘ al-madīna” into the more unified, consistent use of the chair, or throne, in “Ḥammāl al-karāsī.” At the heart of this pivotal moment is Idrīs’ invocation of objects as *actors*, rather than merely symbols or structural devices – though they function as these as well. Idrīs’ use of objects is deceptively simple because it calls on a single object and its surrounding aspects to communicate a multitude of possible meanings at once. My analyses will delve deeper into these, but a few significant aspects of this tactic includes the use of objects to invoke fraught discourses concerning ownership, appropriation, power, and modernity as they relate to Egypt’s relationships to Europe and the United States, both in terms of colonial legacies and in terms of the growing influence of global capitalism, which was displacing the primacy of science to some extent in post-WWII, North American dominated conceptions of modernity. I will trace this ownership discourse to the European “discovery” and subsequent theft of ancient Egyptian antiquities and the way in which that discourse took shape in the Egyptian imaginary, for which capitalism marks a continuation and a departure. With regard to the short story specifically, Idrīs’ harnessing of objects in this way is significant because, through it, he finds a means of invoking the collective in the short story without sacrificing the story’s unity of impression – indeed, his use of the chair in “Ḥammāl al-karāsī” in conjunction with its overall narrative succeeds in producing an highly concise, consistent, focused, yet expansive story. And because the chair is not merely a symbol but is also an actor, Idrīs is able to use it to speak to the collective reality and imaginary of the Egyptian people, effectively achieving an aesthetics of *amāra* in that story, and bringing that moment in his career to an effective close after a prolonged struggle.

#### I. “Qā‘ al-madīna:” the irony of darkness

“Qā‘ al-madīna” is set wholly within Cairo and is peopled by Judge Abdullah and his paid servants. The story begins on an even keel, and then slowly descends into an

unrelenting cynicism. Interestingly, Idrīs appears to use Herman Melville’s classic story “Bartelby the Scrivener” (1853) as inspiration for the story early on. The most telling of this initial reference is Idrīs’ drawing of Judge Abdallah as a man of the law and the picture of moderation.

هو رجل متوسط الحال، بل يكاد يكون متوسطا في كل شيء. فهو ليس طويلا، ولا يمكن أن  
تقول انه قصير، كذلك لا هو بالرفيع أو التخين، ولا بالابيض أو الاسمر. بالاختصار اذا أخذنا  
مائة رجل من جميع أنحاء العالم وأخذنا متوسطهم في الطول والوزن والبشرة لوجدنا أماننا  
الإستاذ عبد الله.<sup>306</sup>

[In fact everything about him was average. If one were to pick a hundred men at random from all over the world and consider their height and weight and the colour of their skin, the result would be something like Judge Abdallah. There were no extremes about him.<sup>307</sup>]

The story begins with the Judge losing his watch, which then sends him down an extreme path to reclaim it. His fanatic response to the losing of his watch is presented as being elevated by his otherwise fanatic moderation, so that,

ماذا يفعل ضياع الساعة في حياة؟<sup>308</sup>

[such an event as losing his watch was bound to cause a ripple.<sup>309</sup>]

I mention the story’s kinship with “Bartelby” primarily because of strains of criticism that have emphasized the latter’s narrative of “free will” as a critique of modernity. This perspective is based on the relationship the story shares with Jonathan Edwards’ “Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will” and Joseph Priestley’s *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity* (1777), both of which focus on the discourses of determinism and free will that were occurring the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. One of the dictates of Edwards’ “Inquiry” is that free will is possible when the will occurs in isolation from the moment of decision.<sup>310</sup> Melville brings this conception of the free will to extremes

<sup>306</sup> Yūsuf Idrīs, “Qā’ al-madīna,” in *Qā’ al-madīna* (Cairo: publisher unknown, n.d.) p. 220.

<sup>307</sup> Yūsuf Idrīs, “The Dregs of the City,” trans. Wadida Wassef 1978, in ed. Denys Johnson-Davies, *The Essential Yusuf Idris: Masterpieces of the Egyptian Short Story* (Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 2009) p. 73.

<sup>308</sup> Literally: “What might the loss of a watch do to one’s life?” Idrīs, “Qā’ al-madīna,” p. 221.

<sup>309</sup> Idrīs, “The Dregs of the City,” p. 73.

<sup>310</sup> Jonathan Edwards, Part I, sections 1 & 2, in “Freedom of the Will,” *The Reformed Reader* (1999) Accessed 18 July 2016, < <http://www.reformedreader.org/rbb/edwards/fowindex.htm>>.

in the figure of Bartelby and his oft-repeated phrase “I prefer not to,” as a way of repeatedly rejecting the will of others being imposed upon him in any manner, for better or worse. Even as the personal consequences of his actions continue to pile up, he insists on his own will and seemingly refuses to see or acknowledge its destructive results, even to the realization of his own death.

Idrīs builds on Melville’s critique of free will as a constructive aspect of the modern through the figure of Judge Abdallah. Unlike Bartelby, however, the Judge comes out “on top” in the end and his isolation from the rest of society is held up as a source of his power, especially over others. It is an indicator of Idrīs’ cynicism on the topic as it relates to the willful “blindness” of the privileged classes in Egypt, however the ending is not the only point of the story. Idrīs emphasizes the conscious “journey” required for a person of education and privilege, like the Judge, to maintain their willful blindness, and the many opportunities presented to do things otherwise. Like “Abū al-Hawl,” “Qā‘ al-madīna” is an allegory of the privileged intellectual’s relationship to his society, and once again the light code plays a significant role to this end, but this time it is realized not only through lightness and darkness, but through the qualities he attributes to objects.

The story is narrated in the third person, and shortly after beginning the story with the loss of the Judge’s watch, the reader is then brought back some weeks or months prior, to the moment when he decides to hire a new household servant. The reader is let in on the fact that he is hiring a new servant because of a renewed sexual desire, and not because of any real need for another servant. He hires a woman named Shohrat, described as a

كانت تبدو كامرأة بلدى مثل غيرها من الاف النساء. امرأة تحس أنها زوجة وأم<sup>311</sup>

[plain, native woman of the people like thousands of others. The sort of woman who is made to be a wife and mother.<sup>312</sup>]

Shohrat is a wife and mother, but the Judge is not concerned with this. He forces her into sexual relations, and eventually, as the act is repeated, her resistance wears away. He begins lending her money, and his feelings about her are increasingly articulated in terms of ownership. But he eventually loses interest in her and cuts back her salary.

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<sup>311</sup> Idrīs, “Qā‘ al-madīna,” p. 235.

<sup>312</sup> Idrīs, “The Dregs of the City,” p. 81.

When his watch goes missing, he immediately suspects her of taking it, and on her day off, he sets out with a couple of his other male servants from his comfortable home in Zamalek to confront Shohrat at her home, amidst the winding streets behind al-Azhar mosque. Along the way he is presented with many opportunities to turn back or do things differently, but in the end he gets his watch back and returns to his life, at extreme cost to Shohrat, who stands in for the Egyptian “people,” but at very little cost to himself.

The story is divided into eight sections, which appear to be the result of adherence to *al-Gumhūriyya*'s serialization of the story rather than any particular need for such divisions. However, because of the length of the story, and the space restrictions of this study, I will focus primarily on the latter seventh and eighth sections, which document the Judge's journey to Shohrat's home to retrieve his watch, and then his return to his own world of privilege. Without a doubt this latter part of the story exhibits the most unity and force, and communicates a stronger unity of impression than the previous six sections, to the point of occupying its own distinct space within the story.

The use of lightness and darkness as he makes his way through Cairo provides a sharp commentary on his place in society as his isolation falls away and he is faced with the world outside his carefully controlled habitat. To retrieve his watch, the Judge decides to leave his home on a journey through Cairo in search of Shohrat, his other lost object, whom he believes to have taken it. Sharaf, Abdallah's long-time but less affluent actor friend, agrees to play the part of a policemen to lend an air of legality to the Judge's journey to bring justice to Shohrat in her home, located in

مكان ما وراء الجامع الأزهر<sup>313</sup>

[a blind alley somewhere behind the mosque of Al Azhar.<sup>314</sup>]

This idea of Shohrat being located in a *blind* alley is a remark conveying her perceived invisibility, which is directly tied to Judge Abdallah's for-granted attitude of ownership toward her. However, as his journey progresses, all of his assumptions, and indeed all of those that Idrīs had communicated through his narrative, experience a gradual inversion.

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<sup>313</sup> Idrīs, “Qā‘ al-madīna,” p. 269.

<sup>314</sup> Idrīs, “The Dregs of the City,” p. 98.

بدأ الأستاذ عبد الله الرحلة وهو فى قمة انشراحه. ضمن الوصول الى شهرت. وضمن المفاجأة. وضمن العثور على الساعة. وضمن الخطة. بدأ الرحلة تماما كالتلميذ المجتهد الذاهب الى امتحان وهو متأكد من النجاح وعلى وجهه اشراقه النصر [...] وكان في شارع الجبلية والشارع طويل نظيف تحفه أشجار مقلمة فروعها مرسومة، والمساحات واسعة والعمارات شامخة وعالية وكل عماره لها نمط وشخصية والمارة نادرون... والهدوء مخيم والسكون تام لا يسمع فيه الا حفيف العربات السارية، وكلها من ماركات فاخرة وموديلات حديثة، والهواء مفتوح النواذ يسرى ناعما رقيقا فى حرية، وموج النيل يمشى على أطراف أصابعه لا يعكر قدسية السكون المستتب [...] وعند أول الكوبرى تلتقى العربية العربيات القادمة من الزمالك والجزيرة والدقى والجزيرة، أسراب جديدة رائعة الألوان كأسراب الطيور تعبر الكوبرى وهى تكاد تطير، وفى دوامة ميدان قصر النيل تتسرب الموديلات القديمة وعربات الاجرة ويوزع الميدان محتوياته ويملاؤها شوارع المدينة حيث الحركة دائمة والاتساع أقل، والبنائيات متلاصقة متقاربة والاصوات قد بدأت تشغل الاسماع، والالوان تتعدد، والماشون على أرجلهم قد بدؤوا فى الظهور. وفى العتبة تختلط العربية بالالوتوبيسات وعربات الترام والمارة والكاروا، وتبدأ الجلابيب، وتعنف الحركة، ولا يبقى ثمة نظام...

وحين يدافون ( يتدافعون؟ ) الى شارع الازهر يصل الصراع الى قمته ويختلط فى بطن الشارع الحابل بالنابل والراكب بالماشى وعويل العجلات وصراخ الكلاكسات وزمامير الكمسارية وزئير الموتورات، وسرعة أجراس الأحصنة، وصفافير عساكر المرور، وزعيق الباعة والمارة والحرارة تصل أوجها والازدحام منتهاه ويصبح لا مكان لفرد وكل شئ بالجملة، الركوب بالجملة والشراء بالجملة والحوادث أيضا بالجملة والآلات هي التى تتصارع والبقاء للاكبر وبين الحين تسمع: حاسب...كالصرخة الخيرة لقتيل يغرق.<sup>315</sup>

[Abdallah was elated as he started off on his quest for Shohrat. It was a novel and thrilling adventure not only because he was certain to recover his stolen watch but because it was going to prove his perspicacity [...] He could only recall the dim beginning from el Gabalaya Street. The long, clean, shaded street; the open spaces and the tall stylish buildings. The peace and quiet, except for the noiseless flow of elegant cars and a few pedestrians. The air was serene and the Nile flowed gently, and the car glided along as though on a carpet of silk [...] At the bridgehead they are joined by streams of cars pouring from Zamalek and Gezira and Dokki and Quizeh. Bright, colourful, shining, like flocks of birds. In the whirlpool of Kasr el Nik Square their ranks are swelled by shabby cars and taxi-cabs before they diverge to other streets where movement never stops; narrower, with closer buildings, noisier, with more pedestrians [...] It reaches a peak when they turn into Al Azhar Street. Here, it is a madhouse of pedestrians and automobiles, screeching wheels, howling claxons, the whistles of bus conductors and roaring motors [...] From time to time a warning to be careful rises above the din like the last cry of a drowning corpse.<sup>316</sup>]

As the Judge goes further and further from his home, he is presented with another world. Idrīs communicates this change as one that begins in lightness, which is likewise aligned with the serenity, quietude, and order of Zamalek, and then descends into darkness, accompanied by an increase in noise and disorder as they approach Old Cairo.

<sup>315</sup> Idrīs, "Qā' al-madīna," pp. 270-72.

<sup>316</sup> Idrīs, "The Dregs of the City," pp. 98-9.

Upon reaching Shohrat's general neighborhood, they are forced to travel the remainder on foot, since the streets are too narrow to allow cars. It is at this point, when the Judge is stripped of the protection of his car and must walk through the alleyways that he begins to experience his visibility as a liability. Safe within the comfort of his possessions – his watch, his home, his car, his servants – he is secure, unchallenged. But now he begins to see how the male servants accompanying him are comfortable in these dark surroundings; that they know and are on neighborly terms with the people in them. He is not only forced to acknowledge his servants' humanity in this moment and their larger place within Egyptian society, outside the contained walls of his own isolation, but he is further confronted with the distance between himself and the society he now finds himself in, prompting him to question his own position as an Egyptian.

وبعد خطوات قليلة يحس بفراغ فى رأسه وكأنه أصبح وحيدا فى مكان عريق مهجور والضجة ماتت والهدوء قد أصبح شيئا ملموسا وكل ما حوله قد بدأ يهوى أمام ناظره. أنه مصرى مائة فى المائة أبوه من المنيرة وأمه من العباسية وله أقارب فقراء فى الصعيد وسافر ورأى وانتقل وحقق ولمس بنفسه أقصى درجات الحاجة وهو متأكد أنه لا يزال فى القاهرة لم يغادرها وأن المكان الذي يمشى فيه حى من أحيائها ولكن المرئيات تتابع كلما تقدم ويحس بالذهول وبأنه يدلى بحبل فى بئر لا قرار له<sup>317</sup>

[A few paces and Abdallah begins to feel hollow as though he had been left alone in an ancient deserted place. The noise dies down, the quiet is almost tangible. He is Egyptian through and through. His father came from El Mounira and his mother from Upper Egypt. He has travelled a good deal, gone to many places, and seen the extremes of poverty. Yet here was Cairo, and this place where he finds himself is part of it. The incredible scenes unfolding before his eyes amaze him beyond belief as he delves further in as though he were sinking in a bottomless pit.<sup>318</sup>]

He is shown as being foreign in this place, his own city, to the extent that the people will not help him to find Shohrat; instead, they engage with his servants. The Judge's servant Farghali leads the way:

ويمضون وتحف بهم نظرات مستغربة تتوجس، وراء كل نظرة كلمة غريب، ووراء الغريب تساؤل، ووراء التساؤل خطر [...] ثم يرين فرغلى ويتحققن منه، فتتخفف الهمسات أكثر<sup>319</sup>

<sup>317</sup> Idrīs, "Qā' al-madīna," pp. 273.

<sup>318</sup> Idrīs, "The Dregs of the City," p. 100.

<sup>319</sup> Idrīs, "Qā' al-madīna," pp. 276.

[They walk on, followed by inquisitive looks. And behind every suspicious look the word ‘stranger’ forms, implying danger and distrust. [...] Then they recognize Farghali and their whispers die down.<sup>320</sup>]

This is an allusion to Farghali’s belonging to a community of people, whereas the Judge does not; his regular existence is one of isolation. The very being of Judge Abdallah is shown as being incommunicable with the people he encounters.

وتتقدم البيوت ويفصلها عن الحضر أحقاب وأحقاب، وتصبح النوافذ فتحات ليس فيها غير الحديد، وتخفت الحركة، وتندر الحوانيت وتتقطع ويصبح بين البقال والبقال مشوار [...] تتضخم الملامح وتغمق الوجوه وتنبت اللحى وتغزر الشوارب وتتناقص الملابس ويصبح البنطلون بلا قميص والجلباب بلا سروال وتتفتت اللغة الى أنصاف كلمات وأرباع وتعبيرات لا يفهما سوى أصحابها وتخفى روائح الدكاكين وتمتلئ الانوف بروائح [...] التقلية والملوخية متصاعدة من البيوت<sup>321</sup>

[Eons of time separate the dilapidated dwellings from modern times, the windows are narrow slits with iron bars [...] Features are coarse, faces are darker and beards begin to sprout. [...] Language breaks down to a jargon of grunts, and kitchen smells ride on the air [...]]

As they keep on towards their destination the winding lanes and alleys lead to a place without substance where everything melts into everything else [...] The smells of the earth mingles with the smell of humanity, and the low broken murmurs mix with the barking of dogs and the creaking of old gates, and the dead slow movement of inanimate creatures. The low grimy dwellings are a continuation of the graveyard, stretching forward as far as the eye can see.<sup>322</sup>]

The descent into increasingly darkness – represented through the people, the streets, the buildings, everything – is used as an indicator of distance traveled through time and space. It is a world in which the Judge’s “modern” ideas about himself and his free will and his place in society is not recognized and holds very little validity. It is a place where society is still very much marked by collectivity, and where outsiders are detected easily. “Speech” here is not restricted to the spoken word, but is communicable through one’s gait, clothes, bearing. Judge Abdallah does not “speak” *amāra* and so must confer on his servants to do so on his behalf. When his servant Farghali is unsure of the location of Shohrat’s home,

<sup>320</sup> Idrīs, “The Dregs of the City,” p. 102.

<sup>321</sup> Idrīs, “Qā‘ al-madīna,” pp. 274.

<sup>322</sup> Idrīs, “The Dregs of the City,” pp. 100-1.

سأل احدى الجالسات فتشير الى بيت قريب، وينتقل الاسم من لسان الى لسان وكل لسان يضيف  
كلمة وتخميننا<sup>323</sup>

[He asks one of the women sitting at their doors who points to a house not far off. The name is carried from mouth to mouth, collecting conjecture as it travels.<sup>324</sup>]

He exhibits surprise at his sudden outsider status. Idrīs' relentless use of darkness here feels like a constant harping, a compounding of the distance between the Judge and the rest of collective humanity, and of his increasing awareness of the difference as it is made visible through darkness – representing an inversion of the presumed relationship between lightness as visibility and darkness as invisibility.

In this way, the darkness serves as an intervention in the perception of the collective Egyptian masses as ignorant and lacking autonomy. Indeed, as the Judge enters into the dark world outside his isolated existence, he is faced with the fact that he is as good as a foreigner here, and that he must rely entirely on the knowledge and collective togetherness of the people among whom Shohrat lives in order to achieve his ends. Being unable to do so himself, he relies on others to do it for him. Thus, the darkness here is not used as a symbol of a lack of knowledge, but rather as the state that encompasses the Judge's being and perception. The third-person narration emphasizes the Judge's perspective as one of derision and disgust in the terms used to describe the darkness he is entering into. And yet Idrīs nonetheless manages that the darkness that the Judge sees is not a reflection of reality, but is instead a reflection of the Judge's assumptions regarding his own position. Idrīs descends the reader into darkness in order to demonstrate that the only people with the knowledge of "the way" – to justice in the figure of Shohrat, and to modernity in the figure of the watch – are those who are perceived to exist in a state of nameless, faceless darkness.

Abdallah and his helpers finally locate Shohrat with their help of her neighbors in a dark house whose

وبابه كفوهة العجوز الاترم وعود الكبريت لا ينفع ويهوى الى أرض المدخل، اذ الارض  
منخفضة ولزجة وكلها طين، والمدخل واسع كقبوة الفرن المهجور<sup>325</sup>

<sup>323</sup> Idrīs, "Qā' al-madīna," p.276.

<sup>324</sup> Idrīs, "The Dregs of the City," p. 102.

<sup>325</sup> Idrīs, "Qā' al-madīna," p. 277.

[interior is like the mouth of a toothless hag.<sup>326</sup>]

It is the epitome of darkness, and the Judge is shaken by what he finds and disoriented by the sharp contrasts he has experienced within the space of minutes, from the beginning of his journey in Zamalek to this foreign place. Yet, despite his astonishment at finding Shohrat in such squalor and the realization that she is the head of her family, supporting many dependents, and despite the shock he experiences from living it himself in that moment, he is still determined in his task.

لا يدري لماذا يهدد ولماذا هو مصر، ولماذا لا يرحم، ولماذا لا يزداد قسوة<sup>327</sup>

[He does not know why he persists, why he has no mercy, nor why he is not more ruthless.<sup>328</sup>]

Idrīs presents this moment as a possibility for learning, for self-reflection, and for change. He brought the Judge to this pit of darkness as a manner of undoing the Judge’s mislead existence; this is presented as the hopeful conclusion to the unraveling the Judge’s persona that has to this point been built on a façade enabled through his sense of ownership of the watch, a symbol of his free will. Nevertheless, he refuses to relent, summoning Sharaf the fake police officer accompanied by the threat of a year in prison, until she finally gives the watch back to him. At that point he has the opportunity to refuse the watch, to let Shohrat have it and in doing so, to “speak” *amāra*; to display his understanding and a newfound ability to be of the collective. Idrīs shows the reader the possibility, presents the epiphanic moment of understanding and possibility, and what the implications of a language of sociality means, before snatching the opportunity away. The Judge refuses the opportunity presented to him, and assumes ownership of the watch once again, returning it to his wrist before going back home to Zamalek, and to his isolated, safe world.

وتختلط العربات بالسابلة. عربات كارو أول الأمر، ثم أجرة مستهلكة ثم أجرة وملاكي .  
وأوتوبيس  
ويتسع صدره وكأنما انزاح عنه كابوس، ويزداد اتساعاً، ويخف الهواء ويخف، وتقل أحماله  
وتكبر رفته، والدنيا تتفتح وتتفتح.<sup>329</sup>

<sup>326</sup> Idrīs, “The Dregs of the City,” p. 102.

<sup>327</sup> Idrīs, “Qā‘ al-madīna,” p. 280.

<sup>328</sup> Idrīs, “The Dregs of the City,” p. 105.

[He leaves the push-carts behind and joins the fleet of taxi-cabs and buses and private cars. The nightmare is over. The air is lighter, the world looks brighter.<sup>330</sup>]

## II. Judge Abdallah's watch: late capitalism and materiality

The year of "Qā' al-madīna"'s publication marked a critical one for Egypt's relations with the west. Abd el-Nasser's presidency caused tensions with Europe (the UK and France), Israel, and the United States, the former of whom had enjoyed an occupational presence in Egypt under the King, and the latter for whom Egypt presented an opportunity for global economic and political expansion in its ascendancy as a world power after WWII. Abd el-Nasser endeavored on a campaign of socialist economic policies intended to redistribute wealth and land, and in 1956 he nationalized the Suez Canal, leading to the invasion of Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel. The tensions resulting from the changing dynamics of foreign involvement in Egyptian life exacerbated those that had already been growing for a century, adding urgency to the questions of Egyptian self-determinism and identity in the face of such influences. Many Egyptians were all the more inclined toward the benefits of American-style consumerism because of their poverty, and where science had represented the exemplary scenario of European style modernization in previous decades, so now consumerism was beginning to encroach on its place.

Idrīs reflects this in the figure of Judge Abdallah. Through him, the reader is shown a man who embodies the logical culmination of an adherence to self-determinism that is being serviced by the lure of consumerism to realize it. His adherence to western conceptions of modernity is compounded by his foreignness. Although Abdallah is Egyptian, he has become isolated from his compatriots and his culture. This is explicitly stated in his journey with Farghali to find Shohrat, where he is referred to as a foreigner. But it is also present in his domicile, which is located in Zamalek, a well-known British and American ex-patriot neighborhood in Cairo. And it is present in his conceptions of ownership, where he is willing to obtain an object he deems to be his at the expense of his own country (read: Shohrat). In this dynamic, Shohrat's (read: Egypt's) position is murky and fluctuates between the allure of material gain for herself and the need to

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<sup>329</sup> Idrīs, "Qā' al-madīna," p. 284.

<sup>330</sup> Idrīs, "The Dregs of the City," p. 107.

provide for her family first and foremost; it is made all the murkier by her willingness to use her charms to advance in a world in which she is otherwise deemed worthless according to prevailing conceptions of modernity. Material gain represents to her – like the Judge – the opportunity to gain visibility and autonomy. This is reflective of Egypt’s position as a strategic political and economic asset to western countries, for which she is rewarded only if she is willing to cede her resources and autonomy for their benefit.

The major question that Idrīs raises here concerns objectification, and the watch occupies the potentialities of the variable conceptions of it as represented in the figures of the Judge and Shohrat. The watch is a mimetic embodiment of an idea of *amāra* whose danger derives from its ability to surpass the local and actually figure the human condition. It is a metonym for consumerism and the unfolding of the story pertains to the possible outcomes that an adherence to *consumerism as modernity* might incite. However, the watch also represents *amāra* at a local level, which is reflected in the fact of the watch’s *bias* as an *actor* in the unfolding events. Because the watch speaks to the human condition, it undeniably also speaks to the Egyptian context in which Idrīs presents it, and this is its power. Idrīs shows that the watch gleams, it gives light, and therefore it gives visibility to he or she who possesses it. In this simple overlay of the light code and the object, Idrīs communicates a profound understanding with and empathy for the social validity that such a possession might bestow. However, the watch is not a passive object in the tale. In drawing Shohrat’s life and surroundings in such a bottomless darkness, he is acknowledging the extent of her invisibility; the extent of her powerlessness, of her lack of personhood as she or anyone else might have a right to expect it. Idrīs describes her home as a place unfit for human life, a place where cockroaches go to die:

والدولاب طوله متر وطلاؤه بني وفوقه طبقة سوداء سميكة وداخله حبة بطاطس مسلوقة عليها  
صرصار.<sup>331</sup>

[The cupboard is one meter wide, painted brown under a thick coat of grime. Inside, a dead roach and a boiled potato.<sup>332</sup>]

<sup>331</sup> Idrīs, “Qā‘ al-madīna,” pp. 280-1.

<sup>332</sup> Idrīs, “The Dregs of the City,” p. 105. A closer translation of this would be “The cupboard is a meter in length, painted brown under a thick coat of grime. Inside, there is a cockroach on top of a boiled potato.” It is not clear from the Arabic whether the cockroach is dead or alive.

And as such, a place where something such as the gleam of a watch may make a noted difference in circumstance. That the watch brings no pleasure to the Judge after he has it to himself again but instead causes him pain reinforces the watch's preference for Shohrat despite the fact that it was not "hers" according to prevailing conceptions of ownership determined through a consumerist paradigm.

The first six sections are a drawn out narrative concerning the Judge's attitudes towards a variety of things. One of the most important here and in setting up the latter two sections is his attitude regarding ownership. Vivally, he is shown to view the watch and Shohrat and his relationship to them in strikingly similar terms. The following two mirroring passages offer a salient summation of this. Of his watch:

إذ كان منقبضاً لضياح الساعة، لا لأنها أثرية، أو ذات قيمة [...] كانت ساعة عادية جداً [...] لم تكن ثمينة اذن، ولكنه ما كاد يوقن أنها ضاعت حتى انقبض [...] لو كان هو الذي ألقاها بيده من النافذة لما أحس بلمحة أسف، ولكن ضياعها هكذا عنوة، ورغما عنه شيء يستثير الضيق والتحدي.<sup>333</sup>

[He was nagged by the usual sense of loss one can't help feeling for even the most trivial objects. This watch for instance was worth nothing in itself, and only the fact that he had lost it enhanced its value. [...] He didn't particularly care for it. Nevertheless, it annoyed him to part with it. Had he flung it out of the window himself he would probably not have felt a pang of regret. But losing it in this fashion irritated him in spite of himself.<sup>334</sup>]

And of Shohrat:

وأصبح جسدها في يده كالورقة المهملة التي يستطيع متى شاء أن يكورها ويلقيها في سلة المهملات ... لم يعد يفكر في شهرت كثيراً أو قليلاً. أصبح وجودها في الشقة شيئاً عادياً مثل الفاز الموضوع في ركن الانترية<sup>335</sup>

[Her body was nothing but a piece of property<sup>336</sup> he could throw on the scrap heap any time. [...] Shohrat did not count one way or another. She could be another of those bits of bric-à-brac cluttering his flat for all he cared.<sup>337</sup>]

<sup>333</sup> Idrīs, "Qā' al-madīna," pp. 218-9.

<sup>334</sup> Idrīs, "The Dregs of the City," pp. 72-3.

<sup>335</sup> Idrīs, "Qā' al-madīna," pp. 150-1.

<sup>336</sup> The literal translation would be of here would be that her body "becomes like a discarded paper," rather than "a piece of property."

<sup>337</sup> Idrīs, "The Dregs of the City," p. 89.

The Judge goes on with this line of thinking in his head, considering Shohrat as an object to be won in order to please his ego, rather than out of any sense of human connection. There are obvious conclusions that can be drawn regarding the Judge's attitude towards women and towards humanity, and how these attitudes are informed by his capitalist mindset, and indeed these are powerful aspects of Idrīs' narrative. But I am using them here as a manner of setting up the latter sections of the story, in which Idrīs converges strong ideas about objects (including what or *who* may be reasonably classified as an object) and ownership with the light code he had by this point perfected. In particular, the above excerpts illustrate the degree to which the loss of the Judge's "objects" irritates him because their loss represents a failure of his will to possess them, even as he takes them for granted when they are firmly in his grasp. Idrīs thus uses a discourse of ownership to comment upon free will amongst the Egyptian elite.

The watch has been shown as a kind of charm that facilitates the Judge's self-made persona, the loss of which sets him on a literal and metaphorical journey that unravels his image down to the essence of his character, and the eventual retrieval of which prompts him to quickly resume his initial façade. As the story comes to a conclusion, the Judge stands on his terrace, and the message of his position is compounded through a passage that illuminates the relationship between the light code and object.

وكانت الشرفة تشهد - كعادتها كل ليلة - ما يطراً على القاهرة من تغيير ساحر مذهل.  
النور القوي الذى كان يضيئ المدينة طيلة النهار أخذت حدته تهمد، ولونه يشحب ويتغير وكأن  
يدا خفية قد امتدت الى شعلة الشمس الموقدة ومستها. واصفر الضوء فاصفرت المدينة. وانطلقت  
من خلالها آلاف من شعاعات الشمس الاربعة وزجاج النوافذ يعكسها ويزغلل بها الناظر  
واحمر الضوء.  
وتلبدت السماء وحدها بالحمرة. أما المدينة فقد كستها رمادية مغربية زرقاء.  
ثم اسودت الارض.  
وأظلمت السماء.  
وكاد الليل يبتلع المدينة لولا ملايين من أضواء صغيرة بذرت فوق سطح الارض، وما لبثت أن  
نبئت، وتغذت على الظلام وترعرعت، وأصبحت أبوابا براقاً تلمع وتبرق  
ثم نضجت الاضواء، وتفتحت لها أزهار، وانتشرت فى جو المدينة أنوار حمراء وخضراء  
وزرقاء وصفراء ذات أشكال وأسماء وأنواع  
واستحال الظلام الى نفال

كانت الشرفة هي التي تشهد رغم أن الاستاذ عبد الله كان لا يزال جالساً فيها، مستلقياً على الكرسي  
المريح، رأسه ثابتة لا تتحرك، وعيناه ساهمتان مثبتتان كعيني ميت وعقله هائم تائه غير مكترث بالنهار  
الذى ولى أو الليل الذى اقبل يحرق فى الفراغ المطبق المظلم، ويجوب، دون أن يحرك رأسه، سماء المدينة  
ذات المحصول الوافر من الاضواء، ويهيم، ويحاول أن يركز انتباهه وبصره فى نقطة تائهة فى ظلال  
الليل، بعيدة عن الاضواء، واقعة لا بد هناك، هناك فى أقصى المدينة، وراء منڈنة الأزهر. يهيم يهيم وبين  
الحين والحين يبرق معدن الساعة الملفوفة حول معصمه فيخطف بصره، ويجذب عينيه الغارقتين فى

الظلام وبحس بشئ ملتهب ينبثق في صدره كالنزييف، ويكز على شفثيه دون أن يدري كنه ما يتملكه،  
وينفجر في رأسه خاطر ملح : أن يخلع الساعة ويرميها على طول يده في النيل.  
عير أنه لم ينفذ الخاطر أبدا.<sup>338</sup>

[The glaring light of day was slowly fading as if an invisible hand were turning off the sun-disk. The city paled as the light faded. The rays of the sinking sun dazzled the eye as they broke on the window panes. The sky was tinged with red and, below, the city took on the evening hue of steel before it settled in nocturnal blackness. It was almost totally engulfed by the night except for the myriad lights speckled on the surface.

The terrace was alone to observe the scene. Judge Abdallah was far away, brooding, motionless, scanning the face of the sky. His thoughts were hovering around a spot, lost in the shadows, somewhere beyond the minaret of al-Azhar. From time to time the metallic sheen of his watch would flash before his sight, and a scathing sensation would gush like a hemorrhage, urging him to fling it away into the river.

But he never did.<sup>339</sup>]

Once again, darkness is used to obscure the ability to see the continuity of Egyptian life as it is perceived from the heights of a privileged perspective. And as darkness descends, lightness becomes an attribute of the watch, as it had also been in Shohrat's home. The gleam of the watch here is a reminder to the Judge of his separation from a majority of the experience of Egyptian life, which he had experienced through his own descent into darkness in order to retrieve it. And although he would like to be rid of it so that he may join in an authenticity of experience, he is unwilling to do so. The watch represents the Judge's privilege but it also represents the shackles that bind him and keep him apart. He is bound within a material existence, in which objects have replaced people, to the point that people – like Shohrat, but also Farghali – are indistinguishable from objects to him. These are the moralistic aspects of the story, intended as an allegory of the human cost of rapid urbanization and consumer capitalist ideals, and the profound discrepancy between individual and collective interests in this regard – which Idrīs represents by the major shift at the end of the story from the secluded, private space of the Judge's apartment to the public spaces of Cairo, and then back again.

However, there is also a deeper discourse represented through Idrīs' use of the watch in "Qā' al-madīna," encompassed in the watch's figuring in the story as an actor

<sup>338</sup> Idrīs, "Qā' al-madīna," pp. 285-6.

<sup>339</sup> Idrīs, "The Dregs of the City," pp. 107-8.

imbued with its own autonomy. In fact, the watch is introduced in the story before any other “character” including Judge Abdallah. Consider the opening passage:

يكون من المستحيل أن يفقد الإنسان ساعة يده. فهو، إذا خلعها لا بد يضعها في مكان يثق فيه. وإذا ارتداها، فلها جلدة أو (أستيك) يطبق على معصمه ولا يستطيع أمهر نشال أن يفكه. ولهذا فأغرب ما قد يحدث لإنسان أن يقلب يده ليعرف الوقت فلا يجد ساعته في المكان الذي تعود أن يجدها فيه. هو حينئذ يقول لنفسه: لا بد أنني نسيتها في مكان ما، ولا بد أن يتذكر أين، فالأمكنة التي يضطر الإنسان لخلع ساعة يده فيها أمكنة محدودة جداً ومن السهل تذكرها وهذا بالضبط ما حدث للقاضي.  
ففي الجلسة دفعه الملل من المرافعات الطويلة ومناكفات المحاميين إلى النظر في ساعته، وفوجئ حين لم يجدها. وبينما كان محامي المدعي عليه يسوق دفعا فرعيا كان عقل الأستاذ عبدالله القاضي يعمل بسرعة فائقة ليتذكر أين يمكن أن يكون قد نسي الساعة.<sup>340</sup>

[It is almost impossible for a person to lose his wrist-watch, because usually if one takes it off one keeps it in a place that is safe and if one has it on, the strap, or whatever contraption keeps it in place, is so firm that even a skilled pickpocket can do nothing with it. That’s why it must be a strange feeling for a man to turn his wrist in order to know the time and find his watch missing. “Must have left it somewhere,” he says to himself and soon remembers where, because there aren’t many places where one’s likely to leave a wrist-watch lying about. That’s what happened to the judge.

In the middle of a court session boredom drove him to want to know the time and when he turned his wrist, his watch wasn’t there. And while the lawyer for the defense was pleading the cause for the defendant, Judge Abdallah was mentally reviewing all the places where he could have left his watch.<sup>341</sup>]

What is interesting here is how Idrīs draws the watch as possessing an autonomy and level of control above and beyond that of the Judge. Therefore, when the watch goes missing, the effect on the Judge is akin to that of a servant whose leader has gone missing. This is reinforced during the only two moments in the story where the watch is “shown:” in Shohrat’s home and at the very end of the story as the Judge contemplates throwing it into the river. In the former, the Judge is confronted with the repercussions of his own actions in seeing Shohrat’s destitution, and his thought process conveys something like shame at the lengths to which he was willing to go to get it back:

<sup>340</sup> Idrīs, “Qā‘ al-madīna,” p. 216.

<sup>341</sup> Idrīs, “The Dregs of the City,” p. 71.

وتتمدها إليه دون أن ترفع بصرها [...] وتبرق الساعة في اليد الممدودة، ويجذبه البريق، ويتناولها، ويتفحصها، ويفرح بها فرحاً صبيانياً كما يفعل الأطفال [...] ويجد نفسه على السلم. ويتنبه ويتوقف، ويركبه إحساس خفي أنه أخطأ.<sup>342</sup>

[She hands it over without looking up [...] The watch is shining brightly in his outstretched palm, and the sight of it fills him with a childish joy [...] He must go. At the top of the stairs as he starts to move, he suddenly slows down, gripped by a feeling that he has done wrong.<sup>343</sup>]

But in the latter, once again the Judge expresses a sense of shame in his position. Each time he encounters the watch he is presented with a moment of reflection, but in both instances he displays a baffling commitment to his ownership of the watch above his own interests as well as the interests of Shohrat and her family. Interestingly, the reality of these encounters undercuts the Judge's own imaginings of his relationship to the watch when he was searching for it but was not yet sharing a space with it. Recall how earlier in the story he had expressed its worthlessness to him, and that it was only valuable because it was missing.

The relationship between the watch and the Judge is thus akin to that of master and slave, though the Judge likes to think that the watch is his possession to do with as he wishes. His conception of material ownership in the matter is what drives him. The reader is not given nearly as much of a glimpse into Shohrat's motivations for taking the watch, but we are told that she does so after the Judge's attentions towards her diminish and he cuts back her salary as punishment. She takes the watch because she feels that it is compensation for the hard work for which she is not longer being adequately paid; we are left with the impression that it is owed to her, but will not be given to her willingly, and therefore she takes it for herself. This shows that the Judge and Shohrat have very different ideas about ownership. The passage in which the Judge encounters Shohrat at her home and is faced with her poverty elucidates the nature of this difference. The Judge does not need the watch, he doesn't particularly care for the watch (when it is in his possession), and in fact the watch makes him feel badly about himself. Yet his ownership of it is enough to justify his actions in his opinion. Ownership to him is possession in isolation with personal adornment as a means of confirming the personal aspirations of his being. For Shohrat, who owns almost nothing and lives a life of bare sustenance, the concept of possession is fleeting. Interestingly, however, Idrīs falls short

<sup>342</sup> Idrīs, "Qā' al-madīna," pp. 281-2.

<sup>343</sup> Idrīs, "The Dregs of the City," pp. 105-6.

of glorifying Shohrat by insisting on her stealing of the watch as a simple means of providing for her family, which would make her an exaggeratingly sympathetic character. Indeed, her family seems to know nothing of the watch in their home, and combined with the material goods she had lavished upon herself when the Judge had been more inclined toward her, her intentions appear murky. She is at once fighting for her family, but Idrīs is careful to convey that she is also fighting for a degree of personal autonomy like that enjoyed by the Judge (a later story of Idrīs' called "al-Naddāha" (The Siren), provides a probing elaboration of this theme). So while her concept of ownership appears fleeting, it is implied to be so by virtue of Shohrat's poverty and her inconsistency.

Is she a virtuous wife and mother merely trying to support her family? Or is she a woman of weak moral convictions willing to sacrifice her virtue for her own gain? Is she to be held up as the example of the righteous Egyptian woman who is to be pitied for her place in society? Or does she in fact already possess her own autonomy and merely manipulates circumstances to her own benefit? The Judge himself seems unable to decide, wondering at once why he is not more lenient with her, and why he does not treat her more harshly. It is implied that the answer to these questions is the determining factor in his decision to leave her be and keep the watch, versus taking the watch and ruining her life. His conviction towards the latter is only decided upon when she puts up a fierce fight in an effort to keep the watch, first denying that she has it and showing incredulity at the slander, to eventually surrendering it. Her determination to keep it through lying confirms to the Judge what he already wished to believe about her, and that which had propelled him down this long journey: that she is a ruthless woman without morals who has brought the situation upon herself.

Idrīs' complex drawing of Shohrat in this way is intentional, as is revealed through her name. The root *shhr* (شهر) at once can be given to mean "defamed," "slander," "malign," "pillory," and "vilify," but it can also mean "illuminate." This returns us to the exploration of the light code in the previous section, elucidating how Idrīs uses surrounding darkness to draw Shohrat's life almost to ironic effect, reflecting not on her, but rather back on the Judge. This complex dichotomy, heightened by her stealing of the watch, is imbued within the polarities of her name. Is she the embodiment of the negative connotations of her name, or is she the embodiment of "illumination" whereby the negative connotations of her name become attributable to those who would harm her?

In this dynamic of ownership and “rights,” Idrīs has written an allegory where the Judge represents so-called “modernizing” foreign influences, Shohrat represents Egypt,<sup>344</sup> and the watch occupies a middle ground between the two. The very influence of Judge Abdallah’s character is based on the extreme figure of western self-determinism, Bartelby. However, the Judge’s character embodies a further dimension of western influence.

The watch is a mimetic embodiment of *amāra* because it speaks the fraught discourse of ownership as it pertains to the Egyptian experience from within and without Egypt in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during which the question of Egypt’s land, resources, and culture seemed to be moving in multiple directions at once, attempting to maintain its autonomy, sometimes forcibly, while also trying to benefit from foreign “involvement.” However, these debates did not emerge with Abd el-Nasser, nor with the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but were part of a much longer discourse concerning outcomes of the modernizing of Egypt from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the problematics of debates over ownership, rights, and objectification were implicitly understood as a larger discourse of the modern Egyptian lived experience. Idrīs’ use of the watch in “Qā’ al-madīna” exploits this larger discourse as it was taking shape in the Egyptian imaginary in the guise of consumerism, and the following chapter will elaborate on the nature of that discourse, and Idrīs’ evolving evocation of it as a way of figuring *amāra* in the Egyptian short story.

### III. The culmination of a prolonged struggle: “Ḥammāl al-karāsī” and Egyptian modernity

“Ḥammāl al-karāsī” represents a culmination of Idrīs’ vision with regard to Egyptianizing the short story. With this story, his prolonged struggle of imbuing the short story with a collective voice – the narrative impulse of *amāra* –, writing against its individualistic leanings, is finally realized. In this way, Idrīs reveals an Egyptianized conception of modernity that is not at odds with the past, and, indeed, that the only thing preventing an Egyptian conception of modernity is the belief that it rests elsewhere. Building on the power of material objects to invoke powerful societal discourses, as he

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<sup>344</sup> For more on the embeddedness of female gender representations on conceptions of nationalism in Egypt, see: Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 2005).

had done over a decade prior with “Qā‘ al-madīna,” he centers the story around the chair, or throne, that is being carried through the contemporary streets of Cairo by an ancient Egyptian man. The chair at once serves as a symbol of meaning, as a character or *actor* in the narrative, and as a structural device. Its multifaceted-ness means that Idrīs is able to overcome the problem of individual voices and unwieldy narratives in order to achieve a unity of impression in the short story while at the same time speaking beyond individualistic narratives, or even the purely allegorical. It is possible to say that, with “Ḥammāl al-karāsī,” Idrīs has written a language of Egyptian modernity through the short story, and in so doing he has written a language of Egyptian social reality. The minutiae of how he achieves this and the discourses he harnesses will be the topic of this section, however first it is helpful to provide some historical context.

“Ḥammāl al-karāsī” is a particularly interesting work within Idrīs’ corpus for its being one of the first works he published following the catastrophic events of Egypt’s six-day war with Israel in 1967. The totality of the defeat, and the nature in which it was handled, created a crisis amongst Egypt’s intellectuals regarding the parameters of their roles with relation to the state as opposed to the people, with regard to politics as opposed to culture, and the nature of their own failures that may have lead to, exacerbated, or informed the events of 1967 and its effects on the country. Idrīs fell into a deep, brooding disillusionment following the Six-Day War, retreating to the countryside to relieve his mental pain.<sup>345</sup> He placed the defeat squarely at the feet of Nasser, and several of his stories published in 1968 and ’69 offer critical, sometimes despotic or grotesque allegorical caricatures of Nasser, like “al-Nuqṭa” (The Point) “al-‘Amaliyya al-kubrā” (The Major Operation), “al-Khud‘a” (The Deception) and “ar-Riḥla” (The Journey). “Ar-Riḥla,” for example, narrates a story via monologue of a car journey in which the narrator is accompanied by a dead body by means of communicating Idrīs’ “spiritual journey” with Nasser,<sup>346</sup> which had been so marked by loathing and fear but also periodically tempered by hope. In the story, he seems to try to question his own role in that relationship:

لماذا كنت تصر وتلح أن أتنازل عن رأيي وأقبل رأيك؟ لماذا كنت دائما أتمرده؟ لماذا كرهتك في  
أحيان؟ لماذا تمنيت في لحظات أن تموت لأتحرر؟<sup>347</sup>

<sup>345</sup> Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 41.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.* p. 158.

<sup>347</sup> Yūsuf Idrīs, “al-Riḥla,” in *Bayt min laḥm* (Cairo: Dār Misr al-Ṭalibā‘a, 1990) p. 73.

[Why did you press me and insist I must renounce by own opinion and adopt your point of view? And why did I always revolt and why did I loathe you sometimes? Why I now and then wished you dead in order to regain my freedom?<sup>348</sup>]

Set within these searching narratives that fluctuate between franticness and complete passivity and seem to express Idrīs' sense of loss and discouragement,<sup>349</sup> "Ḥammāl al-karāsī" is perhaps surprising in that it offers a strikingly sober, concise, unified narrative that encompasses the major intellectual struggle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in writing a modernity that comes from within the Egyptian consciousness and imaginary, while also acknowledging the very nature of the obstacle to that struggle as something located in the realm of untranslatable "speech." El-Desouky summarizes the thematic thrust of the story:

The individualized figure of the Chair Carrier is an abstracted and allegorized figuration of the Egyptian people – a metaphorization of the people in their historically servile condition in relation to ruling powers, which amounts to a figure of the political imagination. As such it is a fitting critique of the Nasserist state revolutionary ideology, to which the majority of intellectuals and media producers contributed directly or indirectly, and which ended up abstracting collective social realities and fitting them into a the politically molded categories of the state's socialist national agendas.<sup>350</sup>

Once again, Idrīs conceives the social impulse of *amāra* aesthetics as one of demystification. However, as will be seen, his process of critiquing the abstracting of collective social realities that resulted from Nasserist ideology nevertheless engages in its own abstraction of collective social realities. The symbol of the chair in many ways saves the narrative from becoming alienating, however, because it points to the *nature* of a shared condition but not the minutiae of that condition. And yet the chair has its own power. Al-‘Alim refers to it as a burden,<sup>351</sup> and yet the story presents it also as a solution, albeit one whose impact remains hidden.

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<sup>348</sup> Translation by Kurpershoek in *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 158.

<sup>349</sup> Kurpershoek summarizes retrospective statements Idrīs made in an interview with him in June 1978, saying that, "objectively there was not a ray of hope to be descried after the war of 1967, but since he had reached ultimate despair, he realized that whatever the future would bring could only be for the better" (Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 153).

<sup>350</sup> El-Desouky, *The Intellectual and the People*, p. 34.

<sup>351</sup> Al-‘Alim, *Arabu'un 'aman min al-naqd al-tatbiqi*, p. 50.

“Ḥammāl al-karāsī” begins with a present-day Egyptian man – the narrator - catching sight of an ancient Egyptian peasant carrying a large chair, described as a throne, through the streets of modern Cairo. When the narrator/modern Egyptian questions the chair carrier about his purpose, he says that he is looking for Ptah Ra, and that he cannot put down the chair except by token of authorization [*amāra*] from Ptah Ra. After an exasperating exchange, the chair carrier insists on continuing to bear his burden, presumably for all of eternity, prompting a moment of self-reflection at the very end on behalf of the narrator about his own lack of understanding of the chair carrier and his purpose.<sup>352</sup> El-Desouky describes the story as a “dense allegory of the Egyptian people and their historical relations with power,” continuing that, “it is also a condemnation of intellectuals (we see the array of their positions in the narrator’s concluding questions) and their failure to communicate with the people in resonant modes of speech, originating in the expression and recognition of a common fate and a shared destiny.”<sup>353</sup>

The power of the object to shape human destiny, even beyond its mortal limits, is particularly represented in the object of the chair, or throne. Further, the chair represents a metaphorical cross to be borne by the ancient Egyptian man searching for Pta Rah as the surface narrative, and on behalf of the Egyptian people, as El-Desouky points out, as its allegorical meaning, or what Fredric Jameson would consider the “political unconscious” of the text<sup>354</sup> that is so central to conceptions of social realism in the Egyptian short story. As a blatant invocation of Egypt’s Pharaonic past, the chair operates as an in-between space, at once an embedded understanding of a shared “Egyptianism,” which includes past, present, and future in all its diversity, while also invoking the historicized discourse surrounding the appropriation of Egyptian culture,

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<sup>352</sup> For an analysis of “Ḥammāl al-karāsī” and *amāra* as they relate to the relationship between the Egyptian people and intellectuals in Egyptian cultural production, see Ayman A. El-Desouky, *The Intellectual and the People*, pp. 29-37.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>354</sup> Jameson famously expounded a Marxist approach as the only one capable of providing an “adequate account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past [...] and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it” (p. 19). His thesis is that “It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative [of the history of class struggle], in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity” and that “there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, [...] everything is “in the last analysis” political” (p. 20). Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). [This can also contribute to the discussion of realism in Egyptian narratives. Consider moving to chapter 1).

politics, social life, and, in essence, an organically conceived modernity from within the Egyptian experience.

The following passage introduces some vital aspects of the chair's symbolic value. The narrator has just observed the ancient Egyptian with his chair for the first time and provides his first impressions of the spectacle.

كرسي هائل، تراه فتظن أنه قادم من عالم آخر أو أقدم من أجل مهرجان ضخم كأنه مؤسسة، واسع القاعدة، ناعم فرشته من جلد النمر، ومسانده من الحرير. وحلمك كله إذا رأيته أن تجلس عليه مرة أو لحظة. كرسي متحرك بتؤده كأنه موكب المحمل حتى لتظن أنه يتحرك من تلقاء نفسه، وتكاد من الرعب أو الدهول تخر أمامه وتعبده، وتقدم له القرابين. لكن في آخر وقت ألمح بين الأرجل الأربعة الغليظة المنتهية بحوافر ذهبية تلمع، ساقاً خامسة ضامرة غريبة على الفخامة والضخامة، ولكن لا لم تكن ساقاً، كانت إنساناً نحيفاً قد صنع العرق على جسده ترعا ومصارف وأنبت شعراً وغابات وأحراشاً.<sup>355</sup>

[It was a vast chair. Looking at it you'd think it had come from some other world, or that it had been constructed for some festival, such a colossal chair, as though it were an institution all its own, its seat immense and softly covered with leopard skin and silken cushions. Once you'd seen it your great dream was to sit in it, be it just the once, just for a moment. A moving chair, it moved forward with stately gait as though it were in some religious procession. You'd think it was moving of its own accord. In awe and amazement you almost prostrated yourself before it in worship and offered up sacrifices to it.

Eventually, however, I made out, between the four massive legs that ended in glistening gilded hooves, a fifth leg. It was skinny and looked strange amidst all that bulk and splendor; it was, though, no leg but a thin, gaunt human being upon whose body the sweat had formed runnels and rivulets and had caused woods and groves of hair to sprout.<sup>356</sup>]

The narrator goes on to describe the even more alarming fact that

لا أحد من المارة في الأوبرا أو في شارع الجمهورية أو ربما القاهرة كلها يندهش أو يستعجب أو يعامل الأمر إلا وكأنه مسألة عادية مفروغ منها، وكأنه كرسي فراشة يحمله صبي ويمضي به [...] لا شيء مطلقاً.<sup>357</sup>

[none of the passers-by in Opera Square, in Gumhuriyya Street or maybe in the whole of Cairo]

<sup>355</sup> Yūsuf Idrīs, "Ḥammal al-karāsī," in *al-Qiṣaṣ al-qaṣīra* (Beirut: Dār al-Sharūq, 1990) p. 129.

<sup>356</sup> Yūsuf Idrīs, "The Chair Carrier," *The Essential Yusuf Idris: Masterpieces of the Egyptian Short Story*, ed. and trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009) pp. 177-8.

<sup>357</sup> Yūsuf Idrīs, "Ḥammal al-karāsī," p. 130.

seemed to notice anything untoward in the spectacle,

[as if the chair were as light as a butterfly and was being carried around by a young lad [...] there was absolutely no reaction.<sup>358</sup>]

The above summary provides an opportunity to pinpoint three significant aspects for analysis with regard to Idrīs' use of objects here, all of which serve as points of mimetic continuity in his corpus. The first aspect of analysis regarding the chair actually has more to do with the man carrying the chair. Idrīs' treatment of him is peculiar because he is drawn as ancient – an outdated holdover from another era – and yet Idrīs uses his figure, which occurs in a carefully orchestrated “dialogue” with the chair, as representative of a demystified Egyptian modernity. These three aspects together provide a picture of how Idrīs uses objects and the discourses surrounding them in the Egyptian imaginary (*amāra*) to give language to an otherwise silent sociality, and consequently writes the Egyptian short story as a salient language of that sociality. Idrīs melds the two figures into themselves, granting the carrier the qualities one would normally associate with a chair:

ولكن لا لم تكن ساقاً، كانت إنساناً نحيفاً قد صنع العرق على جسده ترعاً ومصارف وأنبت شعراً  
وغابات وأحراشاً.<sup>359</sup>

[it was, though, no leg but a thin, gaunt human being upon whose body the sweat had formed runnels and rivulets and had caused woods and groves of hair to sprout<sup>360</sup>]

while granting the chair characteristics normally associated with a powerful human:

وتكاد من الرعب أو الدهول تخر أمامه وتعبده، وتقدم له القرابين.<sup>361</sup>

[In awe and amazement you almost prostrated yourself before it in worship and offered up sacrifices to it.<sup>362</sup>]

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<sup>358</sup> Idrīs, “The Chair Carrier,” p. 178.

<sup>359</sup> Yūsuf Idrīs, “Ḥammal al-karāsī,” pp. 129-30.

<sup>360</sup> Idrīs, “The Chair Carrier,” p. 178.

<sup>361</sup> Yūsuf Idrīs, “Ḥammal al-karāsī,” p. 129.

<sup>362</sup> Idrīs, “The Chair Carrier,” p. 177.

Idrīs' assignment of human-like characteristics to the chair, and chair-like characteristics to the human, implicates the two in an endless cycle of metonymic possibility. The chair's human-like qualities – moving with a “stately gait,” inspiring humans to prostrate before it as with royalty, its being adorned in fine garments and skins – immediately imbues it with special powers, so to speak. This is in stark contrast to its bearer, who is naked but for a loincloth, is undernourished, and whose worn body conveys an image of a carved piece of wood that has been subdued by the elements. The man himself is but a rotting extension of the exquisite chair.

The carrier tells the narrator that he has been carrying the chair since ancient times, “From the time when the Nile wasn't called the Nile,”<sup>363</sup> and so not only is the chair ancient, but the man carrying it is just as ancient, and the bond between the two of them has lasted for nearly the entirety of their respective existences. Upon encountering them, the narrator has the impression that he is looking at ancient Egyptian artifacts

تحس أنك رأيت له شبيهاً في كتب التاريخ أو الحفريات.<sup>364</sup>

[You had the sensation of having seen his like in books about history or archaeology<sup>365</sup>]

and upon hearing the man speak, he expresses amazement and bafflement

أهو هيروغليفي منطوق بالعربية؟ أم عربية منطوقة بالهيروغليفية؟ أليكون الرجل من المصريين القدماء؟<sup>366</sup>

[Was he speaking hieroglyphics pronounced as Arabic, or Arabic pronounced as hieroglyphics? Could the man be an ancient Egyptian?<sup>367</sup>]

The interaction between the narrator and the chair carrier is profoundly marked by the carrier's perceived ancient-ness. From the first, the narrator expresses disbelief at the carrier and his chair's existences in such a modern setting as contemporary Cairo, and his disbelief is only compounded in hearing the chair carrier speak. To his “modern” understanding, something so ancient must surely be confined to silence,

<sup>363</sup> Idrīs, “The Chair Carrier,” p. 179.

<sup>364</sup> Idrīs, “Ḥammal al-karāsī,” pp. 130-1.

<sup>365</sup> Idrīs, “The Chair Carrier,” p. 178.

<sup>366</sup> Idrīs, “Ḥammal al-karāsī,” p. 131.

<sup>367</sup> Idrīs, “The Chair Carrier,” p. 178.

remembered in a static, non-living, unobtrusive form. Idrīs' portrayal of the ancient man and his chair is a reimagining of the Pharaonic narratives which had capitalized on the rediscoveries of ancient Egyptian artifacts in order to incorporate the ancient past into the ongoing reconceptualizations of Egypt's modernity.

The second aspect of analysis speaks to the legacy of the light code and has to do with the idea of visibility, and specifically visibility as knowledge and/or ignorance. For example, the narrator can see the chair carrier, but he goes unnoticed by the rest of the people in Cairo. The discourse Idrīs creates around the nucleus of this fact strengthens the singularity of the object (the chair) as a mimetic symbol. Further, because the chair and the carrier occupy a material, visible presence, taking up physical space in the presence of the narrator, their existence creates anticipation concerning the knowledge that will come from the narrator's act of *seeing* them. And this is indeed the very crux of the story, because it is the narrator's *seeing* the chair and the carrier that prompts his disbelief and forces him to confront an aspect of reality that he assumed was not only relegated to an unreachable and possibly irrelevant ancient past, but to further acknowledge that he is somewhat unique in this assumption. This is indicated by the fact that no one else seems to give any notice to the chair and the carrier. Idrīs gives no indication that he intends any sort of magical realist or ghost-invoking symbolism here, and to do so would be at odd with his overall artistic style, which always or nearly always privileges the materiality of material figures for what they are, and not as illusions.<sup>368</sup> The implication of this is that the Egyptian "people," overall take for granted the validity of their historical and cultural heritage as constituting an integral aspect of their present. However, the narrator, whose interaction with the chair carrier (excerpted further down) displays his privileging of rationality and logic to determine what he considers valid, and it is for this reason that the chair and the carrier are at odds with his conceptions of reality.

The narrator begins questioning the ancient man on the grounds that he is needlessly carrying a chair, a relic of a past millennia, which the former views as pointless and ill-advised. Pointless because, as he sees it,

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<sup>368</sup> Idrīs' style undergoes a profound shift in the early 1970s, taking on more psychological aspects that play with the ideas of what is real and what is not, however this is not part of his corpus for the first two decades, which constitutes my focus. For more on his late stories, see:

دا الكراسي اتعملت عشان تشيل الناس مش عشان الناس تشيلها.<sup>369</sup>

[Chairs are made to carry people, not for people to carry them.<sup>370</sup>]

This signifies a fundamental shift in the entire purpose of a chair, and of a person's function in relation to that chair. There is a further gap in the concept of free will, which the narrator takes as a given, but which the ancient Egyptian does not comprehend; indeed, he has been assigned the qualities of a piece of carved wood, and therefore considerations of free will have no bearing on him.

Further, the chair, which appears "an institution all its own," is presented as a stand-in for authority. The carrier describes how,

من أيام سمو النيل<sup>371</sup>

"From a time when the Nile wasn't called the Nile,"<sup>372</sup>

Ptah Ra had ordered him to carry the chair. He explains:

من أيام ما سمو النيل، ونقلوا العاصمة من الجبل للضفة، جابني عمك بتاح وقال لي شيل  
يا شيال! شلت، وادور عليه في سلقط ملقط بعد كدا- عشان يقول لي حط. من يومها للنهاردا  
مش لاقية.<sup>373</sup>

[I took it up and ever since I've been wandering all over the place looking for him to tell me to put it down, but from that day to this I've not found him.<sup>374</sup>]

This is significant, because it points to the fact that, though our modern narrator takes the fairly recent conception of free will as central to his being and does not recognize the authority of such a long-dead figure as Ptah Ra, he is nonetheless constrained within a parallel reality of servitude that renders his free will a delusion.

<sup>369</sup> Idrīs, "Ḥammal al-karāsī," p. 132.

<sup>370</sup> Idrīs, "The Chair Carrier," p. 179.

<sup>371</sup> Idrīs, "Ḥammal al-karāsī," p. 129.

<sup>372</sup> Idrīs, "The Chair Carrier," p. 179.

<sup>373</sup> Idrīs, "Ḥammal al-karāsī," p. 132.

<sup>374</sup> Idrīs, "The Chair Carrier," p. 179.

The third aspect of importance from the above excerpt relates has to do with the materiality of the object and what that materiality signifies, including discourse concerning ownership. The materiality of the chair and its carrier not only means that they are indeed *real* and therefore constitute aspects of Egyptian reality, but also that they active help to shape that reality. The previous section described the bias of the watch in effecting the comparative characterizations and actions of the Judge and Shohrat. Here, Idrīs’s use of the chair and its carrier is perhaps even more damning toward the intellectual classes because they are written as possessing the key to an already existing but hidden Egyptian modernity.

Here, Colla’s ideas about the vitality of ancient Egyptian artifacts is useful in elucidating the discourses that Idrīs is invoking through his recollection of them as mimetic symbols in his story, which will help to see not only how they operate within the story, but also to elucidate what is at stake in the overall narrative. Of particular significance in Colla’s study is his conception of the rediscovered artifacts of ancient Egypt as “actors” for the dynamic role they played and continue to play in the life of Egypt. This is a critique of more conventional definitions of “artifact.” The word itself derives from the Latin words *arte*, meaning “art” or “craft” and *factum*, the neuter past participle of *facere*, “to make;” together they mean, broadly speaking, an object that has been made. Contemporary conventional definitions distinguish artifacts as man-made objects, particularly of cultural or historical interest.<sup>375</sup> Colla qualifies this in relation to artifacts constitutive of Egyptian antiquity, respective of their societal role, saying:

[It] is now time to move beyond the now routine observation that cultural objects are constructed by human subjects to argue that antiquities were not merely passive objects in history. As nonhuman objects, they were entangled in the social life of human actors and played an active role in the formation of power relations, whether in the British Empire or in the Egyptian nation-state. This is to echo a fundamental precept of science studies: there is no sharp separation between material objects and the concepts and human capacities they enable. This is a call not to return to traditional materialism, but rather to notice that humans, Egyptian antiquities, and the representations of artifacts formed part of a sprawling network of agents and *actants*.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Artifact, *Oxford Dictionaries* (Oxford University Press, n.d.) Accessed 09 July 2016, <[http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/artifact](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/artifact)>.

<sup>376</sup> Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, p. 19.

This idea of Egyptian artifacts as *actants* with a constantly shifting role in Egyptian life is not an abstract idea but is part of a larger discourse that had become embedded within the Egyptian imaginary through an evolving discourse concerning Egyptian identity, resources, colonialism, and appropriation. Recall, for example, Colla's study of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Pharaonic narratives of Mahfouz and Qutb, each of whom were struggling to reconcile Egyptian modernity with its ancient pagan past in light of the discovery of Egyptian artifacts. The allegorical nature of Mahfouz and Qutb's respective approaches is connected to their representations of Egypt's ancient artifacts as necessarily being "of" a moment of ancient history. And so their representation in contemporary literature is political in nature, being "used" to one end or another.

The struggle for Egypt's modernity through its artifact was also taking place on a global level, through a fraught discourse concerning ownership between Egypt and European nations – especially France, Britain, and Germany – as they unearthed and then took possession of Egypt's artifacts. Early in Colla's discussion of the institutionalized transformations that began emerging as antiquities started being moved through time and space, which he exemplifies in a case study of The British Museum's expatriation of Memnon's head to London in 1821, Colla touches on the questions beginning to emerge surrounding the idea of object and ownership, and particularly on the pliability of the narrative of antiquities depending on who is perceived as the owner. It is worth quoting at length.

More than merely describing a set of objects, the language of the artifact – which emerged at the same time as the acquisition of the Memnon head – organized its objects within a new form of knowledge and claimed them for new institutions of interpretive power. As a language for laying claim to objects, the discourse of the artifact is particularly normative, since it both implies and disavows claims of ownership. In the Memnon head's paper trail, appropriation and possession are major themes, yet the notion that the artifact belongs to those collecting it is so taken for granted that it is seldom articulated. Moreover, at no point do any of the agents – the travelers, the acquisitionists, the consul, the trustees – involved in collecting and transporting the Memnon head to London lay claim to the object for themselves. Similarly, while the Memnon head may have come into the possession of the British Museum, it was not claimed as property either by anyone there or by anyone involved in the acts that effected its transport to England. In this case, there is no deed that definitively establishes the object as the property of the British Museum. Its provenance attempts to explain why the object rightly belongs where it sits but succeeds only in telling how it got there. Thus one of the fundamental paradoxes of the artifact as a cultural object: it

may be in the custody of those who proclaim themselves to be the best parties to conserve and study it, but it is not their property. According to artifact discourse, if the Memnon head must belong to someone, it belongs to civilization or humanity in the abstract. In this rendition, the British Museum claims not to be the owner of the piece but merely its custodian.<sup>377</sup>

The dynamic of the discourse of artifact and ownership is somewhat altered with regard to Egyptian literature in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, because the issue at hand much more concerned the reconciling of a pagan past with a predominantly Islamic present that was nonetheless undergoing profound transformation owing to the country's modernizing projects. Thus, in the task of writing *adab qaṣaṣī qaḥmī*, the question of ownership is subsumed within that prevailing discourse, and the matter of appropriation through custodianship becomes a matter of *writing* that custodianship *into* modern Egypt on either "side" as a matter of impacting the mythology – collective memory through stories – of Egypt and Egyptians. Mahfouz's method is to write allegorical stories of Pharaonic Egypt that have bearing on present matters. Qutb's is to reject the ancient past as *jahiliyya*, thereby leaving the matter of antiquities in the past, and by extension marking that past as a measure of contemporary progress with regard to Islam.

The underlying assumption of the custodianship narrative concerns the European justification for expatriation of Egypt's antiquities, with European acquisition justified as a way of, in Colla's words, "offsetting the kind of destruction to which antiquities were doomed if they were left in place."<sup>378</sup> But there is a further assumption here that makes even this possible, which is that, on the one hand, as objects, these artifacts cannot be assumed to occupy a dynamic, vital role in Egyptian life, and on the other hand, that western method and culture is best suited for guarding humanity's valuable objects, regardless of their provenance. Within this discourse there is a denial of recognition concerning modern Egypt and her citizenry. And this discourse is reproduced Egyptian literature in between the intellectual classes and the people.

Thus, Idrīs' representational choice of the ancient chair and its equally ancient carrier as the mimetic heart of a story intended to address the nature and discourse of Egyptian modernity is not an accident, but an astute harnessing of a much broader discourse occupying the Egyptian imaginary in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, made all the more urgent by the corporate atmosphere emerging through late capitalism. Vitally, however,

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid. pp. 62-3.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

Idrīs rejects the very nature of the “struggle for Egypt’s modernity” as it had until then been waged, both amongst the Egyptian intellectual class – for example through the contrasting writings of Mahfouz and Qutb – as well as the European “right to possess” custodial narrative of foreign appropriators and interventionists. Idrīs represents the chair carrier and his chair as possessing their own autonomy irrespective of those discourses. The carrier walks through the streets freely, unhindered by anyone except his own beliefs about his purpose. That his “mission” has thus far lasted a few millennia speaks to the enduring and formidable nature of his narrative concerning his mission and purpose, indicative of the resilient character of the modernity struggle within the Egyptian imaginary, surpassing that of foreign appropriation and internal social rifts.

The chair represents a continuous space between Egypt’s ancient past and modern present – particularly between its pagan past and its Islamic present - thus bridging the gap of history; like Father Flynn’s chalice, its timeless quality is of central significance, for it exceeds the human lifespan and thus exceeds the limits of human knowledge and perception. For the ancient Egyptian it is a thing to be carried; for the modern Egyptian it is something to be sat upon; yet it still exists through these changing conceptions of what a chair is and what its social function is.

Yet, unlike Joyce’s chalice, our perception of the chair does not undergo a radical transformation as the story progresses, nor does Idrīs seem to intend for it to. It is introduced as, and remains, a magnificent if heavy burden for its bearer, and a substitute for a lost pharaonic past. Rather, the measure of the chair’s significance is in its ability to move the story and give it meaning. But not meaning in the mere sense of translating language into imagery, as David Punter suggests, or of compounding its surrounding narrative, as with Lāshīn’s light code. This is where Idrīs’ engagement with *amāra* shows itself as distinct with regard to his conception of epiphany.

ووقفت أرقبه، وقد بدأ الكرسي يتحرك، والرجل قد أصبح مرة أخرى، ساقه النحيلة الخامسة  
القادرة وحدها على تحريكه. وقفت أرقبه وهو يبتعد لاهثاً بين، وعرقه يسيل. وقفت حائراً  
أتساءل: أألحقه، وأقتله لأنفس عن غيظي؟ أأندفع، وأسقط الكرسي عن كتفيه بالقوة، وأريحه  
رغماً عنه، أم أكتفي بالسخط المغيظ منه؟ أم أهدأ، وأرثي لحاله؟ أم أصب اللوم على نفسي أنا،  
لأنني لا أعرف أمانة؟<sup>379</sup>

[I stood watching him. The chair had started to move at its slow, steady pace, making one think that it moved by itself. Once again the man had become its thin fifth leg, capable on its own of setting it in motion.

<sup>379</sup> Idrīs, “Ḥammal al-karāsī,” p. 135.

I stood watching him as he moved away, panting and groaning and with the sweat pouring off him.

I stood there at a loss, asking myself whether I shouldn't catch him up and kill him and thus give vent to my exasperation. Should I rush forward and topple the chair forcibly from his shoulders and make him take a rest? Or should I content myself with the sensation of enraged irritation I had for him? Or should I calm down and feel sorry for him?

Or should I blame myself for not knowing what the token of authorization [*amāra*] was?<sup>380</sup>

The chair's significance rests in its ability to speak from within a socially-embedded language in order to revise or problematize the assumed knowledge from which it springs. Its presence is a mode by which to examine conceptions of modernity through a reckoning with a long-ago historical reality.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to culminate Idrīs' process of writing *amāra* through the short story, and in so doing elucidate or demystify an organic Egyptian modernity. At the center of this struggle was his desire to Egyptianize the short story; for him, this meant imbuing it with a collective voice capable of appealing to intuitively Egyptian modes of knowing and the imaginary of the people. Far from expressing a utopian ideal, however, Idrīs' process included using a kind of comparative characterization, as a way of using his stories as microcosms of the larger "modernity" and "tradition" dichotomy; in this way he acknowledged and incorporated varying aspects of lived experience across the multitudinous sectors of Egyptian life.

I consider "Qā' al-madīna" as a pivotal story in Idrīs' aesthetic process towards achieving this collectivity. Although the story does not achieve an overall unity of impression – an expression in itself of Idrīs' struggle – the final section of the story does. Here, Idrīs displays his increased comfort and dexterity with the light code, using it in a variety of manifestations to comment upon a complex and multi-faceted social discourse encircling the issue of Egyptian modernity as it was evolving during late capitalism. Building on what he had begun with "Abū al-Hawl," and on the legacies of Lāshīn and Haqqī, he deftly uses darkness to ironic effect, inverting its more embedded

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<sup>380</sup> Idrīs "The Chair Carrier," pp. 181-2.

correlation as something that obscures or is indicative of blindness or lack of visibility. During Judge Abdallah's journey from his home to Shohrat's, the value he places on visibility as equal to status and knowledge is tested. As he is faced with an increasing darkness – in the forms of people's skins, homes, shops, streets – what he had presumed to be a blind, faceless mass at his mercy is actually constitutive of a bonded collectivity and intuitive knowledge, from which he is utterly isolated and alienated. That it and the people in it appear obscured in darkness to him is thus not a symbol of the people's reality, but is rather a symbol of the ignorance – or lack of knowledge – of the educated classes to that reality. Just as the kings' ignorance in the frame story to *Alf layla w-layla* is revealed as being tied to their faulty perception of their wives' realities, so Judge Abdallah's ignorance is revealed as deriving from his faulty perception of the Egyptian lower and working classes.

While Idrīs uses darkness to essentially reveal the Judge's ignorance and draw out Shohrat's lived experience, he also complicates the narrative by centering it around the object of the watch. The watch intersects with the light code by participating in the trope of (in)visibility as ignorance/knowledge, but its very objectification also collides with complicated discourses around ideas of ownership, free will, and power that were shaping hegemonic post-WWII conceptions of modernity and increasingly marked Egypt's relationships in the world and her citizens' relationships with one another. The story's collision with aspects of the fallout from late capitalism as exemplified through the symbol of the watch effectively allows Idrīs to call on larger discourses concerning Egyptian lived experience *through* the watch. This is important with regard to Idrīs' professed goal of Egyptianizing the short story because it gives him a way of invoking the collective while adhering, mostly, to the short story's dictates regarding brevity. And, from the perspective of that same "Egyptianizing" process, the use of the object as an invocation of the collective is significant because it taps into the realities of the Egyptian lived experience. In other words, the object achieves *amāra* in the short story, and as such it *speaks* a language of the collective, intuitive knowing and imaginary. However, "Qā' al-madīna" lacks the unity, vision, and maturity to mark it as a momentous achievement.

The chapter culminates in "Ḥammāl al-karāsī," which I cite as a point of maturation in Idrīs' use of symbols to effectively write an aesthetics of social change through *amāra* textuality. Here, the idea of the object as an actor becomes more concrete, and Idrīs displays an exemplary usage of the chair both as a structural device

to give the story unity, while also harnessing the often unwieldy (as seen in “Qā‘ al-madīna”) discourses it invokes concerning modernity. At the heart of this realization is an intense focus on a limited scenario, played out between the chair carrier and the narrator, set around the symbol of the chair. As a blatant invocation of Egypt’s Pharaonic past, the chair operates as an in-between space, at once an embedded understanding of a shared “Egyptianism,” which includes past, present, and future in all its diversity, while also invoking the historicized discourse surrounding the appropriation of Egyptian culture, politics, social life, and, in essence, an organically conceived modernity from within the Egyptian experience. In this respect, like the watch, the chair is a physical manifestation of *amāra*, but, unlike the watch, the chair is inextricable from the entire narrative of the story. In this way, Idrīs’ prolonged struggle culminates in a text that invokes the collective, subverting the genre’s tendency toward individualistic narratives, and also O’Connor’s idea as the short story as a form dedicated to submerged population groups, while managing to honor the single dictate of the literary form: brevity.

## PART THREE

JULIO CORTÁZAR:

Mythmaking and *Bestiario*

They say that the most fervent desire of any ghost is to recover at least the appearance of its corporeality...<sup>381</sup>

– Julio Cortázar

The variable visual images that constitute Cortázar's model kit, like the intersecting planes of Cubist collage, represent the world as a set of fluid spatial relationships in which visual perspective, narrative structure, and felt history are inseparable.

– Lois Parkinson Zamora<sup>382</sup>

### I. An extended introduction

Chapter Three provided a history of the social and literary impulses undergirding myth-making – with regard to Argentina, with regard to Latin America, with regard to the pan-Latin American Boom generation, before briefly culminating in Julio Cortázar's own interpretation. Appearing on so many fronts, many of which overlap, myth-making in Latin America cannot be reduced to a single historical, social, or aesthetic trajectory beyond its broad conception as a search for origins by way of writing Latin American modernity through an incorporation of a forgotten and/or lost past from within a particular artistic sensibility that was taking place in 1950s Latin America. However, in consideration of Cortázar's corpus in particular, a dominant trope emerges through animalistic representations that help to elucidate aspects, not only Cortázar's philosophy and approach to myth, but also his positionality within the broader frameworks of Latin American, and in particular, Argentine, literatures from which considerations of his work are so frequently divorced. Before moving onto those specifics and a summary of the relevant points of Cortázar's life and influences, it's helpful to first outline the salient points of Boom mythology through the prism of *bestiario* and the short story.

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<sup>381</sup> Cited and translated in David Kelman, "The Afterlife of Storytelling: Julio Cortázar's Reading of Walter Benjamin and Edgar Allan Poe," in *Comparative Literature* (2008, pp. 244-60) p. 244.

<sup>382</sup> Parkinson Zamora, *Usable Past*, p. 151.

The emergence of the Boom generation in the 1950s signaled a profound shift that, as Sommers articulated, appeared as a disregard for what had gone before it. The Boom's pan-Americanism deepened this perceived indictment of what had to that point been considered "modern" Latin American literatures. The reason Boom literature appeared this way owed to its pronounced attempts, primarily through the novel, to critique historicized discourses concerning the colonial legacy, its impact on Latin American modernity, and colonialism's reincarnation in the form of neo-liberal policies and practices coming from the United States. The Boom was propelled in no small measure by the Cuban Revolution, which nearly all, if not all, Boom writers heartily supported in its early stages and lauded as a political and social throwing off of European colonial and US-sponsored corporate domination of the central and southern parts of the continent that had endured for so long. Because of its perceived rejection of these factors, and their representations in Latin American literatures to that point, and its vision of a new kind of Latin American modernity that was based on an imagining of a reintegrated pre-colonial past, the Boom novel has frequently been called utopian; Colás articulated this impulse as the Boom novel's greatest downfall, especially citing Cortázar's *Rayuela*, which is often considered the apex of the Boom novel.

This perspective saw the Boom's mythologizing – effectively writing Latin American modernity by inscribing the ancestral presences of Mesoamerica while disregarding 300 years of European colonial rule and influence – as myth-making, in the sense of creating something that was untrue. However, as González Echevarría and Parkinson Zamora so aptly point out in their studies on the Archival and the Ancestral, the Boom novel vigorously engaged with European colonial legacies. Further, two of its most well-known means of achieving this, through magical realism and surrealism, are themselves modes of artistic discourse whose provenance derives from Europe. These perspectives challenge the idea that the Boom writers rejected European influence; rather they express a heightened comfort with the legacy and continued influence of European modes of discourse and expression, particularly harnessing them to their own ends to explore the nature of Latin American modernity. Indeed, nearly all Boom writers spent significant periods of time living European cities, especially Paris, which had been an artistic haven for Latin American writers for a century, while fiercely engaging with Latin American politics and identity within social groups and through their writings, without viewing this as contradictory or a threat to their Latin American-ness. Indeed, the influence of Paris on these writers has been noted as artistically and

politically influential, and vital to the achievements of its writers and the Boom broadly speaking.<sup>383</sup>

What changed with the Boom, therefore, was not a question of influence or “source,” but rather a concerted effort to come to grips with the various and often contradictory aspects of its own modernity through the re-inscription of a silenced historicity. In other words, what the Boom essentially did was to demolish – or at least attempt to demolish – the civilization versus barbarism discourse in order to explore Latin American modernity – and identity – as a multi-faceted conception that subverts attempts to label it as “American,” “European,” “*mestizo*,” “indigenous,” or even “western” or “global south” – legacies and continuations of colonial labeling that had been used to divide and dominate Latin Americans, as was articulated in Chapter Three by Dussel and Quijano, but which now proved detrimental to an understanding of Latin American modernity outside such labels. It recognized that the civilization and barbarism discourse had been fed by a reflexive assumption that the label “European” was at odds with other racialized, epochal, or class labels, and that to consider these as contradictory to one another was an outcome of this assumption. Its goal was to write a new language to express this modernity, which showed up as narratives conceived within the broadest possible terms of mythologizing and mythopoesis. For example, in *Cien años de soledad*, García Márquez at once critiques the colonial legacy but does so using what might otherwise be considered “European” modes of expression, like the Archive and magical realism, and in this way he turns assumptions about the act of labeling in on itself, presenting it as both at odds with and perfectly suited to commenting on itself.

The Boom short story used many of the techniques of the Boom novel, including magical realism and surrealism, and while it dealt with many similar themes as well, it tended toward playfulness and exaggeration of an isolated theme, making it particularly conducive to the mythologizing impulse. A device that emerges in the Boom short story with far more of a presence than in the novel is the use of animal imagery, in the form of anthropomorphism, metamorphosis, and zoomorphism. This is evident in García Márquez’s two best-known short stories, “Un señor muy viejo con

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<sup>383</sup> See: Jason Weiss, *The Lights of Home: A Century of Latin American Writers in Paris* (New York: Routledge, 2003) and Marcy E. Schwartz, *Writing Paris: Urban Topographies of Desire in Contemporary Latin American Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

unas alas enormes” and “La prodigiosa tarde de Baltazar,” both of which center around birds or, in the case of the former, a human with bird-like attributes (an angel). It is also evident in a significant portion of Cortázar’s short story corpus, particularly the first three collections, which will provide the analytical focus for the coming chapters.

The first collection, *Bestiario* (Bestiary, 1951) sets the tone for looking at Cortázar’s early corpus as a cycle of *bestiario* – a term broadly used to encapsulate the use of animals to comment on human actions and values, and in Cortázar’s case, on the individual subconscious and as a narrative expression of the ancestral. The title itself provides the terminology that articulates the central aesthetic trope that Cortázar uses to achieve mythologizing and mythopoesis in his stories. For Cortázar, the impulse toward myth-making began as an intensely personal exploration of his own psyche with political undertones, before later becoming more blatantly political, where the myth-making aspect became a way of commenting on the impact of social and political divisiveness on the individual, where the individual is frequently used allegorically, not necessarily to refer to collective humanity, but rather to refer broadly to the humanistic consciousness. Thus, the psychological becomes one of Cortázar’s most dominant means of arriving at the question of origins and by extension problematizing the very act of labeling described above.

The coming chapters will explore how Cortázar used *bestiario* as a mimetic impetus for “writing the question of origins” through myth-making and mythopoesis. Chapter Six will draw a broad framework of myth-making as a way of writing the modern in the Argentine short story, especially using animal imagery as a manner of reinscribing otherwise invisible or lost aspects of identity – at the individual level and the collective - while at the same time establishing *bestiario*, or a modern interpretation of pre-modern bestiaries, as mimetic tropes that emerge in divisive spaces. The main focus of the latter part of the chapter, however, will be Cortázar’s own use of *bestiario* as a central tenant of his mythologizing. Chapter Seven will look in particular at Cortázar’s use of metamorphosis to refine what had until then been a broadly conceived idea of *bestiario* into something whose self-reflexivity finally subverts allegorical pinpointing, while managing to critique the Boom’s utopian tendencies – including his own – and inscribe European and American (including Mesoamerican) forms of literary discourse into a single salient story called “Axoltol.”

Ia. A briefly sketched life: the impact of psychoanalytic theory on Cortázar's myth-making

[La condición de vivir en medios políticamente hostiles o condiciones por circunstancias de urgencia es] un problema metafísico, un desgarramiento continuo entre el monstruoso error de ser lo que somos como individuos y como pueblos en este siglo, y la entrevisión de un futuro en el que la sociedad humana culminaría por fin en este arquetipo del que el socialismo da una visión práctica y la poesía una visión espiritual. Desde el momento en que tomé conciencia del hecho humano esencial, esa búsqueda representa mi compromiso y mi deber. Pero ya no creo, como pude cómodamente creerlo en otro tiempo, que la literatura de mera creación imaginativa baste para sentir que he cumplido como escritor, puesto que mi noción de esa literatura ha cambiado y contiene en sí el conflicto entre la realización individual como la entendía el humanismo, ya la realización colectiva como la entendía el socialismo, conflicto que alcanza su expresión quizá más desgarradora en el *Marat-Sade* de Peter Weiss.<sup>384</sup>

[The condition of living in a deeply polarized environment is a] metaphysical problem, a continual struggle between the monstrous error of being what we are as individuals and as people of this century, and the possibility of an ideal: a future in which society will finally culminate in that archetype of which socialism provides a practical vision and poetry provides a spiritual one. From the moment I gained awareness of the essential human condition, the quest for that ideal has been my commitment and my duty. But I no longer believe, as I once could, so comfortably, that literature of mere imaginative creation is sufficient to make me feel that I have fulfilled myself as a writer; my notion of that literature has changed. I now believe that that literature embraces the possibility of representing the conflict between individual realization as humanism understood it, and collective realization as socialism understands it – a conflict that achieves what is perhaps its most devastating expression in Peter Weiss's *Marat-Sade*.<sup>385</sup>

– Julio Cortázar

The details of Cortázar's life have been a continuous site of inspiration for theorists attempting to analyze his works. For example, the close relationship he shared with his sister has given way to many interpretive readings of his first published short story "Casa tomada" as indicative of his having had an incestuous or borderline incestuous

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<sup>384</sup> Julio Cortázar, "A Roberto Fernández Retamar, 10 de Mayo de 1967," in eds. Aurora Bernárdez and Carles Álvarez Garriga, *Julio Cortázar: Cartas 1965-1968* (Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2012) p. 419.

<sup>385</sup> Julio Cortázar, "Letter to Roberto Fernández Retamar," trans. JoAnn Engelbert (1988), in Ilan Stavans, *Julio Cortázar: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1996) pp. 103-4.

relationship with his sister. Further, readings of “Bestiario” have emphasized his bisexual and/or homosexual leanings as inspiration for or reflective of the story and vice versa. Other readings have further analyzed his work in accordance with his professed preoccupations with politics, music, boxing, games, and photography. In other words, many points of analysis regarding Cortázar’s work have doubled as a means of revealing the man himself. Cortázar is indeed very difficult to pin down, as is his work, especially because both embody what are frequently considered disparate or contradictory social spaces and elements. As a man, he was at once both unabashedly Argentine, and also Latin American, and also European. In terms of his relationships and sexuality, he was non-restrictive. His expressed ideals at once privileged the individual while also exhibiting an extraordinary pragmatism with regard to individual suffering for the greater good with regard to socialism – something many of his colleagues could not accept from him when it came to supporting the Cuban Revolution in the wake of the Padilla Affair. His work, for its part, has been made widely available through excellent translations, and is frequently featured in anthologies and collections that otherwise exhibit only European or North American writers. His work has been received as both postcolonial as well as Eurocentric. In this way, his legacy shares much in common with his compatriot Borges. Indeed, this occupying of a multitude of seemingly disparate spaces – socially, literarily, politically, intellectually – is a characteristic of Argentina’s intellectual and literary legacy more broadly speaking. An investigation of Cortázar’s life and legacy challenges much of the vocabulary so often used in critical discourse, as I discussed in the Introduction.

For all of the information available about Cortázar, including biographies, personal letters, essays, countless interviews on-screen and off, and of course his corpus of fiction, he remains a fairly elusive figure. Carlos Alonso points to the extraordinary amount of posthumously published information, including stories and letters, as leading to some confusion concerning his legacy, particularly because Cortázar was so selective about what he chose to publish during his lifetime. Alonso especially points to Cortázar’s letters and essays as a source of confusion and contradiction – to what degree should they be taken into account when considering his fiction? And should the posthumous fiction, which Cortázar likely *chose* not to publish during his lifetime, be considered in parallel with those he officially sanctioned? Part of the reason these questions are perhaps more pressing for Cortázar scholars than for those dealing with other writers has to do with the deeply personal nature of his work, and also the often

conflicting and contradictory aspects of it. Further, because Cortázar's work is so profoundly psychological in provenance – a fact that is readily available in the works themselves, but which Cortázar also spoke about fairly extensively - it is tempting to psychoanalyze his fiction, a tendency that is more pronounced in studies of his fiction than most others, rivaled perhaps only by his most profound literary idol, Edgar Allan Poe. With this in mind, my goal in the following biographical section is not necessarily to extrapolate from Cortázar's life by way of demonstrating his goals as a writer – something which has been done very ably by others – but is rather to elucidate his work through what were to become some of the most important influences and how they fit into his achievement with regard to Latin American modernity, but also a modernity that extended beyond those borders. Indeed, one of the things that is most interesting about Cortázar's work is the consistency of his aesthetic, even as his professed goals as a writer shifted from the profoundly personal to the social and in particular the political.

Julio Cortázar was born on August 26, 1914 in Brussels, Belgium to Argentine parents. With the encroachment of German troops through Europe during WWI, his family moved first Geneva, then Zurich and then Barcelona, before returning to Argentina to live in the Banfield suburb of Buenos Aires in 1919. The following year, Cortázar's father left the family, never to be heard from again. Thereafter, Cortázar lived in a close-knit family consisting of himself, his mother, his grandmother, and his sister. He was raised speaking and reading several languages fluently, among them Spanish, French, German, and English, and says that even at home in Buenos Aires he spoke French at home.<sup>386</sup> Growing up, he was a shy, introverted, and sickly child who found solace in books. Through his mother, he was introduced to Jules Verne<sup>387</sup> at an early age and also, by accident,<sup>388</sup> to Edgar Allan Poe, who would become perhaps his most important, lasting literary inspiration.

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<sup>386</sup> Mario Goloboff, *Julio Cortázar: La biografía* (Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1998) pp. 14-5.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid. See: Chapter One: “Una sensibilidad excesiva, una tristeza frecuente, asma, braxos rotos, primeros amores desesperados...,” pp. 11- 26.

<sup>388</sup> He told the *Paris Review* about his introduction to Poe: “My mother, who's still alive and is a very imaginative woman, encouraged me. Instead of saying, “No, no, you should be serious,” she was pleased that I was imaginative; when I turned towards the world of the fantastic, she helped by giving me books to read. I read Edgar Allan Poe for the first time when I was only nine. I stole the book to read because my mother didn't want me to read it; she thought I was too young and she was right. The book scared me and I was ill for three months, because I believed in it . . . *dur comme fer* as the French say. For me, the fantastic was perfectly natural; I had no doubts at all. That's the way things were.” Jason Weiss, “Julio Cortázar, the Art of Fiction No.

In the epigraph above regarding his broad literary goal – that of achieving a saliency of the essential human condition through representing the *conflict* between the individual and the collective – Cortázar reveals his own conception of the “modern” imperative. For him, it was not to do necessarily with perfecting the short story to represent Argentine or even Latin American identity or modernity, but was rather a deeply personal vision with regard to what his own ideas about those things mean. It is here that one of the more problematic aspects of approaching Cortázar’s work arises, because, in the first place, he shared many of the social and political concerns of his Boom counterparts, and yet he also displayed pronounced aspects of an Argentine literary inheritance, and all the while his work remained so individualistic as to render it impossible to pin down, for the most part, in terms of nationalistic or continental perspectives. It is precisely here, at the intersection of these seemingly disparate impulses, that Cortázar’s use of myth finds its agency.

For Cortázar, myth provided the perfect way of exploring the conflicted self within the framework of a shared condition, with that condition finding its best expression from within the framework of human psychology. Beginning in the 1930s, as Cortázar was still in the working stages of perfecting his literary craft, the influential Argentine literary magazine *Sur*<sup>389</sup> (South) began publishing contributions on the theory of myth, the theory of the archetypal, Jung’s theories on archetypes and the collective unconscious, and Levy Brühl’s works on the primitive mentality, among others. “In spite of their heterogeneity, these works have one trait in common: they all deal with myth and ritual as symptomatic of mental processes and revelatory of the structure of the psyche.”<sup>390</sup> In her well-conceived *Keats, Poe, and the Shaping of Cortázar’s Mythopoesis*, Ana Hernández del Castillo explores Cortázar’s influences and engagements with Keats and Poe through the prisms of Jungian psychology and Eric Neumann’s Great Mother, or Magna Mater, archetype, which Cortázar may have become familiar with around 1950.<sup>391</sup> Her method is to comparatively investigate the influences of Keats and Poe through feminine archetypes. In focusing on Cortázar’s

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83,” in the *Paris Review*, No. 93 (Fall 1984) Accessed 3 February 2015 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2955/the-art-of-fiction-no-83-julio-cortazar>>.

<sup>389</sup> The magazine was published from 1931-1992. It was backed by Victoria Ocampo and among its editors was Jorge Louis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, and Guillermo de Torre.

<sup>390</sup> Ana Hernández del Castillo, *Keats, Poe, and the Shaping of Cortázar’s Mythopoesis* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V., 1981) p. 3.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

admiration of Keats' "ability to recapture the psychic reality behind ancient myths and render them alive in his poems," Hernández del Castillo says, "It was through his discussion of Keats, primarily, that Cortázar defined his concept of the poet as one who is 'possessed' by the magnetic forces of the collective unconscious and thus manifests, in his writings, 'archetypal' themes and figures."<sup>392</sup> This idea of capturing the collective subconscious through the writing of archetypes is central to Cortázar's myth-making, according to Hernández del Castillo, who continues on to delineate the archetypal influence of Keats on Cortázar's own writings as communicated through the Magna Mater.

Thus, the archetypal becomes a mode of engaging the question of origins through a modern human experience capable of speaking to and from within the collective subconscious, while also neatly forming an aesthetics that accounts for Cortázar's psychological preoccupation in a narrative framework. The Magna Mater model accounts for the question of origins insofar as it presents a possibility for dealing with man's first experiences within the womb and then being expelled from the womb, as well as his last experience in returning to the womb of Mother Earth in death. From within this conception, various archetypes are possible, with the Magna Mater "associated with whatever the ego perceives as supernatural, awesome, and threatening."<sup>393</sup>

Though the Magna Mater archetype holds the possibility of representing a unifying human experience, its transcendence is limited in dealing with questions of a politicized historicity. In other words, it conveys, as conceived by Neumann, a universally understood and ageless language of the human experience,<sup>394</sup> rather than presenting a new language for a revised conception of modernity as embodied through the Boom. The limit of the Magna Mater's possibility in this regard is precisely where Cortázar's conception of *bestiario* finds its agency; it occupies a space of possibility in reconceiving the modern through a new language of origins that places the historical in a time-space continuum premised upon a notion of simultaneity.

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>394</sup> In *The Great Mother*, Neumann says, "the archetype of the Magna Mater is a mythological motif and [...] as an 'eternally present' content of the collective – i.e., universal human – unconscious, it can appear equally well in the theology of Egypt or the Hellenistic mysteries of Mithras, in the Christian symbolism of the Middle Ages or the visions of a modern psychotic." Neumann as quoted in Hernández del Castillo, *The Shaping of Cortázar's Mythopoesis*, pp. 8-9.

Of course, the use of *bestiario* as a unifying social language was not altogether new, either in the world or in Argentine literature, as will be shown in Chapter Six, but the impulse driving its present conception as a narrativized representation of Jungian psychoanalytic theory in the service of reconciling a failed modernity *was* new, at least within the parameters of modern Latin American literature. In Jung's "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry," he writes:

The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. [...] The unsatisfied yearning of the artist *reaches back to the primordial image of the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present.* The artist seizes on this image, and *in raising it from deepest unconsciousness he brings it into relation with conscious values,* thereby transforming it until it can be accepted by the minds of his contemporaries according to their powers.<sup>395</sup>

Unlike Idrīs, Cortázar's struggle in the short story was not so much to do with the form itself, but rather with achieving Jung's "primordial image of the unconscious" and "raising it from deepest unconsciousness." Therefore, the trajectory of his work was not to do with a constant refining of the form itself to suit his needs, but was rather more preoccupied with issues of representation, and with regard to myth and his use of *bestiario*, he was especially conscious of not succumbing to blatant allegorizing. Vitaly, as the coming chapters show, he was fairly consistent in his modes of representation, at least in his first few collections, which together form a coherent cycle. This is especially interesting considering how his view regarding the potential of literature changed and evolved into a concern with the collective subconscious of society. So, while Chapter Six will focus on *bestiario* as a literary legacy both of Europe and of the Americas, it will also show how Cortázar used it self-reflexively concerning both his own subconscious and also that which cannot be seen. And Chapter Seven will demonstrate "Axolotl" as a culmination of the questions and contradictions of Latin American and Argentine, and indeed humanism's modernity embodied within the mimetic trope of *bestiario* and the narrative frame of myth.

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<sup>395</sup> My emphasis. Carl Gustav Jung, "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry," in *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, Vol. XV of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung* (London and New York: Routledge, 1966) pp. 82-3.

The question of modernity in Cortázar's stories rests in the space of divisiveness or contradiction. He expresses it above as having to do with the individual versus the collective, however, as previously discussed, it has just as much to do with other defining labels like "European" or "native." He expresses this through a resistance to hegemonic social elements. This is precisely how Cortázar eludes simple allegorizations in his work; for example, Kauffmann's reading of "Axolotl" as an allegory revealing of a Eurocentric mindset in Chapter Seven necessarily neglects to address the narrative Cortázar invokes through the very image of the axolotl itself. In other words, Cortázar's work makes it very difficult to say one way or the other if a story is one thing, because such an analysis will necessarily run into problems, if not direct contradiction, if one chooses to follow another analytical thread; such labeling can only be held up if one opts to willfully ignore other interpretive possibilities. This is Cortázar's genius, and it is also the critic's challenge.

Cortázar's invocation of ancient myths and myth-like narrative structures, along with other modes of narrative discourse associated with European literary and artistic traditions, like surrealism, psychology, and the bestiary, further complicates the critic's task. However, as was the case with the Egyptian short story, the question is not one of provenance, but one of sociality and textuality. In focusing on Cortázar's use of animal imagery in his stories, I am at once choosing to focus on a subversive mimetic impulse in his corpus, one that is at once deeply embedded within European and Argentine literary traditions, but more importantly, which Cortázar uses in order to write the forgotten or lost aspects of identity and experience into a new conception of modernity. I have selected to focus on Cortázar's first two collections as a continuous cycle of *bestiario* because of its ubiquity in those two collections, as well as its revealing of Cortázar's early trajectory with regard to de-centering predominant discourses of modernity that privilege not only labeling, but whose very conceptions – European or otherwise – privilege the outcomes of those narratives. Chapter Six will focus on the centering function of myth in Cortázar's writing broadly speaking, and will pinpoint his use of *bestiario* as a complex mimetic impulse that harnesses Jungian psychoanalytic theory in Cortázar's first collection, called *Bestiario*, as a way of exploring the individual's divided self through the trope of visibility and invisibility, and will situate *bestiario* within the broader frameworks of European and Argentine literary traditions, elucidating Cortázar's point of departure as resting with his subversion of allegory. Chapter Seven will focus on Cortázar's development of his mimetic use of *bestiario* in

the collection *Final del juego* (End of the Game). Here, the focus will be on Cortázar's movement toward a more fully realized embodiment of the conflict between the individual and the collective in what is perhaps his most accomplished short story, "Axolotl."

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Bestiario* as a Trope of Visibility for Invisible Narratives

#### Introduction

This chapter will explore *bestiario* broadly as a central psychologically-driven mimesis in Cortázar's first collection of stories, *Bestiario*. Like myth itself, Cortázar's invocation of pre-modern bestiaries is an example of how he used "old" literary ideas that were very much engrained as forms of social knowledge in many parts of the world, including Europe and the Americas, and reinvigorated them with a more conscious psychology in order to use them to comment on the modern human condition. As was referenced in the previous section, Cortázar conceived of the modern human condition as that which rested in the conflict between the individual and the collective. Here, he draws modernity implicitly as an outcome not only of the Enlightenment and the subsequent shift in world view that privileged the individual, but also as an outcome of the colonial experience manifesting in a profound sense of alienation, not only from one's society, but also from one's ancestral self.

Prior to the Boom, Argentine literature in particular had denied this alienation by insisting upon Europe as the source of Argentine modernity, and thereby the continual source with regard to questions of the ancestral as well as the archival. Animal imagery had been ubiquitous in modern Argentine literature, and particularly its short stories, since it began emerging in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was much to do with the allegorical nature of fables, which provided cover to Unitarian writers in exile, like the May Association, whose main literary goal was political. Cortázar's invocation of the bestiary therefore does not solely owe its patrimony to Europe and Christianity, but also to the specificities of the Argentine experience after independence. It is at once an example of how he used something "old" and engrained to new ends, while leaving some of its original vestiges intact, like animal imagery as means of commenting on the political.

In addition to his focus on the short story, Cortázar's use of animal imagery also separated him from other Boom writers, for whom it did not hold so nearly a prominent place. One of the points I aim to make in this chapter and the coming one is the degree to which one served the other; in other words, to highlight to reciprocal relationship

between the short story form and Cortázar's employment of *bestiario* as achieving his myth-making and relentlessly adhering to unity of impression. That his bestiaries derive so powerfully from within a pronounced mimesis in Argentine literary history; that they also derive so powerfully from some of the most prominent discourses from European history – from the ancient to the religious to the scientific; and that they further reflect invisible aspects of the human subconscious: all of these factors contribute to Cortázar's persistent use of *bestiario* in his works as resting precisely at the apex of the conflict he sought to represent, and within it rests his own clarity and his own contradictions as a short story writer.

My goal here is to begin looking at these legacies of the bestiary, delineating older manifestations of animal representation in European and Argentine traditions, before moving on to Cortázar's first collection of stories. Here, I will draw out his points of departure with an emphasis on the psychological as a means of arriving at the ancestral, and how these give force and message to his myth-making. His myth-making will further be elucidated through discussions of his uses of *bestiario*. What emerges is a language of the modern, through the short story, that lends visibility to narratives that have been hitherto submerged in discourses regarding Latin American modernity.

## I. The self-referential mythology

[...] our psychic structure, like our cerebral anatomy carries the phylogenetic trances of its slow and constant development that spread over millions of years. In a way, we are born into an immemorial edifice that we revive and that rests on millennial foundations. We have occupied every rung of the animal ladder; our bodies retain numerous vestiges...we have an entire series of organs that are nothing but ancestral remains; we are, in our structure segmented like worms, whose sympathetic nervous system we also share.

– Carl Jung<sup>396</sup>

Animal imagery is ubiquitous throughout Cortázar's literary corpus, from the Minotaur in his early mythological theatrical poem "Los reyes" (The Kings, 1949), to a prowling tiger in a private family home in "Bestiario" (Bestiary, 1951), to the Nubian gladiator

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<sup>396</sup> Excerpted and translated in Maurice J. Bennet, "A Dialogue of Gazes: Metamorphosis and Epiphany in Julio Cortázar's 'Axoltol,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Winter 1986) p. 57. Original French, see: Carl Jung, "Du rêve au mythe," in *L'homme à la découverte de son âme*, préfaces et adaptation par Dr. Roland Cahen, 6ème ed. (Géneve: Editions de Mont Blanc, S.A., 1962) p. 296.

described through animalistic imagery in “Todos los fuegos el fuego” (All Fires the Fire, 1966). Critical interpretations of Cortázar’s animal imagery are nearly as varied as his representations. Analyses of the tiger from “Bestiario” or the axolotl from “Axolotl” provide perhaps the bulk of these interpretations and have contributed significant insights into Cortázar’s mimetic and aesthetic impetus, what Maurice Bennet refers to as Cortázar’s “aesthetic-ethics.”<sup>397</sup> Bennet calls on the work of Carl Jung, beginning with the above quotation, as a theoretical framework for looking at the ontology of “Axolotl” in a moment of coalescing Cortázar’s use of visual imagery and psychological preoccupation – indeed, Jung’s writings substantially influenced Cortázar at various levels, as will be seen. For Bennet, Jung’s assertions of beasts that haunt man’s imagination as “a biological memory that rebels against the separation of man from nature” is represented through “Axolotl”’s first-person narrator’s fascination, and then metamorphosis into, the figure of the Aztec-looking axolotl in an aquarium at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Bennet’s analysis emphasizes the interaction between man and beast as the meeting point of the visual and the linguistic, or “a dialogue of gazes” as he puts it, a perspective inspired by Richard Kuhns, and correspondingly articulates Cortázar’s achievement as that of “unitary awareness. Significant being is neither specifically ‘other’ nor restrictively human, but derives from the mutual consciousness formulated between the axolotl’s silent visual awareness and the human narrator’s capacity for language.”<sup>398</sup> Bennet’s hypothesis is achieved with the “full circle” aspect of the story: the narrator’s becoming an axolotl symbolizes man’s return to nature, to beginnings. Or perhaps not a return, but a rediscovery of the origins already present within his psychological and biological self: a revealing of that which has always been there, indicated through the act of metamorphosis and precipitated through epiphany, which will be the topic of the following chapter.

In a fascinating study of “Cortázar’s Mythology of Writing,” Roberto González Echevarría puts forth a mode of reading Cortázar that encompasses and expands on this question of revelation or return by isolating self-referentiality as a mythology, primarily in “Los reyes,” but also in “Todos los fuegos el fuego” and “El perseguidor” (The Pursuer, 1959). González Echevarría ambitiously puts his hypothesis forward as an answer to the question of “how to read an author, not a book,” having experienced the “totality of [Cortázar’s] literary enterprise” as posing the question from within. This is

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<sup>397</sup> Bennet, “A Dialogue of Gazes,” p. 62.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*

an issue I will return to. He offers a comparative reading of “Los reyes” and the classical myth that it has re-written, that of Theseus, in the version offered by Plutarch. The central anxiety of Cortázar’s “mythology of writing” is revealed immediately by the multiplicity of accounts available of the classical myth, rendering comparative attempts tenuous at best, but more importantly signaling the very impossibility of the act of writing.

González Echevarría’s readings of the three aforementioned stories (the first two being based to varying degrees on classical myths<sup>399</sup>) locates Cortázar’s self-referentiality most clearly in an abolition of difference – amongst man and beast in “Los reyes,” gladiators and lovers (also historical Roman times and present day) in “Todos los fuegos el fuego,” and between Johnny and Bruno in “El perseguidor.” In a move that toes the line between adroit and arbitrary, González Echevarría draws attention to the “yo, no”<sup>400</sup> pattern implied through the beginning of Johnny’s name and the end of Bruno’s, and then deftly extrapolates a larger signification within the *o*-centric names of Cortázar’s *oeuvre* and connecting them to an etymology of the *o*-driven word *persona* provided in a passage in *Rayuela*.<sup>401</sup> González Echevarría points to this conception of “yo no” as the key to reading Cortázar through the Nietzschean problematic “Who writes?” and signals the underlying impulse behind Cortázar’s stories, like those above, whose mythological *raison d’être* has been transformed into an annihilation of difference, or the achievement of undifferentiation that speaks to the “illusion of meaning.” He says,

[...] each confrontation leads to a mutual cancellation, each conception carries with it its concomitant death. Writing in Cortázar must be born anew in each text; the whole of writing must emerge with each word, only to disappear again – not an eternal return, but a convulsive

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<sup>399</sup> That of Theseus, as already mentioned, and also Heraclitus, who inspired the title of Cortázar’s apocalyptic story “Todos los fuegos el fuego,” which also includes recurring biblical references. See Aagje Monballieu, Danny Praet, and Mark Janse, “Salted with Fire: Biblical Allusions, Heraclitus, and Judgment by Fire in Julio Cortázar’s ‘All Fires the Fire,’” in *Orbis Litterarum*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Aug. 2011, pp. 312-40).

<sup>400</sup> “Yo,” meaning “I” in Spanish, is pronounced in many South American and Caribbean dialects as “jo,” pronounced with a soft “j” as “z” as in the French name “Jacques.”

<sup>401</sup> The passage in question is Chapter 148, whose entirety (one short paragraph) is dedicated to an etymology of the word “person” by Aulus Gellius that suggests that the origin of the word is connected to the “o” sound at its center. See: Roberto González Echevarría, “Los reyes: Cortázar’s Mythology of Writing,” in *Books Abroad*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Summer 1976, pp. 548-557) p. 555; and: Julio Cortázar, “Chapter 148,” in *Rayuela* [Hopscotch] (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1963).

repetition of construction and deconstruction. A formal reflection of this might be found not only in the heterogeneity of Cortázar's longer texts, but also in their reliance on dialogue.

Cortázar emerges, then, at the point of the cancellation, of the negation. He must therefore be read whole, establishing no generic distinctions nor privileging either the fictional or the expository texts. Each text must be read as if it were the totality of Cortázar's production, given that each begins and ends in a question so fundamental as not to be transferable from one to the other, but must rather be repeated in each text and in each reading – a kind of spasmodic eschatology.<sup>402</sup>

The term “mythology of writing” itself derives from Roland Barthe's assertion, excerpted near the beginning of González Echevarría's study, that “the ‘civilized’ work cannot be dealt with as myth,” because by virtue of being written it becomes hampered by constraints not attributable to oral myth, as elucidated through González Echevarría's analysis of “Los reyes.” The question of the origin or the generation of writing points to the abolition of the author. Thus, we return to Bennet, in a manner, regarding the circularity of the text, but rather than a matter of mere symbolism, it has now become the intellectual and artistic thrust behind Cortázar. “In literature self-referentiality is a return to origins in order to take away from conception its claim of originality, of constituting a single, fresh moment of beginning, an ordering principle and principium. Rather than the joyful game that it is often taken to be, self-referentiality is a deadly game in Cortázar, a violent ritual where Cortázar is at stake.”<sup>403</sup>

Together, these discussions from Bennet and González Echevarría serve as an entry point into the mythology of Cortázar's storytelling as symbolized through the animalistic representations in his short stories. Bennet writes that in Cortázar's quest to, in his own words, discover “a new ethic and a new metaphysic,” he has progressively refined the Minotaur myth, “transforming its explicit representation of the antithesis between man and animal, and their tenuous, uneasy union, into more extreme oppositions and, as a result, more profound reconciliations.” And then, echoing González Echevarría, he continues, “‘Axolotl’ retains the labyrinth-monster trope as its fundamental conception, but the tale's power derives from its recognition and subsequent obliteration of absolute distinctions.”<sup>404</sup> Thus, each identifies the return to origins – or the “obliteration of absolute distinctions” or the achievement of

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<sup>402</sup> González Echevarría, “Los reyes: Cortázar's Mythology of Writing,” p. 556.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid. p. 549.

<sup>404</sup> Bennet, “A Dialogue of Gazes,” p. 58.

undifferentiation – as the mimetic impulse yielding an animalistic-centric aesthetics, what Cortázar calls *bestiario*, or an aspect of what Bennet calls Cortázar’s “aesthetic-ethics.”

## II. *Bestiario* and bestiaries: evolving, timeless mimeses

*Bestiario* is the title of Cortázar’s first collection of stories. “Bestiario” is not only a notable story in the collection, but it is also a term of considerable significance that extends beyond the boundaries of the *Bestiario* collection, whose stories are explored in this chapter as a point of entry into Cortázar’s aesthetics of social concern, encompassed in the term *bestiario*. *Bestiario*, or bestiary as it might be translated in English, refers to an aesthetics of social signification, a consistent expression of the meaning of the modern, if we consider that modernity is defined through a revealing of something that has always been there, like the “numerous vestiges” that remain in the body from time immemorial; Jung’s “ancestral remains.” Inasmuch as to read Cortázar is to be taken through a series of regenerative returns to nothingness, his *oeuvre* is also an exposition on the nature of modernity through the body and mind of the individual. And in fact, the realities of Cortázar’s individual are indeed differentiated; they are at times conflated with, metamorphosed into, or reflected through the figurative and descriptive language of beasts, but there is always differentiation. Even in “Axolotl,” once man becomes lizard, the lizard becomes possessed of rational and conceptual thought, and of language. Thus, the body is subsumed, but the mind remains human. Therefore my conception of Cortázar’s bestial representations departs from Bennet’s and González Echevarría’s at this point; I read the bestial as distinct, as occupying a social space apart from, though with greater or lesser bearing on, that of the human.

Hence we come to a much-needed distinction between the bestial, or the mimetic representation of animals, and *bestiario* - with a small “b” to distinguish it from the collection and the story - a social and metaphysical stance culminating in an aesthetics of *el bestiario*. The Oxford Dictionary defines *bestiario* as: 1) “Colección de fábulas sobre animales, en especial de la literatura medieval” [a collection of fables about animals, especially in medieval literature]; and 2) “Hombre que luchaba con las

fieras en los circos romanos”<sup>405</sup> [a man that fought wild beasts in the Roman circuses]. The medieval tradition of bestiary stems from the Old and New Testaments, which include repeated references to animals as examples of God’s creation and, especially, the proper order of nature.<sup>406</sup> Believers are advised to look to the animals of nature to see that God has created each creature with purpose, and further, that all of God’s creatures reflect the Creator, and to study the Creation is to become closer to the Creator. Thus, what had previously been oral fables, existing long before Moses, became codified into select written allegories enframed within religious narratives advising human behavior and belief systems.

This narrative gained popularity in the Middle Ages, particularly amongst Christians in Europe, when stories from the Bible, along with others,<sup>407</sup> were curated into illustrated collections, called bestiaries, or *bestiarios* in Spanish. Each illustration documented the natural history of a single animal, or a particularly significant aspect of the animal’s behavior, in order to convey a moral lesson, usually reflecting the religious message from the above passage from Job. For example:

As the pelican revives her dead young after three days with her own blood, so Christ “revived” humanity with his blood after three days in the grave. The way the young of the hoopoe care for their elderly parents shows how human children should care for theirs. As doves are safe from their enemy the dragon as long as they stay in the shelter of the peridexion tree, so Christians will be safe from their enemy Satan as long as they stay in the shelter of the Church. As the eagle rejects any of its young that cannot stare unflinching into the sun, so God will reject sinners who cannot bear the divine light.<sup>408</sup>

As shown from mention of the dragon, not all beasts mentioned in bestiaries were real in nature. Other “imaginary” creatures included unicorns, basilisks, and griffins, though

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<sup>405</sup> “Bestiario,” in *Oxford Dictionaries Online* (Spanish language version, Oxford University Press, 2016) Accessed 5 April 2016, <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/es/definicion/espanol/bestiario>>.

<sup>406</sup> For example, see: “Job 12:10,” in *The Holy Bible, King James edition* (Cambridge Edition: 1769; *King James Bible Online*: 2016) Accessed 5 May 2016, <<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Job-12-10>>.

<sup>407</sup> The earliest known bestiary borrowed imagery from the writings of Aristotle, Herodotus, and Pliny the Elder, among others, which were compiled in a second century volume titled *Physiologus*.

<sup>408</sup> David Badke, “Introduction” to *The Medieval Bestiary: Animals in the Middle Ages* (January 2010), Accessed 5 April 2016, <<http://bestiary.ca/intro.htm>>.

there was no distinguishing between the real and the imagined to the medieval “reader” of these symbolic animal images, as they were not marked out as being “unreal.”

Interest in bestiaries resurfaced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, giving way to modern bestiaries in art, literature, and criticism that continue to the present.<sup>409</sup> Caspar Henderson’s *Book of Barely Imagined Beings*, which the author was inspired to write after a return to Borges’ *Manual de zoología fantástica* (literally, The Manual of Fantastic Zoology, but published in English as the *Book of Imaginary Beings*, 1957 and expanded into its final form in 1969), is at once a piece of history, modern criticism and a bestiary, taking as its point of departure animals in literature that exist (or have existed) in nature, but which are “stranger than imaginary ones, and it is our knowledge and understanding that are too cramped and fragmentary to accommodate them: we have *barely imagined* them.”<sup>410</sup> He includes the axolotl among his specimens of interest, and cites Cortázar’s depiction. Henderson draws attention to the centrality of animal representation as a way of understanding ourselves, from the Paleolithic Lascaux Cave paintings, to medieval bestiaries, which, after the enlightenment gave way to cabinets of curiosities and anatomical representations, to more recent practices of excavation of ancient ruins and plumbing the depths of the sea. While the thrust of Henderson’s book toes that of the biblical – that animal representation is human representation – its guiding impulse is altered. “The Enlightenment and the scientific method will, therefore, have made possible the creation of a world that really will be allegorical because we will have remade it in the shadow of our values and priorities.”<sup>411</sup> For Henderson, representation of animals reflects the changing world as perceived through the human experience.

Cortázar’s use of animal imagery subverts this allegorical tradition of the bestiary and instead uses animal imagery as a way to inscribe invisible or lost narratives and experiences into contemporary scenarios to reconceive modernity. Taking strong inspiration from Jung’s idea that humanity’s ancestral vestiges maintain a place within

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<sup>409</sup> The fantasy fiction genre in particular has made use of bestiary imagery, two of the most notable examples being *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy from J.R.R. Tolkien and the *Harry Potter* series from J.K. Rowling. Other examples of modern bestiaries: Salvador Dalí, *El bestiario de la Fontaine* (a series of individual sketched paintings); Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *A Bestiary* (Art Institute of Chicago, 1954); Caspar Henderson, *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Bestiary* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Jonathan Scott, *The Blessed Book of Beasts* (Eastern Christian Publications, 2014).

<sup>410</sup> Author’s emphasis. Caspar Henderson, “Introduction” to *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings*, p. x.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.* p. xix.

us – corporeally, psychologically, or merely through traces of memory (collective or otherwise, and also having to do with ancestry) – Cortázar’s question in dealing with the bestiary has to do with the extent to which those vestiges further take part in the modern. This is particularly vital to Latin American conceptions of the modern, which, up to the point at which Cortázar was beginning his published career in earnest had been conceived as an outcome of the colonial experience. This was truer for the intellectual and writer class than for many others. In his collection *Bestiario*, he organizes his stories according to an ascending comfort level with the individual’s power in harnessing the ancestral and the invisible as means of achieving a degree of transcendence over circumstances. His use of animal imagery to do this constitutes his re-writing of the bestiary as something subversive rather than as something expressive of hegemonic or dominant values. Cortázar’s *bestiario* possesses the ability to be these things, but it cannot be reduced to it, and often even as dynamics of power are played out through the bestiary in one respect, its dominance is being subverted in still another.

### III. The bull and the tiger in the Argentine short story

The contradictory interpretive possibilities of Cortázar’s use of *bestiario* has to do with the legacy of political allegory through animal imagery in Argentine literature, of which Cortázar was very much embedded, despite and inclusive of his humanistic, European, and/or Pan-American outlook. This section will provide a brief history of *bestiario* in Argentine literature as it played out through some of its most seminal figures and works before moving on to Cortázar’s own *Bestiario* collection. In documenting *bestiario* as a mimetic impulse of Latin American myth-making, my intention is to trace the idea of its impulse towards a *visualizing capacity*; that is, to show how the transition from allegorical use of animal imagery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century evolved as a conceptual idea contained of various interpretive possibilities, centered around the idea of giving visibility to an idea, which really departed with Borges, and which Cortázar then transformed into a sustain language of the social.

The prevailing trope of Argentine literary discourse in the early nineteenth century, as Latin American literature began emerging in written prose form for the first time since the European conquests, was premised upon a political disunity encompassed in the “*civilización y barbarie*” discourse. The turn from essay and other documentary forms of non-fiction writing to prose fiction was a result of the political atmosphere

under the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793-1877), which required intellectual and political opponents to mask their opinions behind a veil of fictionalization. Animal imagery, based on ancient and religious associations, was employed to occupy the allegorical spaces that rendered corporal human existence impossible.

With this in mind, Latin America's first fully realized short story, "El matadero" (The Slaughterhouse<sup>412</sup>, 1871<sup>413</sup>), by Argentine writer, intellectual, and political activist Esteban Echeverría (1805-1851), encompassed the deeply partisan atmosphere of the country in the throes of independence through vivid and pervasive animal symbolism that would, for all its callowness, set a powerful aesthetic tone in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and leave traces into the 20<sup>th</sup>. The narrative is told from an unidentified but clearly Unitarian perspective that gives the effect of a thinly-veiled social and political allegory of the differences that mark the opposing Unitarian and Federalist groups. The first part of the story documents a gruesome, frenzied struggle on behalf of the populace and the overseeing authorities to slaughter fifty steers into order to feed themselves during Lent, after a great, overwhelming and sustained rainfall and subsequent flooding had wiped out much of the food supply and left people starving. One bull nearly manages to escape, prompting a chaotic, bloodthirsty chase to subdue the animal and then rip it to shreds, which is done at length and at the expense of human lives that are sacrificed in the violent frenzy. The killing of the bull gives rise to the second part of the story. As the populace are settling down from their exhaustive struggle with the bull, a man identified as a Unitarian of English heritage is glimpsed riding past on his horse, giving rise to a chorus of calls among the people for him to be roughed up. The mob chases after him, he is separated from his horse, and the mob leaders bring him to a cabin where Federalist leaders tie him down naked to a cross-shaped plank and taunt him, but the man refuses to be afraid or to capitulate to their Federalist perspectives, and in the end he dies from a blood vessel bursting from the force of his rage. Thus, his death mirrors that of the raging bull of the story's first half, drawing a direct analogy between the two.

The tone of the story is undeniably partisan, and as blatant as the imagery of the Unitarian bull and crucified Christ may be, Echeverría's drawing of the Federalist

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<sup>412</sup> The literal translation is "The Slaughter Yard," or "The Slaughtering Grounds," by which title the story is also known.

<sup>413</sup> It was written in the late 1830s (possibly 1838; see N. Lindstrom, 1983), decades prior to its much later publication.

populace and their leaders is equally so. He repeatedly and unabashedly likens them to vultures, dogs, and vermin; the very dregs of society. The point is driven home through the contrasting image of the bull, which is portrayed as strong, brave, and courageous. The symbolism is further compounded by the fact that, firstly, the eating of meat is prohibited during Lent except for the sickly and is only being made available on this occasion by virtue of the effects of the flood, and secondly, by the fact that the meat of bulls is customarily prohibited: “Un toro en el Matadero era cosa muy rara, y aun vedada. Aquél, según reglas de buena policía debió arrojarse a los perros; pero había tanta escasez de carne y tantos hambrientos en la población, que el señor Juez tuvo a bien hacer ojo lerdo”<sup>414</sup> [“A bull at the slaughterhouse was a very rare and even forbidden thing. According to the public health laws, it should have been thrown to the dogs, but there was such a shortage of meat and so many hungry people among the populace that the judge thought it best to look the other way”<sup>415</sup>].

This can be read as a further compounding of the violations occurring on behalf of the Federalist populace against Unitarians, who should find protection from such ignorance and violence in the authorities, who have nevertheless abandoned the intellectual class in favor of satiating the masses – perhaps an allegory of Echeverría’s own exile. But the bull, whose image allegorizes the Unitarians, are portrayed as being so strong that they can only be brought down with maximum force and at great cost, while very little is gained in the end. This point is further compounded in the second half of the story, whose religious imagery mirrors that the animal symbolism of the first part of the story. It depicts the captured Unitarian – who is also illustrated as being of English descent, speaking to the divisive issue of race and European influence on Argentine identity – as the image of a crucified Christ. As the story ends, bestial and religious references are brought together:

En aquel tiempo los carniceros degolladores del Matadero eran los apóstoles que propagaban a verga y puñal la federación rosina, y no es difícil imaginarse que federación saldría de sus cabezas y cuchillas. Llamaban ellos salvaje unitario, conforme a la jerga inventada por el Restaurador, patrón de la cofradía, a todo el que no era degollador,

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<sup>414</sup> Esteban Echeverría, “El matadero,” in ed. David W. Foster, *Literatura hispanoamericana: una antología* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994, pp. 251-66) p. 262.

<sup>415</sup> Esteban Echeverría, “The Slaughterhouse,” trans. John Incedon, in ed. Seymour Menton, *The Spanish-American Short Story: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980) p. 15.

carnicero, ni salvaje, ni ladrón; a todo hombre decente y de corazón bien puesto, a todo patriota ilustrado amigo de las luces y de la libertad; y por el suceso anterior puede verse a las claras que el foco de la federación estaba en el Matadero.<sup>416</sup>

[At that time the throat-slitting butchers of the slaughterhouse were the apostles who spread the gospel of Rosas' Federation by the whip and the dagger, and it is not hard to imagine what kind of federation came out of their knives and heads. In keeping with the jargon invented by the Restorer, patron of their guild, Unitarian savage was the name they gave to anyone who was not a cutthroat, butcher, savage, or thief – that is to say, to all decent men of stout heart, to all highly educated patriots, friends of liberty and enlightenment. And, by the preceding episode, it can clearly be seen that the focal point of the Federation was the slaughterhouse.<sup>417</sup>]

The story is a bestiary in its own right, drawing heavily on the religious morality so central to medieval bestiaries. There are various points of overlap and coalescence between the religious and animalistic aspects of the story. Some of these derive from the warring atmosphere of Argentina during much of the century and no doubt stand in lieu of what might have been other forms of documented argumentation, for example essays or articles, to make a case for Unitarian governance and all that implied. To this end, Echeverría appropriates imagery from Christian Europe, which had come to Latin America via colonialism, as a way of achieving the Unitarian message. In appropriating this imagery – particularly of a bull during Lent – he sanctifies the Bible's word as a triumph of civilization. He draws righteousness and thoughtfulness as being the purview of those of European descent, and compounding that image with the powerful force of the bull and the image of the crucified Christ. And, vitally, he is harnessing that very force of the bull, as drawn from Scriptures,<sup>418</sup> to sanctify a colonialist “right to rule” perspective as a moral imperative – in this case, to argue for Unitarian “right to rule” over Argentina with Buenos Aires as its capital, and taking the French and British as examples to emulate.

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<sup>416</sup> Echeverría, “El matadero,” p. 266.

<sup>417</sup> Echeverría, “The Slaughterhouse,” pp. 20-1.

<sup>418</sup> An example from the Old Testament: “His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns: with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth: and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh.” “Deuteronomy 33:17,” in *The Holy Bible, King James edition* (Cambridge Edition: 1769; *King James Bible Online*: 2016) Accessed 5 May 2016, <<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Deuteronomy-33-17>>.

However, it is important also to keep in mind that Argentine literature arose out of a need to censor political stances, in large part by individuals who were exiled from their country for being political opponents to the sitting Rosas regime. Here, animal imagery provides a further veil of fictionalization so that the provenance of the story cannot be traced to any particular episode or individual. In particular, the imagery of the bull provides a stand-in for corporeality, which in itself is prevented on the double account of grave danger to individual, outspoken Unitarians as well as the reality of exile. Thus, the bull is a manner of giving *visible presence* to something and someone who must necessarily remain invisible. This is the crux of its allegorical necessity.

Similar to Echevarría, Sarmiento wrote *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* while in exile in Chile from the Rosas regime. “Facundo” refers to Juan Facundo Quiroga, a federalist *caudillo*, whose life and deeds provide allegorical purpose in Sarmiento’s painting of the countryside as a source of barbarism and a breeding ground for warlords, which is what he considers both Facundo and Rosas to be. By contrast, the city is painted as a civilizing place, with Sarmiento himself, as both narrator and main character, portrayed as embodying the ideal outcome for Argentine citizens and leaders who embrace the urban influence. Quiroga’s story ends when he is assassinated on the road, apparently by henchmen of Rosas, giving way to commentary by Sarmiento concerning the ills of Argentine society – American barbarism – and propounding his vision for the future, embodied in a European and urban ideal, explicitly juxtaposing what he views as the civilization of France against the barbarism of Argentina.

The figure of the tiger is a sustained metaphor throughout *Facundo*, and Sarmiento employs it as a double-edged sword, a potential meeting ground between civilization and barbarism, but eventually landing on the latter. Playing on Quiroga’s real-life nickname, El Tigre de los Llanos (The Tiger of the Plains), which was bestowed upon him after killing a cougar, Sarmiento elaborates on this nickname as fundamental to Quiroga’s fate, and that of other *caudillos* and Argentina’s non-urbanites citizenry. The first part of *Facundo* documents the characteristics of the people and flora and fauna of the *pampas* to the effect of essentially “othering” the entire way of life as foreign, even going so far as to sustainedly refer to its inhabitants as “American Bedouins” and “Arabs” and the *pampas* as being like that of a Middle Eastern desert.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> Sarmiento had himself never visited the pampas prior to writing so confidently about its appearance and people. Thus, he treats rhetoric as equal to experience, and as a valid stand-in for any kind of subjective “fact” or “truth” based in experience. He treats his conceptions of

He describes how the nature and atmosphere of the Argentine wilds determine the people's character, which he draws as being fundamentally opposed to that of "modern" urban life, and fear of the tiger is a part of this. For example, when a caravan is forced to halt its sluggish traverse for rest, he must be constantly fearful and alert.

Si no es la proximidad del salvaje lo que inquieta el hombre del campo, es el temor de un tigre que lo acecha, de una víbora que no puede pisar. Esta inseguridad de la vida, que habitual y permanente en las campañas, imprime, en mi parecer, en el character argentine, cierta resignación estoica para la muerte violenta, que hace de ella uno de los percances inseparables de la vida.<sup>420</sup>

[When not fearful of the approach of the savage, the plainsman has equal cause to dread the keen eyes of the tiger, or the viper beneath his feet. This constant insecurity of life outside the towns, in my opinion, stamps upon the Argentine character a certain stoical resignation to death by violence, which is regarded as one of the inevitable probabilities of existence.<sup>421</sup>]

Occasional references of this nature abound, preparing the reader for Quiroga's eventual prolonged encounter with the beast.<sup>422</sup> The fictional encounter shows Quiroga frantically running from the animal, fearing for his life, until finally climbing into a tree for safety while the tiger stealthily hunts him down and ferociously encircles the tree, waiting patiently for Quiroga to fall out from exhaustion. He is only saved when his friends track him down and, together, lasso the tiger before letting Quiroga climb down from the tree in order to stab the tiger to death. This is the episode, highly fictionalized by Sarmiento, through which Quiroga earns his nickname, El Tigre de los Llanos. The narrator (Sarmiento himself) seizes on the episode to remark that, "La frenología y anatomía comparada han demostrado en efecto, las relaciones que existen en las formas exteriores y las disposiciones morales, entre la fisonomía del hombre y de algunos

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foreign lands similarly at times, as well as the lives of those he names, including Quiroga. Thus, Sarmiento creates an aesthetic that surpasses the strictly allegorical and that conflates fact and fiction into a creative type of nation-building document.

<sup>420</sup> Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga. Civilización y barbarie* (Barcelona: Red ediciones, 2016) p. 27.

<sup>421</sup> Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo: Or, Civilization and Barbarism*, trans. Mary Mann (London: Penguin Books, 2002 e-book edition) np.

<sup>422</sup> In a separate passage, Sarmiento explains that the tiger is actually something like a jaguar, but was given the name of a tiger by Spanish colonizers who had no words for such animals upon their arrival, and therefore gave them familiar European names.

animale, a quienes se asemeja en su carácter”<sup>423</sup> [“There are, in fact, as is proved by phrenology and comparative anatomy, relations between external forms and moral qualities, between the countenance of a man and that of some animal whose disposition resembles his own”<sup>424</sup>].

After Quiroga’s nicknaming, his fortunes change, and thereafter Sarmiento frequently replaces his name with that of “The Tiger,” indicating the extent to which man and beast become one. Yet, because the brave and fearless tiger is essentially subsumed into the body of a cowardly human, the ferocity of the tiger is thereafter deployed in the service of despotism and savagery. “Las madres y las esposas saben lo que significa Atilas, y unas primero y otras después logran reunir las sumas pedidas, para hacer volver a sus deudos del camino de conduce a la guarida del Tigre. Así, Quiroga gobierna a San Juan con solo su terrorífico nombre”<sup>425</sup> [“The mothers and wives understood what fate they were to expect, and first one, and then another and another, succeeded in scraping together the sums necessary to keep back their sons and husbands from the den of the Tiger. Thus Quiroga governed San Juan merely by the terror of his name.”<sup>426</sup>]

Sarmiento’s tiger is, like *Facundo* itself, part biography (of Quiroga), part aesthetic device in an ethnographic-centric study of the *pampas*, and part political allegory. But it is something else as well: it is a figment of the imagination, being non-existent after its ceremonious death at the bottom of a tree. It becomes subsumed into collective memory as myth, and its mythological power is evoked, and sullied, through the very human figure of Quiroga. This is one of the reasons why, though Sarmiento paints Quiroga in the worst possible light, the story told of his life evokes a feeling of loss.

For Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), born just a decade after Sarimento’s death, the tiger is the ultimate symbol of loss. It represents to him at once the highest symbol of the conscious mind (“Suelo pensar entonces: Éste es un sueño, una pura diversión de mi voluntad, y ya que tengo un ilimitado poder, voy a causar un tigre”<sup>427</sup> [“Then I think:

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<sup>423</sup> Sarmiento, *Facundo*, Spanish ed., p. 76.

<sup>424</sup> Sarmiento, *Facundo*, English ed., np.

<sup>425</sup> Sarmiento, *Facundo*, Spanish ed., p. 142.

<sup>426</sup> Sarmiento, *Facundo*, English ed., np.

<sup>427</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Dreamtigers,” in ed. Alexander Coleman, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000) p. 74. The cited story-poem included here by Borges’ were originally published in his collection *El hacedor* (The Maker<sup>427</sup>, 1960), following up his 1957 (and

This is a dream, a pure diversion of my will; and now that I have unlimited power, I am going to cause a tiger”<sup>428</sup>]), and also the impossibility of capturing, through language, that which the mind sees (“Oh, incompetencia! Nunca mis sueños saben engendrar la apetecida fiera”<sup>429</sup> [“Oh incompetence! Never can my dreams engender the wild beast I long for”<sup>430</sup>]). The symbol of the powerful beast is transformed, from pure allegory, as it had been conceived in “El matadero,” for instance, into a symbol of in-betweenness in the poems and short stories of Borges: of the distance between the human experience and human creation, and between the conscious and subconscious mind.

Borges did not write in long-form, strongly preferring short prose forms, and particularly the short story. There are strong echoes of Sarmiento in Borges, for example his pliable relationship with the concept of “fact,”<sup>431</sup> and in his playfulness with genre – even his short stories may be taken as other forms, like essays, biographical insights, or even poems. Further, in a manner, Borges’ preference for short prose takes the disunity of *Facundo* almost to its logical extreme in his embrace of the cycle. This meant that he freed himself and his tiger up from the restrictions of an extended metaphor bound within the confines of a single narrative trajectory. Throughout a certain cycle of Borges’ writing, the tiger is a symbol of Borges’ self-referentiality, to the point of destabilizing the very notion of fiction in the fictions in which it is present. These stories always end, as the poem above, in the quagmire of the “fact of naming it,” signaling the limits of Borges’ own abilities (“Oh incompetence!”).

The symbol of the tiger would continue to evolve with Cortázar, particularly in his story, “Bestiario,” which I will discuss further on in this chapter. For Cortázar, the tiger would become an expression of a surrealist artistic sensibility that Cortázar

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expanded in 1969) bestiary collection, *Manual de zoología fantástica*, which tells stories about creatures he has made up.

<sup>428</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Dreamtigers,” in *Dreamtigers*, trans. Mildred Boyer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964, 12<sup>th</sup> edition 2008) p. 24.

<sup>429</sup> Borges, “Dreamtigers,” Spanish ed., p. 74.

<sup>430</sup> Borges, “Dreamtigers,” English ed., p. 24.

<sup>431</sup> For excellent discussions of this topic concerning *Facundo*, Borges, and in Argentine literature more generally, see: Ilan Stavans, “Introduction,” to Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo: Or, Civilization and Barbarism*, trans. Mary Mann (London: Penguin Books, 2002 e-book edition); Diana Sorensen Goodrich, *Facundo and the Construction of Argentine Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Sergio Waisman, “Jorge Luis Borges’s Partial Argentine Ulysses: A Foundational (Mis-)Translation,” in *TTR : traduction, terminologie, redaction*, vol. 19, no. 2 (éruudit.org: 2006, pp. 37-51) <<https://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/2006/v19/n2/017823ar.pdf>>; Sergio Gabriel Waisman, *Borges in Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005).

embraced;<sup>432</sup> however, its consideration as surrealist is valid only insofar as the surface narrative is concerned, owing to the implausibility of a real tiger existing within the context of the frame story. My focus will be on Cortázar's use of the tiger as a corporeal expression of the invisible aspects of the psychological and ancestral self. And while I will not focus extensively on the political undertones of the story, it nevertheless marks a continuation of the enmeshed relationship between political allegory and animal imagery that had begun with Echeverría's "El matadero." Indeed, one of the things that makes Cortázar's tiger so formidable and able to subvert strictly allegorical readings is his use of it, evolved through the epochs of the Argentine short story, as a corporeal expression of the repressed or invisible, as a way of naming human qualities, values, and relationships, and also as a conceptual idea that encompasses the variable experience of living in a divided social scenario.

#### IV. Raising the subconscious: from an invisible presence to making a tiger in *Bestiario*

In Latin American literature in the twentieth century, the division between human and animal representation became blurred, or even nonexistent, especially through the tropes of magical realism and surrealism. The two mark derivations from separate forms of European artistic expression that nonetheless include some similar aspects, such as a foregrounding of dreams and the subconscious, and juxtapositions of the real and unreal that are commonly referred to as "fantastic." Animal imagery has played a powerful role in both, particularly after they were revived through mid-twentieth century Latin American literature, which seized on them with such vigor, especially during the Boom, that for a time, Latin American fiction became synonymous with magical realism, as an umbrella colloquialism that encompassed magical realism, surrealism, and everything in between.

For Cortázar, unlike García Márquez's baroque magicalism or Borges' metaphysical explorations, the fantastic is inseparable from the conscious and unconscious mind, which is capable of drastic distortions, adaptations, and vital powers of instinctiveness. The pervasive psychological aspects of Cortázar's work are the greatest distinguishing features of his surrealism. Surrealism made its way to Latin America just as it was waning in Europe, finding new expression there and providing a

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<sup>432</sup> See: Melanie Nicholson, *Surrealism in Latin American Literature: Searching for Breton's Ghost* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) pp. 9-10.

precursor to Latin American postmodernism.<sup>433</sup> Mirroring the rise in therapeutic, theoretical, and medicinal advanced in studies of the mind, particularly the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis as advanced through Freud, Jung, and Lacan, among others, surrealism privileged an experience of reality as that of “the mind already knows,” and emphasizing “hidden,” or subconscious, mental processes and memories.

Surrealist expression, similar to magical realism, became a mode of expression that routinely toed the line between the conscious and subconscious. It took on an allegorical impulse reflecting the social and political strife in mid-twentieth century Latin American countries that created an atmosphere in which citizens were not always able to know the boundaries of their individual experience. Cortázar expertly addresses just such a scenario through a siege-like atmosphere in his first published short story, “La casa tomada” (House Taken Over, 1946), which documents an adult brother and sister who live together in their family home. Room by room, the house is taken over by an unnamed force referred to only as “they,” until at last brother and sister are forced to flee into the street without any possessions in the middle of the night. Because “they” are never explicitly named or seen by the reader, it is tempting to assume that brother and sister are perhaps imagining something which is not really there; yet, to them, it is so real and powerful that it need not be named, and it is worth their losing everything in order to escape. “La casa tomada” is a simple, expert illustration of the shifting boundary between conscious and unconscious thought; in the story, it manifests as a question between either psychological or material colonization. How can one know the difference?

In such a scenario, in which surrealism “finds itself” in Latin America, animalistic imagery comes to occupy a battleground between the conscious and subconscious. The tiger in the story “Bestiario” represents a prowling presence of known magnitude. Like the “they” in “La casa tomada,” the tiger is never seen by any members of the family, because to see it would mean certain death: a trope that mirrors the unchallenged invisible force that causes brother and sister to abandon their home. This is a powerful theme of the *Bestiario* collection, and it is central to Cortázar’s conception of a modern bestiary. For Cortázar, *bestiario* is a material representation of an unseen, contested space, rather than a visual representation of animal symbolism as

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<sup>433</sup> See Melanie Nicholson’s literature review of this topic in M. Nicholson, *Surrealism in Latin American Literature: Searching for Breton’s Ghost* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) pp. 2-3.

moralistic allegory. Yet, Cortázar's choice of title for the collection points to an affinity between the bestiaries of the Middle Ages, which assumed an implicit connectivity between human experience and the natural world, and his own modernistic conception of *bestiario* as that which lies between the body and the mind, and also between the individual experience and its social and political environs.

Further, though Cortázar's mimetic aesthetic of *bestiario* assumes a psychologically-driven mode of expression classified as surrealism, it nonetheless also marks a continuity in religious animal symbolism of Spanish Catholic Latin America, and a more recently conceived Argentine literary tradition for which animal imagery, deriving power from the former, was harnessed into a particular social and political aesthetics based on the joint premises of conquest and colonization. Though Cortázar's, and indeed Borges', aesthetics and the social circumstances propelling them would be drastically different than that of early Argentine literature, it is important to keep in mind the trajectory of the discourse in order to locate Cortázar's aesthetics as a partial legacy of this history, as much as Poe, Joyce, and Keats, and the atmosphere that shaped the Boom.

The tiger of Cortázar's "Bestiario" story, which was published some years prior to Borges' bestiary collection, *Manual de zoología fantástica*, presents a culmination of sorts for the stories that make up his bestiary. Here, too, the figure of the tiger is of central significance, and, like Borges' tigers, represents an in-between space, representing both an impossibility of expression, though without Borges' hand-wringing, as well as social, or inter-personal, and personal distance. What makes the story so masterful is its ability to at once signify the distance between the conscious and subconscious, and also social distance between the political and the personal (as one point of interpretation), the public and the private (as another), and between real and imaginary beings (as yet another).

The story tells of a girl named Isabel who is sent to the country to stay with relatives for the summer. These relatives have a mean-spirited son named Nino, whom the family seems to tip-toe around from fear of upsetting him. There's a powerful sense of dark mystery around him, because, while he is quite cruel, no one ever speaks of his cruelty – his actions are encircled within a powerful silence. There is also, we are told rather off-handedly, a tiger prowling the house and its grounds. The family and its visitors do not display fright or surprise at the animal's presence; in fact, it has become just another aspect of life for them, and they have developed a clear method of

communication so that they know where the tiger is at all times, so that they don't misstep and find themselves in its jaws. Thus, though the tiger is frequently spoken of, it is never seen or even described in the story, for to see it would mean certain death.

After a while of observing the family and Nino's actions, particularly toward his sister, Isabel makes what appears to be an on-the-spot decision and tells Nino that the tiger is in the library when in fact it is in his study. Nino goes to his study thinking he is safe, but instead meets his death. As his screams carry through the house, the men run to him, while their aunt Rema, now safe from Nino, silently hugs Isabel in gratitude.

Readings of the story have focused on its metaphorical qualities,<sup>434</sup> especially under consideration of its surrealist classification.<sup>435</sup> There has also been a significant amount of attention paid to Isabel's adolescence and coming of age in the story, as either signified through or around the tiger,<sup>436</sup> or in lieu of the tiger altogether. Jaime Alazraki's "Sonata en verde menor: relectura de 'Bestiario'" (Sonata in Green Minor: Rereading "Bestiario"), for example, proposes a radical new mode of reading the story, saying that overemphasis on the tiger has produced criticism that emphasizes it, "como *causa* del conflict y no como su resolución" ["as a cause of the conflict and not as its resolution"], thus limiting the story's potential.<sup>437</sup> He asserts that the major theme of the story "no es el tigre sino Isabel, y más específicamente su transición de niña a adolescente"<sup>438</sup> ["is not the tiger but Isabel, and more specifically her transition from girlhood to adolescence"]. From here, he proposes Cortázar's extended use of the color green as a connecting thread that connects and illuminates the story of Isabel:

El verde de "Bestiario" define también el tema del cuento (el encuentro de Isabel-niña con su adolescencia), pero...su aparición no es una estricta repetición del mismo tema, del la misma palabra con el mismo sentido (el escenario del pasaje), sino que allude a variaciones sobre el mismo tema. Cada una de esas variaciones replanta el tema y aporta, a su

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<sup>434</sup> See: Lucille Kerr, *The Beast and the Double: A Study of the Short Stories of Julio Cortázar* doctoral dissertation (Ann Arbor: University of Microfilms, 1972) pp. 58-63.

<sup>435</sup> See: Don. E. Wood, "Surrealistic Transformation of Reality in Cortázar's 'Bestiario,'" in *Romance Notes*, Vol. 13. No. 2 (Winter 1971, pp. 239-41).

<sup>436</sup> See the Chapter, "Bestiario," in Jaime Alazraki, *En busca del unicornio: los cuentos de Julio Cortázar. Elementos para una poética de lo neofantástico* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1983).

<sup>437</sup> Jaime Alazraki, "Sonata en verde menor: relectura de 'Bestiario,'" in *Hacia Cortázar: aproximaciones a su obra* (Barcelona: Editorial Anthropos, 1994) p. 109.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*

vez, nuevo matices y grados de información. Desde esa gama de verdes, el relato afina, precisa y apuntala la ambigüedad como una elección.<sup>439</sup>

[The green in “Bestiario” also defines the theme of the story (the meeting of Isabel the girl with her adolescent self), but... its appearance is not a strict repetition of the same theme, of the same word with the same meaning (the scenario of the passage), but alludes to variations on the same theme. Each of these variations replants the theme and provides, at the same time, new shades and degrees of information. From this spectrum of green, the story refines, pinpoints, and underpins the ambiguity as a choice.]

Alazraki subverts any fixity connected to the color green by showing how its meaning changes, evolves, and grows in complexity as Isabel’s situation likewise changes. This method is subsequently elaborated beyond the color green by Pamela McNab, who places special emphasis on the story’s symbolic evolutions: “the beauty of the story resides in this dual shifting technique: signification shifts between each symbol and its multiple, tenuous ‘meanings’ and narrative shifts from one symbol to the next that advance the story.”<sup>440</sup>

McNab returns to the tiger as structurally significant in framing the story and providing a sense of narrative unity, while also showing, with remarkable detail, how Cortázar uses other animals as symbols, individually appearing throughout seven isolated sections or “episodes” of the story, each speaking to Isabel’s situation within its respective episode in examples of zoomorphism. For example, the Funes’ children are introduced in the beginning in Isabel’s imaginings/memories/reflections the night before she is to depart for their home:

Antevivía la llegada en *break*, el primer desayuno, la alegría de Nino cazador de cucarachas, Nino sapo, Nino pescado (un recuerdo de tres años atrás, Nino mostrándole unas figuritas puestas con engrudo en un álbum, y diciéndole grave: “Este es un sapo y éste un pes-ca-do”). Ahora Nino en el parque esperándola con la red de mariposas, y las manos blandas de Rema – las vio que nacían de la oscuridad, estaba con los ojos abiertos y en vez de las cara de Nino zás las manos de Rema, la menor de los Funes.<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Ibid. p. 120.

<sup>440</sup> Pamela McNab, “Shifting Symbols in Cortázar’s ‘Bestiario,’” in *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Dec. 1997, pp. 335-46) p. 337.

<sup>441</sup> Julio Cortázar, “Bestiario,” in *Cuentos completos I (1945-1966)* (Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2013, pp. 170-82) p. 170.

[She was enjoying beforehand the drive up in the phaeton, the first breakfast, the first happiness of Nino, hunter of cockroaches, Nino the toad, Nino the fish (a memory of three years before, Nino showing her some small cutouts he'd glued in an album and telling her gravely, "This-is-a-toad and This-is-a-fish"). Now Nino in the park waiting for her with the butterfly net – she saw them coming out of the darkness, she had her eyes open and instead of Nino's face – zap! – Rema's hands, the Funes' younger daughter.<sup>442</sup>]

As the story progresses, cockroaches and fish are replaced with more extensive references to black and red ants and ant hills, then a praying mantis, and then, finally, in the ultimate zoomorphism – but of whom (Isabel? Nino? Both?) we are not sure – is Nino's being consumed by the tiger. Each of the beasts in the story elucidate and signify aspects of the children's relationship to one another, particularly the tension between Nino and Isabel with respect to Rema, whom they both love differently. The bugs, which are also their main source of entertainment and play, come to represent that love, as well as the surrounding repression, animosity, and upheaval amongst and within the children.

These are all aspects of what makes "Bestiario" the story a modern literary bestiary, and I have no intention of reproducing the excellent analyses – from Alazraki and MacNab and others – that have already so ably elucidated the metaphorical and symbolic aspects of the story beyond this point. Rather, I prefer to focus on how the story "Bestiario" embodies Cortázar's conception of *bestiario*, which undergirds the aesthetics of social concern that occupies a significant trajectory within his body of short fiction. "Bestiario" provides a framework for returning to González Echevarría's question from the beginning of this chapter on how to read Cortázar as an author rather than a book. The story at once affirms and rejects González Echevarría's assertion concerning Cortázar's impossibility of writing, or "mythology of writing." The tiger – which for Borges is a symbol of the limitations of language, and for Sarmiento is the source of corruption, both in language and with respect to power – for Cortázar emerges as a language all its own. More than a mere symbol, the tiger represents something like the language of the cosmos, constantly modifying, creating, disrupting, undoing, and holding together the fabric of the human experience: it is language given to that which

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<sup>442</sup> Julio Cortázar, "Bestiary," in *Blow-up and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, pp. 77-96) p. 78.

has no language. The tiger subverts the limitations of language precisely because of its multiplicity.

This aspect of void and reflection is evident in the prevalence of glass in the story. The children's animal playthings are nearly all looked at, contained within, or reflected through a glass object of some kind – an ant farm, a microscopic lens, a glass jar.

El formicario valía más que todo Los Horneros, y a ella le encantaba pensar que las hormigas iban y venían sin miedo a ningún tigre, a veces le daba por imaginarse un tigrecito chico como un goma de borrar, rondando las galerías del formicario; tal vez por eso los desbandes, las concentraciones. Y le gustaba repetir el mundo grande en el de cristal, ahora que se sentía un poco presa, ahora que estaba prohibido bajar al comedor hasta que Rema les avisara.<sup>443</sup>

[The ant-farm was worth the whole of Los Horneros, and it gave her [Isabel] immense pleasure to think that the ants came and went without fear of any tiger, sometimes she tried to imagine a tiny little tiger like an eraser, roaming the galleries of the ant-farm; maybe that was why the dispersals and concentrations. And now she liked to rehearse the real world in the one of glass, now that she felt a little like a prisoner, now that she was forbidden to go down to the dining room until Rema said so.<sup>444</sup>]

Isabel observes that Rema's hand is unknowingly reflected in glass so that it looks like her hand is inside the ant-farm, prompting the ants to run around frantically, as if they were running along her fingers. Isabel asks Rema to move her hand because, "El reflejo asustaba a las hormigas"<sup>445</sup> ["The reflection was scaring the ants"<sup>446</sup>]. This is of course another instance of the zoomorphism that is so prevalent throughout the story, but it is also a method of communicating the existence of a void, be it a social, imaginary, or linguistic one. The tiger is also a void, for it never manifests in the story except as a reference, and that invisibility – so evident, for example, in "Casa tomada" as brother and sister are forced from room to room, just as in "Bestiario," both by an unseen force – is the social and conceptual nothingness that Cortázar renders real by virtue of naming it – granting it language. Thus, the spaces in between are given the name of tiger, and

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<sup>443</sup> Cortázar, "Bestiario," p. 175.

<sup>444</sup> Cortázar, "Bestiary," p. 85.

<sup>445</sup> Cortázar, "Bestiario," p. 175.

<sup>446</sup> Cortázar, "Bestiary," p. 85.

the tiger is the language of that which has no language. Cortázar effectively renders a “mythology of writing” into the writing of a mythology.

Further, Cortázar’s *bestiario* linguizes distance traveled. There is of course the distance traveled in the *Bestiario* collection itself. The first story, “Casa tomada” is eloquently echoed, as previously described, in the final story, “Bestiario,” whereby the force that moves the family from one room to another, determining the cycle of their lives, begins as invisible and by the end is named “tiger.” The young man’s persistent vomiting of rabbits in “Carta a una señorita en París” (Letter to a Young Lady in Paris); the rabbits destroy his friend’s flat and lead him to such despair that he kills them and himself. The incredibly oppressive tension in “Ómnibus” against a young man and woman, whose terror is only made explicit when the bus driver leaves his seat when stopped at a light and begins crawling down the aisle toward them, to who knows what ultimate goal, and is only hampered by their decision to jump from the moving bus to save themselves. Cortázar says of his approach to the story that he intended “derrumbar barreras para dar acceso a un orden de la realidad que está del otro lado de la experiencia cotidiana. No son ni un puro juego verbal ni una simple metáfora, sino una ruptura”<sup>447</sup> [“to tear down barriers to give access to an order of reality that is on the other side of everyday experience. It is neither a pure verbal game, nor a simple metaphor, but a rupture”]. Cortázar’s re-writing of the myth of Circe in “Circe,” about a young woman who kills her lovers with chocolate truffles that have cockroaches cooked into their centers. There is a sinister aspect of *el bestiario* from the beginning because the void is portrayed as a source of human mental and subsequently physical destruction. By “Ómnibus,” however we see Cortázar beginning to conquer its potential destructiveness, until at last in “Bestiario” it becomes a power to be harnessed in the service of resolving a social evil (in the body of Nino).

Thus Cortázar’s *bestiario* is not a story, as in the medieval sense, that assumes animals as symbols, nor communicators of moral lessons, nor as scientific curiosities. Rather, it is a moment on a continuum, a harnessing of the cruder aspects of “El matadero” in the Argentine literary tradition (by this point) of speaking “in animal” to communicate inarticulable aspects – for Echeverría and Sarmiento, Rosas was the impediment, for Borges and Cortázar, the very nature of language itself – of the human experience.

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<sup>447</sup> Julio Cortázar as quoted in J Alazraki, *En busca del unicornio*, p. 177.

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to show how *bestiario* came to embody a vital modernizing impulse in the Argentine short story, and how this impulse began to transform with Cortázar's persistent use of it as a trope of visibility for lost, forgotten, and/or repressed aspects of the human experience in his early career. Cortázar's conception of *bestiario* is an amalgam of the Argentine experience broadly speaking, in that aspects of its provenance derive from Biblical and European allegorical traditions related to social values, and yet it also encompasses unique aspects of the Argentine and Latin American experience connected to postcolonial modernizing discourses. For example, Echeverría's use of animal imagery in "El matadero" highlights its expression of corporeality in the face of political exile and censorship as Argentina was at war with itself over the nature of its post-independence future, while also serving as an exploitative political allegory that capitalized on colonial "right to rule" discourses which associated non-European races and beliefs with diminished agency. And with Sarmiento, the image of the tiger began taking on conceptual undertones that both capitalized and expanded on Echeverría's allegorical fables with regard to the political disunity of the country, while also using rhetoric as a means of writing a modern myth of contemporary 19<sup>th</sup> century Argentina and the figure of Quiroga intended to supplant the collective memory as source and thereby fact. Borges developed this idea of myth-making with a pronounced playfulness with the very idea of "fact." Yet, for Borges, the figure of the tiger represented a conceptual idea regarding the impossibility of writing – something that would become a key impulse to Cortázar's own myth-making as articulated by González Echeverría early on in the chapter.

The second part of the chapter moved on to Cortázar's earliest collection of stories, *Bestiario*, focusing in particular on the first story of the cycle, "Casa tomada," and culminating in a more extended analysis of the final story of the cycle, "Bestiario." One of the framing characteristics of the cycle is the distanced travelled, so to speak, between the first story and the last in terms of the materiality of *bestiario* and what that signifies. Although Cortázar makes it almost impossible to draw strict allegorical meanings in one direction or another, there are certain significant aspects that show up regarding the agency he grants individuals as that materiality increases. Using *bestiario* broadly as a means of raising aspects of the subconscious based on Jungian

psychoanalytic theory, in which our ancestral traces maintain a continuous presence within modern experiences, Cortázar inscribes repressed aspects – be they political, ancestral, psychological, etc. – as relevant and functioning aspects of lived experience. In other words, what started off in “Casa tomada” as an invisible threat gradually colonizing the lives of two adult siblings, by “Bestiario” had materialized into the shape of a prowling tiger whose threat is subverted and ultimately thwarted through Isabel’s embrace of its presence in the spaces she inhabits.

These aspects of transformation take on heightened urgency in Cortázar’s next collection of stories, *Final del juego*. Moving away from metaphoric and zoomorphic representations, Cortázar further inscribes the mythological impulse into his stories by playing with metamorphosis, and in so doing comes closer to blurring the distinctions between Jung’s immemorial edifices and his own contemporary reality. In so doing, his work becomes more enmeshed with postcolonial narratives, signaling the beginning of a larger shift in his work toward dealing with the ultimate roots of the divided self. Cortázar’s distance traveled expands as his own conception of it grows more complex. As he joins other politically-minded Boom writers, both in exile like himself, or back home on the American continent, the question of Latin American identity re-emerges and is problematized by a need to reckon with pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial realities that had been subsumed and then obliterated in the post-Independence struggles for modernity. As Cortázar moves away from *Bestiario* the collection, his language of *bestiario* grows more urgent, seeking to at once to critique that very notion of modernity and providing new fictional worlds to address the question, “Who writes?” from within a silenced historicity.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Metamorphosis and the Fiction of Modernity:

#### “Axolotl,” Xolotl, and the Imperative of Allegorical Subversion

##### Introduction

Cortázar’s second collection of stories, *Final del juego* (End of the Game, 1956<sup>448</sup>), took what had been a fairly broad exploration of the possibilities of *bestiario* as a mimetic trope of the divided self in a polarized society in the collection *Bestiario* and began honing it into a more unified literary form that at once privileged the short story’s form with heightened seriousness but also more explicitly expressed the repressed subconscious in a way that compounded the mythological impulse. Once again, stories at the beginning and end of the collection are the best representatives of this shift. “Los venenos” (Poisons) and “Axolotl” show Cortázar increasingly metamorphosing what had until then been externally manifesting representations of *bestiario* (the prowling tiger and the ants in “Bestiario,” the beetles cooked into chocolates in “Circe,” etc.) with the human subconscious. In “Los venenos” this turns up as a realization of the extent of an underground insect infestation, and in “Axolotl” it turns up as the actual merging of human and animal, with a merged consciousness leading to a merged corporeality. In this way, Cortázar achieves in “Axolotl” what he articulated previously as the ghost’s desire to recover some semblance of its corporeality.

The ghost here is a reference to Parkinson Zamora’s idea of the ancestral and also of Jung’s idea of phylogenetic traces. Metamorphosis is the conduit for Cortázar’s raising of these elements to the surface, to give them a visualizing presence in their respective stories and in the realities they serve. Here, *bestiario* is aesthetically evident

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<sup>448</sup> *Final del juego* was originally published in 1956, and included nine stories: “Los venenos,” “El móvil,” “La noche boca arriba,” “La puerta condenada,” “Las ménades,” “Torito,” “La banda,” “Axolotl,” and “Final del juego.” It was subsequently revised in 1962 to include an additional nine stories, however, in between its original publication and revision, Cortázar published a new collection as well, titled *Las armas secretas*, in 1959. For the sake of chronology, only the original nine will be included in my analytical considerations in this chapter. On a separate note, the original Spanish-language collection is not to be confused with its 1967 English-language counterpart *End of the Game and Other Stories*, translated by Paul Blackburn, which includes only a selection from *Final del juego* in addition to most of the stories from *Bestiario* (excepting “Cefalea”), as well as selections from *Todos los fuegos el fuego*. The English-language collection was later renamed *Blow-up and Other Stories* in 1985.

through the entanglement of the bestial with the human and in this way locates itself as a space of historical possibility in tandem with the modern: *bestiario* is a route to origins without denying the present moment; in fact, the present moment here *becomes* the historical moment. It should be clear by this point that that aesthetic impetus undergirding Cortázar's conception of *bestiario* was not merely allegorical or destructive; rather its power is its self-referentiality, though not exactly in the manner of González Echevarría's articulation in Chapter Six. Indeed, the central aesthetic tenet of *bestiario*, and possibly even of Cortázar's myth-making more broadly speaking, occurs through the transcendence of metamorphosis. This is evident from Cortázar's first story, "Casa tomada," where an invisible (or imaginary?) force, that, for all the reader knows could be a simple creak in the floor, becomes a powerful invasion feeding on the fear of the house's sibling inhabitants. Their fear likewise transforms them, altering their surroundings and their psychological state until at last they flee. But are they fleeing something real, or are they fleeing to achieve a psychological release? That the story is a clear allegory of the state of fear spreading amongst citizens in Argentina under Perón does not provide solutions to these problems, but rather gives a sense of precisely what is at stake in confusing dreams and reality. The harnessing of varying forms of metamorphosis is the manner by which Cortázar draws through imagery, rather than explains through strict narrative, precisely what is at stake in his stories.

González Echevarría says in Chapter Six that it is Cortázar himself that is at stake in these games. But what has become evident through the preceding chapters is the tension his stories exhibit between the world of the individual, and that of the collective. For, though much has been made of the individual-centricity of his fiction, particularly with regard to the deeply personal and pervasive psychological elements attributed to his characters, the mythologizing is, at its core, a manner of achieving a modern conception of "universal history," in the manner of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>449</sup> However, Cortázar's motivation towards this end came from a deeply felt humanism. From within this perspective comes the certainty that, like Ovid himself, "Metamorphosis as an actual subject does not matter."<sup>450</sup> Rather, metamorphosis helped him towards his treatment of myth, just as "[Ovid] emancipated metamorphosis from being an actual subject and made it into a functional principle that is operative in all

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<sup>449</sup> G. Karl Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: An Introduction to the Basic Concepts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975) p. 3.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

essential aspects of the poem.”<sup>451</sup> This is also the case with Cortázar, whose stories exhibit a metamorphosis that is propelled, above all, by the concern of creating a language, visual to the extent possible, capable of surpassing the oppressive conditions of the present – a concern for the Boom as much as for Cortázar himself.

### I. Metamorphosis debates: epiphany and self-referentiality in *Final del juego*

“Axolotl,” from *Final del juego*, is the culmination of Cortázar’s mythologizing through *bestiario*, and it is the point of maturation of his art in terms of achieving a single, concise story that merges his artistic vision with the social. Like any good story, the possibilities for interpretation are endless. Criticism on the story has shown it as engaging in the reification of European colonial perspectives, on the one hand, and as a politicized allegory of the state of exile on the other. The centrality of mirrors and glass, as represented by the physical containment of the aquarium, has served as a significant aesthetic trope in such readings. Disproportionate attention has been paid to the narrator’s actual act of becoming an axolotl, particularly from a psychological, surrealist-centric reading. Yet, interestingly enough, little has been made of the axolotl itself, and what precisely that transformation means if the central figure of the story is read as the salamander rather than the narrator. Entering the story through the figure of the axolotl opens up a new world of interpretive possibilities, with the act of metamorphosis at its center, and this is what I will explore in this section, touching on significant critical readings thematically as I go.

The story is extraordinarily brief. It begins with a man, our narrator, who visits the aquarium at the Jardin de Plantes in Paris. He becomes fascinated with the axolotls and begins visiting them constantly, staying for hours, and thinking of them when he is not there. In a process of gradual transformation, indicated through a signature move of Cortázar’s beginning in *Final del juego* by which the first person referent suddenly shifts to refer to another “self” (“Vi un cuerpecito rosado y como translúcido [...], semejante a un pequeño lagarto de quince centímetros, terminado en una cola de pez de una delicadeza extraordinaria, la parte más sensible de nuestro cuerpo”<sup>452</sup> [“I saw a rosy little body, translucent [...], looking like a small lizard about six inches long,

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>452</sup> Julio Cortázar, “Axolotl,” in *Final del juego* (Buenos Aires: Alfaguara – Biblioteca Cortázar [Kindle edition], 2016) paragraph 4.

ending in a fish's tail of extraordinary delicacy, the most sensitive part of our body"]<sup>453</sup>), the narrator gradually becomes the axolotl of his obsession. By the end of the story, the first person narration shifts entirely to that of the axolotl ("Ahora soy definitivamente un axolotl"<sup>454</sup> ["I am an axolotl for good now"]<sup>455</sup>). Finally, the last sentence ("me consuela pensar que acaso va a escribir sobre nosotros, creyendo imaginar un cuento va a escribir todo esto sobre los axolotl"<sup>456</sup> ["I console myself by thinking that perhaps he is going to write a story about us, that, believing he is making up a story, he's going to write all this about axolotls"]<sup>457</sup>) implicates the reader in the act of seeing, giving a sense of endless stages of becoming, from the narrator, to the axolotl, to the reader, and *ad infinitum*, each connected to the other and prompting growth into new forms, but never achieving resolution; "resolution" in this case being a state of psychological freedom, in which the mind would successfully achieve independence from its physical (corporal, geographic, or otherwise) surroundings.

In critical works on the story, the act of metamorphosis is figured as the moment of epiphany. For Bennet, it is the culmination of a "dialogue of gazes" exchanged between man and beast, which becomes the meeting point of "two discontinuous realms of being" that becomes "for a single transfiguring moment the node of a unitary awareness." In Bennet's articulation, mutual consciousness between the two is "formulated between the axolotl's silent visual awareness and the human narrator's capacity for language," and it is this intersection that produces meaning.<sup>458</sup> Other interpretations privilege metamorphosis as an act of escape. For Harris the transformation into an axolotl represents a Sartrean escape from anguish on behalf of the individual through identification with an animal he views as the same as himself.<sup>459</sup> Gyurko also emphasizes the act of escape from anguish, but this time resulting from a

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<sup>453</sup> Julio Cortázar, "Axolotl," trans. Paul Blackburn, in ed. Alberto Manguel, *Bestiary: Selected Stories* (London: Harvill Press, 1998) p. 162.

<sup>454</sup> Cortázar, "Axolotl," Spanish ed., final paragraph.

<sup>455</sup> Cortázar, "Axolotl," English ed., pp. 164-5.

<sup>456</sup> Cortázar, "Axolotl," Spanish ed., final paragraph.

<sup>457</sup> Cortázar, "Axolotl," English ed., pp. 165.

<sup>458</sup> Bennet, "A Dialogue of Gazes," p. 62.

<sup>459</sup> Mark D. Harris, "Existence, Nothingness, and the Quest for Being: Sartrean Existentialism and Julio Cortázar's Early Short Fiction," in *Latin American Literary Review*, Vol. 37, No. 74 (July-December 2009, pp. 5-25) pp. 7-15.

guilty conscience resulting from having committed the crime of caging the animals, for which the Aztec gods demand from him a human sacrifice.<sup>460</sup>

More recent postcolonial readings of the story have focused on the story's allegorical aspects, particularly locating it within the ethnographic traditions of Latin American literary history, and reading the axolotl as a textual representation of alterity, with the moment of metamorphosis as an attempt at an empathetic act. Among the most notable of postcolonial readings is Kauffmann's "Narrating the Other," which views the transformation of man into beast as a way of speaking for the "other" from within an inadequately examined Eurocentrism.<sup>461</sup> Kauffmann's reading takes strong consideration of Cortázar's own position as a European-born Argentine whose "ambiguous existential status as both 'insider' and 'outsider'" and as a "Latin American intellectual who made his home in a European capital, could hardly have left him insensitive to anticolonial struggles under way in Latin America."<sup>462</sup> Kauffmann essentially perceives Cortázar's position as a Eurocentric one, and "Axolotl" as an outcome of that worldview. Cortázar's European-Latin American-Argentine identity has been a topic of endless debate and sometimes even friction, especially in light of his political outspokenness and social ideals (with regard to socialism and also his broad humanism). While I agree with Kauffmann's allegorical impulse insofar as the undeniable European influence on Argentine letters since colonization irreparably merged the two continents and cannot help but find reflection in the literature, and indeed produces many of the tropes in Latin American literature, including "Axolotl," I nevertheless find it prudent with a story as complex as "Axolotl" to read beyond the strictly allegorical. Further, the Eurocentric argument is one that can be made about nearly all prominent Argentine writers in the past two hundred years – a topic discussed extensively in Chapter Three and continued in the Introduction to Part III - which begs the question as to how one defines Eurocentrism, which is the larger challenge posed by Argentine literature itself.

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<sup>460</sup> Lanin A. Gyurko, "Destructive and Ironically Redemptive Fantasy in Cortázar," in *Hispania*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (December 1973, pp. 988-99) p. 994.

<sup>461</sup> R. Lane Kauffmann, "Narrating the Other: Julio Cortázar's 'Axolotl' as Ethnographic Allegory," in eds. Erik Camayd-Freixas and José Eduardo González, *Primitivism and Identity in Latin America: Essays on Art, Literature, and Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000, pp. 135-56).

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.* p. 149.

This being said, what all of the above modes of interpretation have in common is that they take the act of metamorphosis as the moment of epiphany. Indeed, it can be argued that in any story that uses metamorphosis, the point of such an act is to create an epiphany; to force a new perspective through a physical or psychological (and more likely both) transformation from one form into another. Reading the story, however, it is unclear that any physical metamorphosis has actually taken place. If anything, it appears that Cortázar has merely mimicked the act of metamorphosis through a clever narrative technique. Bennet hints at such an outcome in his emphasis on the act of dialogue, but falls short of articulating it in any terms. Gyurko is more blatant, referring to the moment of metamorphosis instead as the narrator's *belief* that he has been transformed as a result of psychological torment visited upon him through guilt.<sup>463</sup>

Speaking of the function of metamorphosis in Ovid, Galinsky emphasizes its potent psychological aspect as key to its power as a mimetic device. He says that there is a psychological aspect to metamorphosis for the reason that metamorphosis speaks to the question of identity.<sup>464</sup> He cites psychologist David J. de Levita's *The Concept of Identity*, which speaks to how the transformation of a human into another form speaks to a corresponding alteration in their place in society and asks whether metamorphosis, "even when interpreted as a symbol, does not lay a strong accent on the identity aspects of psychic changes it represents."<sup>465</sup> The place of the individual in a discontinuous or disruptive society is of course one of the main thematics of Cortázar's literature and a significant factor in his "duty" as a writer as he perceived it. So, while for Ovid the psychological aspects of metamorphosis may have been something of a convenient contributing factor in his choice of metamorphosis to drive his message, for Cortázar, it is not unreasonable to suggest that such a consideration was deliberate and central. In articulating Cortázar's main departure from Ovid's metamorphosis, in this respect, is his insistence on implicating the reader in the very *act* of literature – that in reading literature, the reader is in fact reading themselves as possibly written by another "other" or another "self" from a distant past.<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>463</sup> Gyurko, "Destructive and Ironically Redemptive Fantasy in Cortázar," p. 994.

<sup>464</sup> Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, p. 45.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid. See also: David J. de Levita, *The Concept of Identity* (New York: Basic Books, 1965) p. 77.

<sup>466</sup> Andrew Feldherr, *Playing Gods: Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' and the Politics of Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) p. 4.

The most obvious example of this type of self-referentiality is Cortázar's shortest story, and the first in the updated version of *Final del juego*. "Continuidad de los parques" (The Continuity of Parks) begins with a man reading in his study. He sits down to continue a book he had previously begun reading and quickly becomes immersed in the story *in medias res*, of a pair of lovers, a Bonnie and Clyde type, who set about meticulously planning a murder and then executing it. At this point, their story has become *the* story, taking over the narrative, so that the man reading a book in his study does not notice that the landscape the killers traverse on their way to do their deed is that of his own estate, nor that the victim - a body sitting in the study reading a book - is himself. This shift in narrative, as previously described above in "Axolotl," sets the tone for the collection of stories, and its conclusion, which circles back on the reader in an implication of identity as something that is never fully resolved or permanently embodied, is what distinguishes Cortázar's particular use of metamorphosis.

There are two important implications of Cortázar's method that are central to considerations of the term "metamorphosis" in his work. The first is that the more traditional materiality of metamorphosis is subverted in favor of a narrative technique that leaves open the question of whether or not an actual physical transformation has indeed occurred, in turn emphasizing the psychological aspect, in line with Gyurko's reading. The second is that the moment of epiphany is in fact deferred beyond the transformative (albeit psychological) act. This stance echoes González Echevarría's, discussed previously, that Cortázar's self-referentiality, or his mythology of writing, is located in the "annihilation of difference," whereby "each confrontation leads to a mutual cancellation, each conception carries with it its concomitant death" and "the whole of writing must emerge with each word, only to disappear again – not an eternal return, but a convulsive repetition of construction and deconstruction."<sup>467</sup> Instead, the "object" of transformation (for example, the axolotl) serves as a sub-narrative, or the story within a story as exemplified in "Continuidad de los parques." Its existence in the narrative speaks to the nature of the human psychological and social dilemma, and any physical (i.e. psychological) transformation signifies a merging of the sub and master narratives; or, to put it another way, the merging of the individual and the collective. As for the moment of epiphany, it may be read as emerging from the ashes of destruction,

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<sup>467</sup> González Echevarría, "Los reyes," p. 556.

depending on the nature it takes, or it can be read as something that is inevitable but deferred to some point in the future, presumably the point at which the cycle of becoming reaches a resolution or changes shape. I myself tend to agree once more with González Echevarría that the moment of epiphany in Cortázar is the moment at which a new story begins, for it is the only indication of resolution and departure that is ever given, and it is at the heart of the composite nature of his collections.

Thus, metamorphosis, or more to the point, *psychological* metamorphosis, as an aesthetic choice, is a revealing mode by which Cortázar achieves a merging of the artistic and social aspects of writing. And in writing metamorphosis, Cortázar writes himself and implicates his readers in the act of creating and interrogating social realities. It is precisely these factors – the psychological manipulation of metamorphosis, self-referentiality, and delayed epiphany – that mark Cortázar’s mythologizing points of departure. Further, the metamorphosis referent, in this case the axolotl, marks an important sub-narrative that strengthens these factors and contributes additional layers of meaning and potential for critical interpretation.

## II. An allegory of the present? Xolotl and the challenge of a postcolonial modernity

Cortázar’s axolotl in the story represents an archetype of Cortázar’s mythologizing, as well as an intriguing but so far overlooked entry point by which to explore the deeper functionings and layers of meaning in the story. It also provides insight into Cortázar’s short fiction through *bestiario* more generally. Indeed, “Axolotl” represents the single most pointed culmination of the *bestiario* trope that began with “Casa tomada.” By entering the story through consideration of the axolotl, the intention is not to undermine the story’s sequential aspect (narrator to axolotl to reader, etc.), but rather to emphasize the importance of the referent in producing meaning.

Upon first reading “Axolotl,” I had to pause to look the word up in order to have a reference point; beyond the odd arrangement of letters (the juxtaposed *t* and *l* at the end are particularly curious), the word itself looks positively archaic, if not extra-terrestrial. As Cortázar points out in his story, the word for it in Spanish is *ajolote*, but interestingly Cortázar does not use this more commonly understood word either in the story’s title or in the story except for the one reference to its Spanish-language equivalent. What I take from this is that Cortázar may have intended for the reader to look the word up, if only to confirm that it is indeed a real creature, and not among the

imaginary beasts of old, like the Minotaur. Further, Cortázar's conflicted description of the creature ("Yo creo que era la cabeza de los axolotl, esa forma triangular rosada con los ojillos de oro. Eso miraba y sabía. Eso reclamaba. No eran *animales*"<sup>468</sup> ["I think it was the axolotls' heads, that triangular pink shape with the tiny eyes of gold. That looked and knew. That laid the claim. They were not *animals*"]<sup>469</sup>) about whether or not it was human-like or foreign reflects the ambiguity of the word itself, and only seems to prompt the need for information on behalf of the reader even further. Additionally, Cortázar's narrator early in the story is himself confused about the identity of the axolotl and searches it out, mirroring – or in fact anticipating – the reader's own instinct for more knowledge.

En la biblioteca Sainte-Geneviève consulté un diccionario y supe que los axolotl son formas larvales, provistas de branquias, de una especie de batracios del género amblistoma. Que eran mexicanos lo sabía yo or ellos mismos, por sus puequeños rostros rosados aztecas y el cartel en lo alto del acuario. Leí que se han encontrado ejemplares en África capaces de vivir en tierra durante los períodos de sequía, y que continúan su vida en el agua al llegar la estación de las lluvias.<sup>470</sup>

[In the library at Sainte-Geneviève, I consulted a dictionary and learned that axolotls are the larval stage (provided with gills) of a species of salamander of the genus *Ambystoma*. That they were Mexican I knew already by looking at them and their little pink Aztec faces and the placard at the top of the tank. I read that specimens of them had been found in Africa capable of living on dry land during the periods of drought, and continuing their life under water when the rainy season came.<sup>471</sup>]

These factors reinforce the idea that Cortázar intends for the reader to search out the word, and prompts me further in my theory that the referent (the axolotl), as the very first word of the story (the title), is the most plausible entry point to the story.

Interestingly, Cortázar's information above is misleading regarding the Mexican axolotl, for, because of its perpetual tadpole-like existence, it is never able to live on

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<sup>468</sup> Cortázar, "Axolotl," Spanish ed., paragraph 6.

<sup>469</sup> Cortázar, "Axolotl," English ed., p. 163.

<sup>470</sup> Cortázar, "Axolotl," Spanish ed., paragraph 3.

<sup>471</sup> Cortázar, "Axolotl," English ed., p. 161.

land, but must remain underwater for the duration of its life.<sup>472</sup> It is curious that he has chosen to include information about another species of salamander in Africa – for most salamanders are able to live both on land and in water – in a paragraph intended to provide the reader with information about the Mexican axolotl he was beholding in the tank. This confusion is something of a precursor to the greater ambiguity that surrounds the axolotl, both as a salamander species and as a nearly forgotten god of Aztec mythology.

As a species in current existence, Merriam-Webster gives a broad definition of “axolotl” as “any of several salamanders (genus *Ambystoma* especially *A. mexicanum* and *A. tigrinum*) of mountain lakes of Mexico and the western United States that ordinarily live and breed in the larval form without metamorphosing.”<sup>473</sup> This means that they look like larvae even as adults. The Mexican species of axolotl Cortázar describes is on the verge of extinction and only exists in the wild in the heavily polluted canals of Xochimilco in Mexico City.<sup>474</sup> However, the species “have long flourished in aquariums. They have been bred successfully behind glass over the past century, raised as exotic pets or as laboratory specimens for scientists investigating their extraordinary ability to regrow a severed limb or tail.”<sup>475</sup> The word’s origin is given as *Nahuatl*, which is the umbrella term for the group of languages spoken by the Aztecs in Mexico, indigenous to Mesoamerica. The Aztec connection is alluded to a few times in the story, beginning with the narrator’s own search of the term “axolotl” (“Que eran mexicanos lo sabía ya por ellos mismos, por sus pequeños rostros rosados aztecas y el cartel en lo alto del acuario”<sup>476</sup> [“That they were Mexican I knew already by looking at them and their little pink Aztec faces and the placard at the top of the tank”]<sup>477</sup>).

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<sup>472</sup> Sofía Castello y Tickell, “Mythic Salamander Faces Crucial Test: Survival in the Wild,” in the *New York Times* (30 October 2012) Accessed 9 May 2016, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/31/world/americas/struggle-of-axolotls-mexicos-mythical-salamander.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/31/world/americas/struggle-of-axolotls-mexicos-mythical-salamander.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2)>.

<sup>473</sup> “Axolotl,” *n.* in Merriam-Webster Online, Accessed 9 May 2016 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/axolotl>>

<sup>474</sup> Axolotls are far more endangered today than they would have been at the time that Cortázar wrote the story. Not only has the water around Mexico City increased in pollution, but twenty years ago tilapia fish were also introduced to their waters to support the local fishermen. These fast reproducing fish feed on the plants where the axolotls usually lay their eggs, vastly diminishing their own reproductive abilities. See: Sofía Castello y Tickell, “Mythic Salamander Faces Crucial Test: Survival in the Wild.”

<sup>475</sup> Castello y Tickell, “Mythic Salamander Faces Crucial Test: Survival in the Wild,” np.

<sup>476</sup> Cortázar, “Axolotl,” Spanish ed., paragraph 3.

<sup>477</sup> Cortázar, “Axolotl,” English ed., p. 161.

A further investigation of the axolotl shows its significance in Mesoamerican mythology, mostly Aztec but spreading to other cultures as well. Ironically for an amphibian whose shape retains the same larval appearance throughout its life, the axolotl is said to be a metamorphosed embodiment of the Aztec god Xolotl, who was known for his ability to mimic the appearance of other gods and creatures. The lore surrounding Xolotl is not a particularly well preserved, and interpretations vary widely, but the following comes through the varying interpretations relatively intact.

Among the children of Coatlicue, Mother of the Gods, was a set of twins, whose names were Quetzalcoatl and Xolotl. Twins being taboo in Aztec culture, one twin became successful and the other lead a shadowed existence; Quetzalcoatl went on to become an extremely successful god, the God of Wind and Learning, while Xolotl was God of Fire, Monstrosities and Misfortune,<sup>478</sup> with close ties to the god of the underworld. He was one of the gods who was said to have been present at the birth of the sun,<sup>479</sup> and was responsible each night for guiding the sun (and in some tellings also the stars) through the underworld each night. He had the head of a monstrous dog – dogs being considered filthy in Aztec culture - a symbol of the underworld, and he is known for having dragged rotting bones of an ancient species up from the underworld (either with his brother or alone), whereupon himself and the other gods, including his brother, sprinkled them with their own blood, thereby giving birth to the human species. But when Xolotl refused to sacrifice himself, along with the other gods, to create a new sun (signifying a new era of creation), he was forced to flee lest his brother kill him. To escape detection he transformed himself several times in an attempt at masking his identity, first as a maize plant and then an agave plant, before his final transformation into the Mexican salamander known as the axolotl.<sup>480</sup> Interestingly, each of the three forms he took to escape death were staple foods of the Aztec people, including the axolotl itself, which until recently was a significant source of protein. The salamander also has healing properties when stirred into a particular elixir. In his life, the god Xolotl

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<sup>478</sup> Some accounts attribute all three to him, while others attribute one or the other or a combination thereof.

<sup>479</sup> Burr Cartwright Brundage, *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979) p. 120.

<sup>480</sup> For this account I referenced: Cartwright Brundage, *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World*, pp. 119-21; Lewis Spence, *The Myths of Mexico and Peru* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010) pp. 93-4; and Wayne Ferrebee, "Xolotl, God of Sickness, Deformity, and Misfortune," in *Ferrebeekeepers: Reflections Concerning Art, Nature, and the Affairs of Humankind*, Accessed 28 April 2016, <<https://ferrebeekeeper.wordpress.com/2010/05/28/xolotl-god-of-sickness-deformity-and-misfortune/>>.

had been known for a certain gift of transformation, and often mimicked the appearance of his twin brother, and he also masqueraded as a set of twins, earning him a secondary reputation, in some accounts, as the God of Transformation and/or the God of Twins, and/or the Sun God.

Cortázar could barely have selected a better figure to serve as his “object” of metamorphosis. Not only is the axolotl steeped in mythology, a topic of endless social and artistic fascination and inspiration, but it is also a figure whose modern existence is marked by the constant threat of extinction, thus communicating Cortázar’s existential and humanistic concerns. Additionally, there is the consideration of Xolotl’s mother being the Mother of the Gods in Aztec mythology – the ultimate Magna Mater archetype, whose existence is nearly inseparable from the beasts that make up her clothes, skin, and blood. Though “Axolotl” is hardly considered amongst Cortázar’s more forceful Magna Mater stories, like “Circe” and “Las ménades,” the act of delving into the axolotl’s meaning opens up the possibility of including it among such interpretations, even if peripherally. Further, and as focused on in other readings of the story, this additional information about the axolotl reinforces Cortázar’s articulated problematic of “living in a deeply polarized environment” as exhibited through the centering of Mesoamerican lore and nature in a European setting.

*Bestiario* uniquely straddles the Archival, the Ancestral, and the Archetypal. It may at once derive from ancient texts, not only in terms of ancient Greek, biblical, and medieval bestiaries, but also referring to the centrality of animals in Mesoamerican inscriptions; the Aztecs “wrote” their own bestiaries in the form of statues.<sup>481</sup> If the Ancestral refers to those ancient references, often taking the form of ghosts, objects, and relics, then *bestiario* is likewise a non-textual reference to Mesoamerican beliefs that revered gods who were part animal, or fully animal, or who could become animal, and for which animals were one of the most common sources of sacrifice to the gods.

The example of the Goddess Coatlicue, the Aztec Mother of the Gods, provides an exemplary meeting point between the archetypal Magna Mater, “a negative figure who brought nocturnal darkness up from the underworld [...] from which all nourishment ultimately springs”<sup>482</sup> and the representative significance of *bestiario*. The

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<sup>481</sup> Barbara A. Somervill, *Empire of the Aztecs* from the series *Great Empires of the Past* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2010) p. 119.

<sup>482</sup> Buffie Johnson, *Lady of the Beasts: The Goddess and her Sacred Animals* (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1994) p. 163.

the most famous image of her, in the form of a pre-Columbian era, 2.7 meter statue, shows her with a head of two facing serpents, a skirt made of snakes, bird-talon hands, and tortoise feet, and she is elsewhere adorned with tusks, claws, and scales. Her nickname, Coatlicue, literally means “skirt of snakes,” while her less frequently used formal name Teteoh Innan means “Mother of the Gods.” She is said to have been decapitated at the beginning of creation, and the blood spurting from her neck took the form of snakes. In Aztec culture, she represented the epitome of the Magna Mater, embodying the feminine trinity of Mother, Maiden, and Crone, a ruthless warrior and fierce killer who was nevertheless the source of all life and healing.<sup>483</sup> She was also a virgin despite having numerous children because, according to myth, she was impregnated when a ball of feathers fell on her while she was sweeping the top of Snake Mountain, making her pregnant.<sup>484</sup> The relevance of the figure of Coatlicue is experiencing a renaissance at present, and Almere Read and González describe her statue as “a poetic starting point for women struggling to come to terms with the modern world.”<sup>485</sup>

Johnson, who took Carl Jung’s theory of the archetype as a starting point for her book on goddess figures and beasts, describes how the figure of the goddess and her beasts provides a language for interpretation of the modern:

Not only is the iconography of figures and vessels a manifestation of the ancients’ belief, it contributes a visual language through which their ideas can be deduced and interpreted.

At the core of prehistory loom the animal archetypes, symbols of fertility and death, that stand beside the Great Mother in what can only be described as an epiphany. Her animals are neither totems nor the independent divinities of polytheistic beliefs. They embody the deity herself, defining her personality and exemplifying her power. Her sacred animals act in the myths as guides and soul carriers, much as they do in fairy tales and dreams.<sup>486</sup>

Thus we return to the creative impulse of Boom literature: that of creating a new language to find authenticity in the modern through an invocation of an authentic past.

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<sup>483</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>484</sup> Kay Almere Read and Jason J. González, *Mesoamerican Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs of Mexico and Central America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 150.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid. p. 151.

<sup>486</sup> Johnson, *Lady of the Beasts*, pp. 2-3.

Deriving from Cortázar's prevalent Magna Mater archetype, *bestiario* becomes a language of correlation: a communication of beginnings, of the very embodiment of "source" through the mimetic animal symbols as the Magna Mater's power.

Yet, what makes *bestiatio* special in Cortázar's writing is that it also works on its own, without need of such a correlation. While the Magna Mater's power lies in the perception that she is the nurturer of life, and therefore a representation of origins, the invocation of animals in some ways supersedes such a humanistic embodiment. At first, it seems that Cortázar's narrator, in becoming an axolotl, is returning to a prehistoric past from which sprang many lizard species; in-between stages on the journey of fish into mammals, and eventually humans: a moment of becoming, of the not-yet, and therefore a moment of extreme possibility. But Cortázar complicates this perception early on in the story by emphasizing that the axolotl still exists, and is not yet a relic, despite its appearance as such.

This explanation of the Aztec myth brings up issues surrounding the use of metamorphosis and anthropomorphism as a sublanguage of *bestiario* that will be the topic of the following chapter. And yet, regarding the questions that concerned the Boom, it constitutes one of the best attempts in the short story towards achieving an originary moment. The axototl is a bridge between the modern and the ancient; a species whose mythology derives from the mother of all gods in Aztec lore, and, further, a metamorphosed embodiment of a figure who was present at the birth of the sun, i.e. the birth of all life and all of creation. It is at once Ancestral and Archival (the latter of which will become more evident in the next chapter), and it goes some way to answering the question of the archetype that has been so central to conceptions of Cortázar's mythology. The following section will return to Cortázar's text with these considerations in mind, continuing to read the text through the centering of the axolotl.

### III. Subverting allegory, destabilizing meaning

Cortázar's selection of the axolotl for his story clearly opens the gates to a wide array of interpretations, including postcolonial, ethnographic and anthropologic, mythic, historic, and even ecological. This is mostly why interpretations of the story vary so vastly, and is what makes the story so brilliant as well. Like the axolotl, or the god Xolotl himself, the story transforms itself according to the reader's perspective and critical grounding, to a greater extent than most other literature, including Cortázar's own. Yet, Cortázar's

point of departure for the axolotl is the emphasis on psychological metamorphosis rather than physical. How does this consideration alter the story's production of meaning, particularly in light of the physical (mythic) lore and scientific knowledge that are vital to its symbolic value? And how might such a consideration provide insight into Cortázar's literary and social motivations?

Consideration the Xolotl myth as an Archival and/or Ancestral presence puts it into direct collusion with magical realism, for which the myth becomes an object whose essence communicates extraordinary meaning. Analysis of the Archive, and I argue for the Ancestral as well, for being the Archival's non-textual counterpart, "involves a privileged region: at once close to us and distant from our present existence, it is the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us. [...] its threshold of existence is established by the discontinuity that separates us from what we can no longer say, and from that which falls outside our discursive practice; it begins with the outside of our language."<sup>487</sup>

The "discontinuity" Foucault speaks of is conveyed, firstly, by the opacity of the axolotl itself, in both name and figure. The act of delving into the axolotl's meaning, as prompted by the text, serves to somewhat demystify it, and, if not fully explain it, at least provides a trace of meaning, and translates its other-worldliness into a conception of time-space based on their modern conceptions, thus placing the axolotl within our discursive practice, and also our language; though something is undoubtedly lost in this process. This signals an intangible barrier between the observer and the observed, while Cortázar indicates the physical barrier in the form of a glass aquarium. Bennet talks about the dialogue of gazes between the axolotl and the narrator as occurring in lieu of such barriers in order to achieve empathy through a shared existence: "the shared awareness of man and axolotl promises a regained community."<sup>488</sup> Yet, the gaze is one-sided, insofar as the narrator observes the axolotl obsessively, but receives nothing back from the axolotl's eyes, which were "carentes de toda vida pero mirando, dejándose penetrar por mi mirada que parecía pasar a través del punto áureo y perderse en un diáfano misterio interior,"<sup>489</sup> [lacking any life but looking, letting themselves be

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<sup>487</sup> Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 147.

<sup>488</sup> Bennet, "A Dialogue of Gazes," p. 62.

<sup>489</sup> Cortázar, "Axolotl," Spanish ed., paragraph 4.

penetrated by my look, which seemed to travel past the golden level and lose itself in a diaphanous interior mystery<sup>490</sup>].

A driving perspective of Gyurko's reading of Cortázar's corpus is that, for his protagonists, "Fate becomes an inner force, the relentless action of the obsessed and tormented consciousness," with the characters themselves "prone to absorption into fantasy worlds because they are narcissistic, socially alienated, and emotionally unstable."<sup>491</sup> According to Gyurko's reading, such malignancies of character explain the circumstances that find the narrator mirroring those of the god Xolotl.

[The narrator] sees the monstrous animals as Aztec gods demanding human sacrifice for having been confined by twentieth century man to a liquid hell. The protagonist, in order to free himself of his own existential anguish through oblivion, gives himself up as a willing victim of sacrifice. He finally believes he has become transformed into one of the creatures and that the *axolotl* had taken his human form, perhaps as an act of vengeance to reclaim the beast's former power.<sup>492</sup>

In fact, this is the sum total of Gyurko's analysis of the story. It is surprising, therefore, that it is one of the only analyses of the story that takes into account the actual myth of Xolotl rather than simply leaning on the story's illusion to the creature's Aztec features. In spite of this consideration, however, Gyurko still falls back on one of the prevailing perceptions of the story, and of Cortázar's use of *bestiario* more generally, that the creatures represent a "destructive fantasy," and that the "nightmares and delusions of the characters are linked with a past that is primitive, savage, and demonic."<sup>493</sup>

There are two prominent paths that such a reading has taken: one is Gyurko's own, where the beasts are representative of something terrible that finds reflection in the protagonist's own existence, and that, in facilitating the human's becoming or merging with the bestial through metamorphosis, Cortázar is communicating a kind of defeat or regression as a form of escape. The other interpretation, like Bennet's, is that the act of metamorphosis between beast and man represents a cycle of life, and that man's merging or becoming beast implies a utopian impulse, a mimetic act that collapses history to emphasize the act of becoming – of possibility – and rewrites historically detrimental power imbalances. Dissimilar though the conclusions are, each of these

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<sup>490</sup> Cortázar, "Axolotl," English ed., p. 162.

<sup>491</sup> Gyurko, "Destructive and Ironically Redemptive Fantasy in Cortázar," p. 988.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid. p. 994.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid.

ways of reading hinges on the conception of the axolotl as holding power over man through an assumed ancient, long-standing connection between the two, as if they are family members who have been separated over the course of generations.

But the problem Cortázar presents in his use of the axolotl is a bit more complicated than either of these, for all their merits. Part of the complication stems from the fragmented nature of the Aztec myth as it has come through over the centuries – disjointed, contradictory, and incomplete. Yet, as González Echevarría points out in his comparative reading of Cortázar’s “Los reyes” and interpretations of the Minotaur myth of Theseus, this may be precisely the point, for it signals the very impossibility of writing, or what he calls Cortázar’s “mythology of writing.” Rather than engagement with a particular oral or written text, Cortázar seems to be engaging here with the spirit of a myth rather than the fact of it. An implication of dealing with the myth in this way is that it acknowledges the myth’s own morphed meaning over time and works *through* precisely that presumption of movement. For example, the fascination the axolotl holds in scientific fields – as a genetic curiosity on the one hand, and as a creature in need of saving on the other – is a fairly recent phenomenon, and has helped to shape Cortázar’s re-conception of the Xolotl myth as much as it has altered modern understanding of the myth more broadly speaking. Yet this understanding is in no way fixed or static.

The reader’s experience of the axolotl is filtered through the perspective of the narrator, but Cortázar still manages to convey movement of meaning. Structurally, he achieves this by engaging the narrator’s imagination through a dreamlike state, rather than engaging his knowledge through a waking consciousness or a verbal dialogue. The reader benefits from the resulting elisions.

Los imaginé conscientes, esclavos de su cuerpo, infinitamente condenados a un silencio abisal, a una reflexión desesperada. Su Mirada ciega, el diminuto disco de oro inexpresivo y sin embargo terriblemente lúcido, me penetraba como un mensaje: “Sálvanos, sálvanos.” [...] Me sentía innoble frente a ellos; había una pureza tan espantosa en esos ojos transparentes. Eran larvas, pero larva quiere decir máscara y también fantasma. Detrás de esas caras aztecas, inexpresivas y sin embargo de una crueldad implacable, ¿qué imagen esperaba su hora?<sup>494</sup>

[I imagined them aware, slaves of their bodies, condemned infinitely to the silence of the abyss, to a hopeless meditation. Their blind gaze, the diminutive gold disc without expression and nonetheless terribly shining,

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<sup>494</sup> Cortázar, “Axolotl,” Spanish ed., paragraph 7.

went through me like a message: “Save us, save us.” [...] I felt ignoble in front of them, there was such a terrifying purity in those transparent eyes. They were larvae, but larvae means disguise and also phantom. Behind those Aztec faces, without expression but of an implacable cruelty, what semblance was awaiting its hour?<sup>495</sup>]

The narrator, still debating with himself the axolotl’s living and even human qualities versus his original impression of it as a fairly lifeless being lacking in consciousness, is still on display here. But it is evident how Cortázar is mixing the language of the two axolotls – the scientific one in the larval stage, lacking in agency, a victim of circumstance, and the mythic one, representing an ancient and powerful civilization, demanding a return to greatness, or reparations, or possibly a sacrifice, as Gyurko put forth – Cortázar leaves the question ambiguous.

The threads of meaning that rest in these fluctuations are impossible to pin down, and yet they are the greatest indicator of precisely what is at stake in Cortázar’s story. What is very interesting, however, is how the act of metamorphosis merges the two axolotls into one. The act of metamorphosis itself privileges the myth, calling forth Xolotl’s penchant for transformation, but Cortázar twists it around, so that it is not Xolotl in the body of an axolotl who metamorphoses, but rather the action is prompted through the narrator’s human consciousness, which lay outside Xolotl’s reach; that is, unless the narrator is the embodiment of Xolotl to begin with. But it could also be an illusion created through the glass, one of Cortázar’s favorite *bestiario* techniques.

Regardless, after the narrator has imagined himself into an axolotl, or Xolotl has imagined himself into a man, the narrative shows the mythologized creature escaping into human form, while the human form, in achieving his utopia, finds himself enslaved within a cage of mythology.

Sólo una cosa era extraña: seguir pensando como antes, saber. Darne cuenta de eso fue en el primer momento como el horror del enterrado vivo que despierta a su destino. Afuera mi cara volvía a acercarse al vidrio, veía mi boca de labios apretados por el esfuerzo de comprender a los axolotl. Yo era un axolotl y sabía ahora instantáneamente que ninguna comprensión era posible. Él estaba fuera del acuario, su pensamiento era un pensamiento fuera del acuario. Conociéndolo, siendo él mismo, yo era un axolotl y estaba en mi mundo.<sup>496</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> Cortázar, “Axolotl,” English ed., p. 163.

<sup>496</sup> Cortázar, “Axolotl,” Spanish ed., paragraph 12.

[Only one thing was strange: to go on thinking as usual, to know. To realize that was, for the first moment, like the horror of a man buried alive awaking to his fate. Outside, my face came close to the glass again, I saw my mouth, the lips compressed with the effort of understanding the axolotls. I was an axolotl and now I knew instantly that no understanding was possible. He was outside the aquarium, his thinking was a thinking outside the tank. Recognizing him, being him himself, I was an axolotl and in my world.<sup>497</sup>]

Here, Xolotl – initially represented through the observed axolotl in the tank - seems to finally give in to the necessity of sacrifice. He does so by freeing himself from within his own lost mythology that has come to represent an oppressive exile. In the narrator's psychological transformation into the axolotl, there is nonetheless still another human figure "outside the aquarium." On the one hand, this is the greatest indication that the metamorphosis occurred only in the man's mind through an extraordinary act of empathy. The assumption here is that, if a physical transformation had occurred, there could be no man remaining outside the glass for he would have been subsumed into the axolotl's body in the tank. But this does not happen. Nevertheless, the man says, "Now I am an axolotl," and even describes the feelings of the other axolotl's feet touching his face in the cramped tank, and describing the man himself from a distanced third person. So, whether or not a metamorphosis actually occurred or it was just a matter of the imagination working overtime – a question equally applicable in Cortázar's other *bestiario* stories, like "Casa tomada," and "Bestiario," – the belief in the event of metamorphosis is so strong that whether or not it is physical or purely imaginative is nevertheless a pointless distinction to the narrator. So we see Xolotl either taking human form and finally escaping his mythical exile in human form, and in so doing sealing his own fate as a mortal, or, in another manner of reading it, of coercing the human to excite empathy for this forgotten creature and its myth and giving it new life. Cortázar does both these things. Meanwhile, for the narrator, he achieves a utopian state and returns to the glorious, pre-colonial past from which he had envisioned the exile. But in this transformation, he finds the limitations of its reality; as the narrator had imagined the axolotl in the beginning, he now finds himself with a human-like knowledge, but lacking in agency or voice, and must place his hope in the human who occasionally comes to visit him, that he will give him glory by writing about him in a book; the idea of a return to a utopian past is thus that – utopian – for it signals a different kind of

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<sup>497</sup> Cortázar, "Axolotl," English ed., p. 164.

prison when it is not realized with due consideration for present realities. This is a comment on the struggle to write modernity through myth.

## Conclusion

The story is representative of Cortázar's political concerns as a Boom writer. This reading of the story is allegorical to the extent that it raises the question of whether or not utopian ideals are possible, or merely an illusion whose reality will prove as limiting, if not more so, than current circumstances. These questions became more urgent five years after *Final del juego*'s final revision and publication, with the Padilla Affair, when Cuban poet Heberto Padilla was interrogated and imprisoned by the Castro regime for writing critically of the revolution. Thereafter most intellectuals who had previously backed the Cuban revolution turned their backs on it. Though Cortázar criticized the handling of the Padilla Affair, he abstained from signing the letter of condemnation signed by, among others, Jean Paul Sarte, Octavio Paz, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Luis Borges, Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, and Susan Sontag. Cortázar continued to maintain good relations with the Cuban government after the affair, but it nonetheless impacted his life and writing significantly, and placed a wedge between himself and the letter signers, many of whom had previously been included among his close friends.<sup>498</sup>

This would all occur in the future, and yet the story nevertheless manages to capture the unknowability of imagined outcomes and a certain inability to see the consequences of recent actions. This is the manner in which Cortázar's metamorphosis

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<sup>498</sup> In 1969 he participated in a heated debate with Vargas Llosa and Oscar Collazos, the latter of whom had attacked the Boom writers as being pro-establishment. Cortázar's response, an essay titled "Literature in Revolution and Revolution in Literature," staunchly defended the revolutionary consciousness of his own work (Ilan Stavans, *Julio Cortázar: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996, pp. 46-7). Nevertheless, in Cortázar's obituary, Paz described their relationship warmly: "He was a cornerstone of contemporary Latin American letters... I met him early on, in 1945; the two of us contributed to *Sur*, and thanks to José Bianco, we soon began exchanging correspondence and books. Years later we coincided in Paris and for a while we saw each other frequently... In 1968 he and Aurora Bernárdez lived with me and [my wife] Marie José in our house in New Delhi. It was around that time that Julio discovered politics, and he embraced with fervor and naïveté causes that also ignited me in the past but that, at that point, I already judged reproachable. I ceased to see him, but not to love him. I think he also kept considering me a friend. Through the barriers of paper and words, we made each other friendly signs" (I. Stavans, *Julio Cortázar: A Study of the Short Fiction*, p. 47). Original Spanish-language text in Octavio Paz, "Laude (Julio Cortázar, 1914-1984)," in *Al paso*, Vol. 8 (March 1984 pp. 64-5).

abstains from epiphany, for the outcome is ambiguous and its repercussions even more so. Presumably, we as readers are reading the book by the man outside the aquarium whom the axolotl-narrator at the end hoped would endeavor in the task. But even after the book has been written, its outcomes remain unclear, the epiphany delayed to some future moment.

Despite this, the act of entering the story through the axolotl, of obeying Cortázar's textual prompts in the search for knowledge, beginning with the very word "axolotl," is revelatory of deeper meanings and sharper ironies than what is provided in the text itself. For all of Gyurko's insight in his compact analysis of "Axolotl," he dismisses Cortázar's motivations in the story as obviously stemming from a transparently disturbed individual who seeks an escape. In many ways, this was and still sometimes is the reaction directed at Cortázar in light of his staunch, though conflicted and fraught, support for the Cuban Revolution after the Padilla Affair, when most of his fellow Boom writers withdrew their support and also grew distant from Cortázar. Many chose to see him as a hopeless idealist, as willfully blind, or, worse, as a fanciful boy who could not face truths that practical adults could see. In this consideration, his work was considered as either the expression of a hopeless utopianism, or an extraordinary cynicism born out of disappointment. Yet, "Axolotl," at its deepest depths, conveys a deep understanding of the human condition and of the stakes of debates over Latin American modernity.

In "Axolotl," Cortázar cleverly manipulates metamorphosis, subverting its epiphanic revelation by denying the polarization that comes about when one form transforms into another, or even one mindset into another. His selection of the axolotl as the figure of interest suggests the textual and historical incompleteness that he is prepared to undertake, and implicates the reader in the task of creating meaning, with the understanding that no final interpretation will ever be possible, just as it is not possible for the axolotl itself. Thus, though "Axolotl" is very much a story of modernity, and a modern story, it is also a relic, an artifact to be discovered and probed, but never fully known. In that sense it is not revealing of the Archival or the Ancestral, but constitutes each of them in and of itself. It is not the rewriting of an old myth; it is a wholly new myth, and a contribution to the debates of Latin American independence and agency.

## CONCLUSION

The question of definition has plagued the short story. However, many of the dominant methods used to resolve the ambiguity of its form and social function have been based on old assumptions. These can be traced back to two major problems that have permeated the field since it began emerging at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These are: that the short story's agency is to be located *vis a vis* the novel; and that the short story "traditions" that emerged "first" on the linear historical timeline – specifically in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century – constitute "source," and therefore short story traditions that emerged thereafter are "derivative." Until very recently, with the emergence of only a couple of studies regarding the "postcolonial short story," those stories/writers/regions have been invisible in the field of short story criticism. Consequently, the short story has also been largely absent from discussions of postcolonial theory and literature, as well as larger debates surrounding world literature. Early in this project, I articulated the outcomes of these problems as amounting to a mystification of the short story based on historicized knowledge, using Berger's idea of the mystification of art as a guiding principle. In this way, "mystification" is used as an umbrella term for the multi-faceted issues and challenges this thesis aims to address (or rather, redress).

The broad mission of this project is to begin consciously rectifying these issues. As such, I endeavored here to begin conceiving a method of reading the short story that would: allow it to emerge from within a critical language of the short story constitutive of its agency rather than that of other forms whose literary trajectory is notably apart from the short story, namely the novel; to begin bridging the yawning gap between the broad field of short story criticism and localized short story scholarship by using the local as an entry point to the field instead of *vice versa*; to use the local – in this case, *amāra* in Egypt and mythology in Argentina/Latin America - to draw out the short story and its writers' locations as related to issues of postcolonial theory and world literature, thereby opening up as-yet unexplored interpretive possibilities and elucidating how studies of the short story may complicate, challenge, and/or complement existing discourse.

I have articulated my process with regard to these goals as "demystification," which amounts to a method of reading that emerges from within the short story itself. As such, it was *through* the short stories of numerous authors of various periods and locations that I began extrapolating certain social patterns related to moments of

profound social change. I used these to problematize the field of short story criticism and reconsider its form as directly tied to the social discourses from which it emerges. These ideas are addressed in the first two chapters. The first discusses the field, and particularly points to issues of what Emily Apter calls Eurochronology, which I show as undergirding deeply held Eurocentric assumptions and approaches to the short story that have rendered non-European traditions invisible while also keeping the field preoccupied with issues of definition. The second chapter considers the *form* of the short story, calling on many of the discourses – particularly those put forward by the authors themselves – and seizing on two conceptions in particularly related to its brevity: Poe’s articulation of unity of impression and Cortázar’s idea of the short story as a photograph. From these issues, I delineate visuality as a fundamental, fluid aspect inhered in the short story’s form and driving its narrative and imaginative power.

The issues I outlined in the first two chapters coalesce in Chapter Three, which provides a segue into the localized contexts of Egypt and Argentina, *particularly* as viewed through the histories of the ideas and conceptions that are referred to herein, from within the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century conceptions through which they are explored in Parts II and III, as *amāra* and mythology. I trace the histories of both of these ideas within their *literary* contexts as being imbued of powerful and often conflicting discourses regarding modernity in post-colonial, transitional societies. In this way, *amāra* and mythology are revealed as concepts that embody and mimetically *speak to* complex, multi-faceted, and conflicting ideas about and movements toward certain conceptions of modernity in Egypt and Argentina/Latin America. By tracing the ideas of *amāra* and mythology, I am in fact tracing the fluid, changing nature of social discourses regarding modernity. In this discussion, I acknowledge the influence of European ideas of modernity on local modernizing projects prompted by the “moment of encounter,” while further emphasizing what was at stake at a local level, apart from European influence; that is, how conceptions of modernity arose out of organic, local scenarios with complex, frequently hierarchical, and historical aspects of their own.

With this in mind, the Introductions to Parts II and III introduce Yūsuf Idrīs and Julio Cortázar via their situatedness with regard to these larger conceptions and trajectories connected to issues of modernity. The chapters that follow show how they used the short story to more perfectly embody these ideas. I articulate their struggle to achieve this as what Berger refers to as the “prolonged struggle” – the process an artist must go through before breaking through the mystification of an art form, including the

often capitalist, Eurocentric, hierarchical assumptions imbued in the form itself. In this way, calling on Ayman El-Desouky's study of *amāra* in Egyptian literature and culture, and Idrīs' situatedness within that paradigm, I set about articulating Idrīs' struggle to embody *amāra* in the short story as a way of Egyptianizing the form. His point of departure – and perhaps one of his biggest struggles – is infusing the short story with a collective, centering Egyptian voice of the “people.” This is a tall order for a literary form that is portrayed as privileging the individual voice, and particularly that related to what O'Connor calls submerged population groups. Herein lies the tension of Idrīs' struggle, and the crux of his effort at demystification. Meanwhile, Cortázar's “prolonged struggle” emerges as a resistance to what is hegemonic. Cortázar's situation as a writer is complex and multi-faceted, and also contradictory according to dominant modes of labeling, including some of those I use in this study. Indeed, Cortázar engages deeply with his own psychology and life as a way of using self-referential mythopoesis to subvert dominant conceptions of labels like “European,” “Eurocentric,” “Argentine,” “Latin American,” “mestizo,” “fiction,” “reality,” and indeed, “past” and “present.” Emerging from deeply within a context of three hundred years of European colonial presence, while also embodying that Europeanness himself, as well as “Latin Americanness” and “Argentineness,” – whatever those things might mean - Cortázar's mythopoesis aims at a unifying humanity that privileges the idea, inspired by Jung, that humankind is imbued with everything it has ever been. In this way, the idea of the modern man is shown as a fallacy whose presumption rests in the consideration of the past as “past.”

In order to draw out these broad mimetic impulses leading to conceptions of and challenges to the modern within the corpuses of both authors, I delineated some of the dominant visualizing threads in their works to elucidate how these discourses are engaged through narrative and form. The goal here was also to show how the short story's visualizing impulses can serve as a methodological entry point to the short story, and in particular to the short story as a language of the social. This is how I use visuality to show the short story as a language of demystified modernities. Through a three-story arc that elucidates Idrīs' progressive uses of the light code and symbolic objects, I highlight how these visualizing aesthetic threads lead to more explosive interpretive possibilities that exceed the strict parameters of the text and in fact *embody* the *amāra* impulse. Both of these methods, for example, exploit collective knowledge, understanding, and the collective Egyptian imaginary regarding the intonations of

lightness, darkness, and certain objects. Set against aspects of plot and narrative, these aesthetic signifiers create a fluid, shifting language that is implicitly understood. This is important because the short story's brevity is dependent upon the ability to "say much in little." In this way, the short story serves as a profoundly effective and enduring (because of its fluidity) form related to social discourse in times of profound transformation. An example of this is evident in the example of "Ḥammāl al-karāsī," which I situated within its original historical context of Nasser's Egypt. The story resurfaced as an adapted short film in 2010 directed by Tarek Khalil.<sup>499</sup> The film satirizes Mubarak's landslide election victory at a time of profound unrest. Mubarak was to be ousted just months later, in January 2011, after massive popular protests erupted across Egypt. This further compounds my assertion of the short story emerging at moments of profound transition and social change, and as a *language* of that discourse.

I highlighted Cortázar's use of *bestiario* as one of his most dominant visualizing aesthetics that, in itself, is revealing of Cortázar's artistic and social philosophies and goals. *Bestiario* is deeply situated within European and Latin American modes of cultural production and its underlying conceptions of modernity. But Cortázar's use of *bestiario* is complex and shifting, and is used to resist hegemonic narratives by using animal imagery in an intricate dance situated around issues of (in)visibility. Indeed, I situate both *amāra* and Cortázar's mythopoesis through *bestiario* as mimeses undergirded by issues of visibility and invisibility, where the aesthetics of visibility (i.e. *amāra* and mythopoesis) serve as *actors* in discourses regarding modernity that renders certain voices/groups/ideas as invisible and others as visible. Idrīs' visualizing aesthetics show the issue of (in)visibility to be a double-edged sword, where the assumed relationship between seeing and knowing is challenged (for example, Judge Abdullah and his capitalist values and belief in free will in "Qā' al-madīna" and the chair and carrier in "Ḥammāl al-karāsī"). Cortázar's visualizing aesthetics, meanwhile, aim to elucidate that which remains hidden, buried, or silenced through historicized discourses and capitalistic value systems. The tiger in "Bestiario" is considered by most

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<sup>499</sup> Tarek Khalil, "The Chair Carrier: *Ḥammāl al-karāsī*," short film (2010) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqGNQbGXbcc>>. The film won "Best Satire" at the American International Film Festival in 2010 and a Silver Award for Student Film at the California Film Awards. See also: Marcia Lynx Qualey, "Film Version of Idrīs's 'Chair Carrier,' or: Egyptians, it's Time to Sit Down!" in *Arabic Literature (in English)* blog (15 March 2011) <<https://arablit.org/2011/03/15/film-version-of-idriss-chair-carrier-or-egyptians-its-time-to-sit-down/>>.

to be a menacing threat, however Cortázar complicates this assumption by, among other things, revealing its usefulness in the present moment; rather than a figure colonizing the home, Isabel recognizes the tiger as a potentially useful tool toward improving the family's situation. By embracing the tiger's presence, she frees them from embedded assumptions about the nature of power and visibility. "Axolotl," conversely, brings the suppressed, invisible presence of Aztec mythology and belief systems into contemporary Paris where the salamander's interaction with the "modern" narrator transforms his assumptions entirely. His past existence comes to the surface as a critique of discourses regarding Latin American identity, European identity, Eurocentrism, and utopianism related to the Boom and the Cuban Revolution. Ultimately, I offer these as examples of visualizing aesthetics as entry points for a methodological approach towards reading the short story as a language of demystified modernities.

Admittedly, this project has covered a lot of territory, and at times its velocity has blurred questions emerging from discussions that deserve far more space and nuance than has been allotted here. I am consciously aware of these elisions, and I offer this project only as a starting point whereby these and other emerging ideas may be studied, explored, disseminated, and/or contested. At various points along the way, for example, I resisted the temptation to turn this project into a comparative study of the short story and the photograph. The intricate histories and structural and impulsive relationships between the two made it challenging to limit the discussion. That said, while my discussion of Sontag's ideas in Chapter Two may not be immediately related to this project, other than highlighting the capitalist ideas of modernity that it shares with the short story, I ultimately decided to keep it in place as the beginning of another important conversation that nonetheless has firm grounding in the ones I offer with this project.

Related to this, the current atmosphere of technology, in the forms of the Internet, social media, and YouTube, have provided new, robust, and immediate platforms through which the short story is adapting and reaching larger audiences. While there are currently robust studies happening in comparative literature and Area Studies related to literature and its online platforms, a study of the short story with its visualizing formal impulses has not yet, to my knowledge, been attempted. Such a project would be a useful way of complicating some of the ideas I have proposed here, which are based within a context of print media, while expanding others and helping to understand the short story and its place in society moving into the future.

Many of the short stories included in the analytical Parts of this project have appeared as films. Indeed, films have been one of the primary modes of dissemination by which Idrīs' stories have been introduced to the Egyptian public. In the course of my studies, I spoke to many people about Idrīs' work, and one of the things that stuck with me was the fact that possibly half of the people I spoke to had encountered his stories through film rather than through the texts themselves. Similarly, though not as pronounced, a large number of Cortázar's stories have been turned into films, going back to the 1960s, and adaptations continue to emerge. Films based on these author's and other's short stories are experiencing a renaissance through YouTube, particularly in light of debates emerging out of issues of globalization in all of its manifestations. The dynamics of this are surely worthy of future study, particularly to emphasize the short story's permeable boundaries and to further challenge the idea of conceiving of a short story definition outside of the social. In my mind, the short story exceeds the boundaries of the strictly literary and is in fact a literature that closely straddles the visual arts. One of the things that I wanted to do with this project was begin writing a foundation to further explore this dynamic. To my mind, film and photography offer exemplary comparative starting points.

Beyond issues of visibility, this project made me question the limits of ideas and theoretical debates regarding the postcolonial, Eurocentrism, hegemony, and many of the labels I have assumed within the broader discourse of this project related to historicized knowledge and modernity. Like Cortázar, I have come to question the limitations posed by such terminology; though for the purposes of this project, and in order to emphasize my main points, I have perpetuated them here. I do not question the hierarchical and often suppressive historical and social patterns that they indicate through robust discourse. However, in the course of my readings, I have come to question their limits especially as they relate to the short story. Here, I consider Hosam Aboul-Ela's conception of "other South" as constitutive of intellectual and economic patterns through social rather than historical space as well-founded and especially useful. My readings of Joyce, Paley, and even Hemingway and Poe have lead to me to question the limits of marking these authors as "western" or "Euro-American," inclusive of all that those labels indicate. A broadly conceived project to explore the boundaries of these discourses from within the short story might consider select examples from these authors' corpuses as writing against critical definitions of Eurocentrism, while also managing to elude other forms of categorical imprisonment. These are authors

whose writings are never included in discourses regarding postcolonial or world literature; as canonical western writers their works are considered secure in the power structures of western capitalism. And yet these assumptions belie the very social impetus that I put forth here as undergirding the short story as a form that emerges out and in response to moments of profound transformation. In the Introduction, I briefly pointed to the roles of Poe and Washington Irving in shaping a new post-independence American voice. And while this is true, both authors also existed very much on the fringes and were harshly maligned. Their examples have catalyzed the beginnings of a subversive critical discourse in my mind that holds the potential for a new or expanded way of reading the short story beyond their specific contexts.

I would like to close this project with some of the most pressing questions it has raised for me that might offer useful ways forward. Is it possible to situate the short story as a visual art, and what are the limits of the relationship between text and visuality? How might this relationship help to elucidate larger questions regarding the nature of language, and how might that facilitate translation studies and expand the parameters of comparative literature? Where are the limits of common labeling practices, particularly those that denote hierarchical relationships enabled through capitalism, Eurocentrism, etc. as they relate to the short story? In what ways might study of the short story complicate these assumed relationships and the language used to communicate them? Not only do these questions elucidate the vitality of the short story as a contemporary literature, but they hold the potential for broadly conceived contributions to discourses related to world literature and postcolonial theory.

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