

## Introduction: The Fantastic as a Literary Genre

*The fantastic must be so close to the real that you almost have to believe in it.*

—FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

*Reality is not always probable, or likely.*

—JORGE LUIS BORGES

All types of fiction originate in the writer's imagination, yet some works inevitably strike the reader as more imaginary than others. Almost automatically, we tend to categorize stories and novels in terms of the reader's perception of reality; if the narrative describes a recognizable and verisimilar world, we think of it as realistic, but if the work presents a world which varies so greatly from our own that it appears more invented than familiar and true, we are apt to talk about it as a product of the writer's imagination. In Spanish America, realistic fiction has provided a particularly useful mode of expression for writers who wish to link literature to political and social causes. Nevertheless, imaginary fiction has also been an important part of Spanish American letters, and it has grown and developed parallel to the realistic vein. Nineteenth-century romanticism ushered in a taste for the bizarre and the uncanny in literature. Interest in ghost stories, strange legends, and tales of the supernatural and inexplicable came from the United States and northern Europe and comfortably settled into Spanish American drawing rooms. The spine-tingling themes of romantic writers were revived by turn-of-the-century modernists, who were strongly attracted to imaginary fiction of this kind, and in one form or another it continues to the present day. Because it was originally cultivated for bourgeois, urban readers, it took on connotations of being an elitist or escapist kind of literature, charges that still hover around it in some circles. Because it frequently played against dominant notions about the nature of reality, it also gained the reputation of being an intellectual game, not

to be taken seriously or, at least, not to be taken as a serious challenge to socially committed realist fiction. These notions have been hotly contested by critics in recent years, along with the claim that the fantastic is a minor genre in Latin America. The fantastic has proven to be an enduring source of fascination for readers decade after decade, in large part because of its mysterious and still undefined relationship to our understanding of the real. Some of the most important literary figures of the past century, such as Rubén Darío, Horacio Quiroga, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, and Carlos Fuentes, have cultivated it, and there is a substantial and impressive body of work associated with this kind of writing. Fantastic short stories, when they are well written, are like jewels, finely polished and carefully constructed narratives that mesmerize readers through their craftsmanship. They are what Barthes called “writerly texts,” stories that draw readers into the creative process and dismantle in the process long-standing assumptions about fiction and reality. Despite claims that the fantastic is unimportant, irrelevant, or even dead in other places, it continues to be a vital force in Spanish America because it provides another window onto the complex world that spawns it.

Although there is no single definition of the fantastic that stands out as absolute and final, almost all critics agree that it incorporates something into the narrative that may strike readers as supernatural or otherworldly, inexplicable or impossible, something that unsettles readers and makes them hesitate or doubt the nature of what they are reading. Some critics offer a thematic approach, focusing on the content of the fantastic story, and others look at the story from a structural and semiotic perspective, outlining strategies used by the writer to produce a fantastic effect. Some have attempted to situate it historically, linking it to a shift in thinking associated with European Enlightenment or romanticism, while others have approached it philosophically, showing how it reflects a metaphysical angst rooted in the modern world. Beyond these simple contours, it becomes very difficult to speak about the fantastic with any authority, since there is so much disagreement about the meaning of the term and how it can be used. There has also been, over the past fifty years, a tendency to conflate all kinds of imaginary fiction into a single broad category with a variety of names proposed for it, and an equally strong push to distinguish between different kinds of imaginary fiction and give each one its own clear identity. My purpose here is not to put an end to the debate, which would be an exercise in futility, but to look at the debate as emblematic of the fantastic itself. What is it about the genre that makes it so impossible to pin down?

One of the most pressing problems in any discussion of this imaginary vein of literature is what to call it. Do we highlight what it has in common, or how one type differs from another? Generic terms such as the supernatural or fantasy are somewhat misleading, since they have been appropriated by popular literature and film and sometimes refer to mass-marketed works that lack artistic merit. In contemporary criticism, fantasy is so broad a category that it is used to refer to science fiction, fairy tales, and ghost stories, along with other kinds of supernatural and magical tales, and includes authors as widely diverse as Ursula LeGuinn, Stephen King, and J.K. Rowling. The uncanny, the marvelous, the absurd, the grotesque, and gothic horror, by contrast, are terms that have been coined in reference to specific works and writers and have such a clearly defined nature that their use is restricted to those particular kinds of texts.<sup>1</sup> Magical realism, as the name suggests, describes works that blend the magical with the real, but the precise meaning of the term and its boundaries are far from stable entities in the world of literary criticism. The marvelous-real (*lo real maravilloso*) intersects with magical realism so often and so intimately that it is impossible to discuss one without reference to the other. For some, they are the same thing; for others, they mark different paths in the evolution of literary theory.<sup>2</sup> The fantastic is acknowledged as a neighboring genre to all of these types of fiction, but it has perhaps been the most difficult concept to grasp. Critics have engaged in an ongoing dialogue for the past fifty years about what the fantastic is, what function it has in a literary text, and what relationship it has to our notions of the real. Readers naturally expect critics to provide them with clear definitions that they can apply to the study of specific literary texts, but in the case of the fantastic, they are often left wanting. The slippery nature of the fantastic is part of what defines it as a genre, and any attempt to confine it to a set of marked characteristics inevitably leads to more confusion and debate. Perhaps a more productive way to approach the fantastic is to acknowledge that it can shift, slide, and transform itself over time and across cultures, and that as a literary genre it remains resistant to closure. Fortunately, there are common threads that link theoretical discussions of the fantastic together; we can identify and use them to lay down loose boundaries for the genre that prevent the fantastic from becoming a blanket term used for all kinds of fiction. At the same time, it behooves us to remember that absolute and authoritative definitions of the fantastic are little more than wishful thinking on the part of those who offer them, since they are easily dismantled and reassembled by other critics who approach the

fantastic from a different point of view. Clearly, the fantastic is a kind of writing that strains against boundaries and yet doubles back on itself to reconfigure old ideas in new ways. This is part of its appeal.

Even today, many critics use words like fantasy and the fantastic interchangeably, as if the terms were synonyms. Are they? The words share a similar history and etymology, appearing in the English language in the fourteenth century to mean “existing only in imagination” or “illusory appearance,” via Old French (*fantastique/ fantasie*) with Greco-Latin origins (*phantasticus/ phantasia*). In Spanish, they are derived from the same roots and appear at roughly the same time. Yet, for most of the twentieth century and up to the present day, literary critics have been unable to agree on how the words should be used and in reference to what kind of literary text. The addition of new terminology created by critics to subdivide and categorize types of fantastic literature has only complicated the issue, since it diverts our attention from the problem of what the original term means.<sup>3</sup> Does it matter what name we give things? I argue that it does, for naming implies apprehension of what the name represents. When critics and readers use words in radically different ways, it leads to confusion and misunderstanding. This is one of the greatest challenges we face when we talk about the fantastic because we cannot pin it down to a simple definition. All we can do is look at how the term has been used by its major theorists and why it has generated so much debate. We should not leave the discussion there, however, with a simple restatement of arguments about boundaries and definitions, but rather seek to understand why the term remains resistant to closure. As David Sandner reminds us, the fantastic “promises the discovery of something rich and strange which may mark us, change us, unalterably” (297). That possibility is worth talking about, not because it will lead us to a better definition of the fantastic, but because it will illustrate why writers, readers, and critics want to engage with a literary form that is so infinitely frustrating in its tendency to outrun our grasp.

## Fantastic Theory and Notions of the Real

Before we can undertake a study of the fantastic in Spanish America, we are obliged to come to terms with some of the fundamental ideas that have influenced the way we think about the genre. One question that arises immediately is why so much emphasis has been put on defining what is unreal, impossible, or supernatural when relatively few critics who have advanced theories about the fantastic question where

our ideas about what is real, possible, or natural in literary texts come from. Andrew Bush summarizes a common view of the fantastic when he writes, "This breakdown of distinctions between real and unreal is the very heart of the fantastic whenever it arises" (88). While the unreal remains an eternal mystery, there is an implicit understanding that we know what is real and possible and can readily identify it in a text. The appropriation of an extra textual idea (the real) as a basis for our analysis of a work of literature is a given in most discussions of the fantastic, allowing readers and critics to focus only on the markers inside the text that signal a break with our perception of the world around us. If the fantastic is confined to the fictional text but compared to notions of the real that exist on some supposedly objective plane outside the text, what does this say about the way we read literature in general? What does it say about the relationship between literature and the world at large? The fantastic has proven a highly effective tool for examining these and other important ontological questions. It stands to reason that if our understanding of the real shifts over time and from place to place, so must our understanding of the fantastic, since the two concepts are so closely connected. However, this kind of traditional dichotomy may bring us no closer to a definition of what we mean when we talk about the fantastic in literature. Sandner observes that the fantastic is made up of "irresolvable tensions—the sublime claims, the uncertainty, the dreams of wholeness, the uncanny possessions—that run like fault-lines through both the texts examined by the critics and in the critical works themselves" (277). If we cannot agree on a single prescriptive model for the fantastic, should we abandon the attempt to understand what Sandner calls "the continued presence of an impossible literature in our modern and skeptical age" (277)? Obviously, there is something about the fantastic that invites us to engage with it, even when it eludes us. It frustrates us, it challenges us, it makes us think. It is not unique in this way, of course, but it has played an important role in the formation of our ideas about literature and the role of the reader in the creative process. As Bush says, "Fantastic literature is but an extreme case of all literature, manifesting the problematics of the contemporary literary climate to an advanced degree" (87). Clearly, it merits further study, especially in the context of Spanish America, where it has often been pushed to the margins.

Another issue that must be addressed is the fact that so much of the theory about the fantastic in literature has grown up around European and North American texts, with relatively little attention given to Latin America. Many critics who discuss the fantastic as a universal mode

of expression never venture beyond the borders of their own culture. How appropriate it is to use critical theory borrowed from one place to study the literature of another? At the very least, we can open a dialogue about the ways that Spanish American texts illustrate theories of fantastic; at best, we can illustrate how Spanish American fiction has shaped the ways we think about the genre itself. It is absurd to suppose that Spanish American writers have written in isolation and have not been part of literary trends simply because foreign critics have neglected to mention them. Many of the Spanish American writers whose works are studied here are cosmopolitan figures, fluent in various languages, voracious readers, well aware of the latest arguments in the field of literary criticism at home and abroad. Their work can be read as a reaction and response to the ideas proposed by theorists, as well as to the literary texts on which those theories are based. Literature is defined not only by those who study it but also by those who create it. Borges, Cortázar, Bioy Casares, and Fuentes, for example, are recognized not only as masters of the fantastic short story but also rank among the foremost literary critics in Latin America. In referring to the ideas of European and North American theorists in my study, I do not mean to suggest that Latin Americans are unable to elaborate their own theories of the fantastic. They have done so, and they are included here. But their voices have too often been isolated from other discussions of the fantastic, and they have not always received the recognition they deserve in shaping the way we think about this kind of literature.<sup>4</sup> There has been a European or Anglo American bias in much of what has been written about the fantastic over the years, a tendency that distorts the importance of the genre in Latin America and sometimes results in accusations that it is merely an imitation of foreign models and not an authentic form of literature. The endurance of fantastic short stories in Spanish America long after the vogue in Europe had passed is sometimes cited as an example of how Spanish American literature lags behind European trends. Another way of looking at it is to see the fantastic in Spanish America as an example of postcolonial literature, a body of work that has taken on a life of its own and developed its own characteristics, appropriating foreign models and using them to delve into problems of self-representation in literature. An examination of the theories put forth by European and U.S. scholars, when interwoven into a study of fantastic literature written in Spanish America, is crucial to an understanding of how many of the assumptions we make about the genre are rooted in Western ideologies, and how those ways of thinking have been challenged by Spanish American writers. In Spanish

America, the fantastic is wedged into a space where cultural tensions come together, smoothing over surface divisions while at the same time threatening to undermine the foundations on which the culture rests. It is for this reason that so many fantastic stories from the Spanish-speaking Americas ultimately strike us as deeply subversive works.

I use the word *genre* to refer to the fantastic, although the characteristics that describe this kind of writing are far from clear-cut. Genre suggests that it is divisible from a larger body of general literature, and that it can be studied in its own context. Early scholars of the fantastic tended to look at it from the point of view of thematic concerns, but since the 1970s, critical focus has shifted to style, structure, and form. For this reason, I sometimes also call the fantastic a narrative mode, as it describes a particular way of telling a story. Whether the fantastic can appear in any kind of literary text is a much-debated question, but looking at the works that best illustrate the fantastic in Spanish America, it is clear that the short story is the ideal vehicle for this kind of writing. Because the short story can be read in a single sitting, and the economy of the form permits writers to create a compact, tightly controlled fictional world, it lends itself to the kind of tension required to bring the fantastic to life. In the short story, there are no distractions, no detours, and no motivation for readers to put the text aside and let the effects of the fantastic dissipate before reaching the story's end. If, as some critics claim, the fantastic is a brief glimpse, a temporary disorientation, or an unsettling feeling about the nature of what we are reading, it makes sense that it cannot be sustained for long periods of time. This explains why critics seldom discuss long novels as examples of the fantastic. Although a novel may have some elements we could identify as fantastic, the work in its entirety cannot maintain the same kind of tension that we find in a short story without completely exhausting its readers. The fantastic, critics tell us, must always keep a toehold in the recognizable world of the reader, and it comes and goes so quickly that it introduces a kind of vertigo into the reading experience. By contrast, magical realism, a neighboring genre to the fantastic, is much more at home in the novel, since the length, depth, and breadth of a novel allow writers to create an entire fictional world with its own frame of reference that draws readers into it at a more leisurely pace.

Critics disagree about when the fantastic came into being: some insist that the fantastic is as old as literature itself (Carillo), some find its origins in the eighteenth century, when belief in the supernatural was on the wane in Western Europe (Caillois, Todorov), and some situate it at the

beginning of the nineteenth century (Bioy Casares), when romanticism was in full flower. To a large degree, our understanding of the history of the fantastic is linked to the way we conceptualize the genre, which leads back to the thorny question of what kind of literature, exactly, are we talking about? It is easier to pinpoint when writers and critics first began to argue about the fantastic. In Western Europe, “fantastic criticism develops in inverse relationship to the intensity of eighteenth-century claims for the reasonable, realistic novel, each form requiring the other for self-definition” (Sandner 286). But most of Spanish America in the eighteenth century was still under colonial rule, when censorship determined what books colonists could read and writing fiction of any kind was considered an illicit act. Literary criticism was primarily limited to the discussion of ecclesiastic texts and the works of classical Greco-Roman authors. For this reason, critical discussions of the fantastic in any form in Spanish America seem to lag behind the European mainstream, although this is not to suggest that upon entering the debate Spanish Americans did not have important new ideas to add. In fact, they were well on their way to becoming masters of the genre by the time they entered into theoretical discussions about it.

### The Evolution of the Fantastic in Spanish America

Jorge Luis Borges, one of the first in Spanish America to understand the complexities of the genre and to vindicate it as an art form, wrote in his 1936 review of Adolfo Bioy Casares’s book *La estatua casera*, “Sospecho que un examen general de la literatura fantástica revelaría que es muy poco fantástica” (qtd. in de la Fuente, 58). Although his statement is typically enigmatic, Borges anticipates one of the central problems of fantastic criticism in the twentieth century, that there is no common agreement or understanding about what the fantastic is; therefore, one can take up diametrically opposed positions about it in order to construct or dismantle its meaning, ultimately creating a semantic void around the word itself. A few years later, upon the publication of the *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, Borges, Bioy Casares, and Silvina Ocampo would have to confront the problem more directly in their choice of representative texts for the collection. Annick Louis has observed that some of the pieces in the anthology do not fit well within the framework of Bioy Casares’s introductory remarks about the genre, but Louis claims, “El carácter ambiguo de esta antología se entiende como un rasgo constitutivo del género” (415). In other words, the selection of texts defines the



genre as one characterized by contradictions and contrasts, and it teaches us how to read the fantastic as a kind of literature that is continuously pushing against its own boundaries. The appearance of the anthology in 1940 and its widespread popularity clearly suggest that there was a pre-existing interest in this kind of literature on the part of a South American reading public. We can also assume that not all readers were familiar with the critical meaning of the term fantastic and that the anthology itself became their way of understanding it. Bioy Casares's introduction leads the reader through a brief theoretical discussion of the genre, where he outlines some of his views about the fantastic and illustrates them primarily with reference to European and North American works. The essay's unassuming tone, however, disguises the revolutionary approach the three editors took to the selection of texts for the work. Louis sees the anthology as "un espacio privilegiado para librar batalla en el campo literario, ya que el volumen que compilaron combate una concepción de la literatura fantástica ampliamente difundida en la cultura argentina de la época" (416). For example, the anthology omits writers like Ambrose Bierce and E.T.A. Hoffman, hitherto considered important exponents of the fantastic, and replaces them with contemporary Spanish American authors like Borges and María Luisa Bombal. In private correspondence to Victoria Ocampo, the French critic Roger Caillois complained that he found the selection in the anthology disconcerting and wrong headed.<sup>5</sup> Still, there can be no doubt that the anthology succeeded in generating a dialogue about the fantastic in which Spanish Americans would play a vital part. An examination of its contents reveals some important points: (1) the fantastic has strong ties to Europe, but it also exists in Spanish America; (2) it has flourished in Spanish America in places where European influence was strongest (large cities, the River Plate region, and so forth); (3) as a literary genre, it came into being in the early nineteenth century and continues to the present day; (4) the fantastic is best represented by short fictional narratives; (5) reader response to the text is one of the defining characteristics of the genre; and (6) the fantastic is not a stable entity but has been transformed over time.

Contrary to Caillois's assertion that the fantastic was born in Germany, Bioy Casares tells readers, "como género más o menos definido, la literatura fantástica aparece en el siglo XIX y en el idioma inglés" (7). This statement may reflect the editors' decision to isolate eighteenth-century gothic fiction from the fantastic, or it may simply be a product of the Argentines' intellectual ties to England. Although most of the works included in the anthology are translations from other languages,

the anthology marks a significant moment in Spanish American fantastic fiction, for included along with European, North American, and oriental masters are several writers from the Southern Cone: Bombal, Borges, Dabove, Fernández, Lugones, Payrou, and Cancela. As a theorist of the fantastic, Bioy Casares perhaps makes his most important contribution when he acknowledges that the fantastic follows particular rules or laws, but they are not permanently fixed notions. He warns his reader, "Pedimos leyes para el cuento fantástico; pero ya veremos que no hay un tipo, sino muchos, de cuentos fantásticos. Habrá que indagar las leyes generales para cada tipo de cuento y las leyes especiales para cada cuento" (8). He also recognizes a symbiotic relationship between the reader, the writer, and the text that causes literature to undergo constant renovation: "Si estudiamos la sorpresa como efecto literario, o los argumentos, veremos cómo la literatura va transformando a los lectores y, en consecuencia, cómo éstos exigen una continua transformación de la literatura" (8). These observations are astute and suggest the unstable and evanescent quality of the fantastic element in any given text, an idea that other critics would take up later in more detail.

The Argentine author maintains that nineteenth-century writers often evoked feelings of fear or surprise through the creation of atmosphere, and standard subject matter such as ghosts, supernatural beings, time travel, metamorphosis, and the like provided the writer with fantastic plots. Some works allow a logical explanation of preternatural events, while others do not; Bioy Casares notes, however, that a logical explanation often weakens the effect of the narrative. He stresses the importance of the reader's reaction in his discussion of the fantastic, as later theorists would do, and he also points toward the fact that the fantastic in the twentieth century has a different nature than that of the previous century, "lo que podríamos llamar la tendencia realista en la literatura fantástica" (9), or as he puts it "la conveniencia de hacer que en un mundo plenamente creíble sucediera un solo hecho increíble; que en vidas consuetudinarias y domésticas, como las del lector, sucediera el fantasma" (8-9).

Bioy Casares sees the short story as the ideal vehicle for the fantastic but he does not pause to consider the relationship between the fantastic and short fiction. Instead, he treats it as a natural connection, explaining that "una noche de 1937 hablábamos de literatura fantástica, discutíamos los cuentos que nos parecían mejores; uno de nosotros dijo que si los reuniéramos y agregáramos los fragmentos del mismo carácter anotados en nuestros cuadernos, obtendríamos un buen libro. Compusimos este

libro" (14). Although most of the texts in the anthology are short stories, the editors include a few examples of drama that they consider fantastic. Poetry, however, is conspicuously absent, which points to the implicit understanding that the fantastic effect cannot be achieved through language that encourages allegorical or metaphorical readings. This is a point that Tzvetan Todorov and later critics would also take up in their discussion of the fantastic.<sup>6</sup>

The publication of Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* in 1970 is generally understood to be a turning point in fantastic criticism, for almost every scholar to discuss the subject afterward has felt a need to respond to the book, whether choosing to embrace and expand on some of Todorov's arguments or reject them adamantly in favor of another approach. Despite the apparent dearth of critical studies on the fantastic in Spanish America between 1940 and the 1970s, it is important to note that fantastic literature was at its zenith there. This period, which leads up to and overlaps with the so-called "Boom" of Latin American fiction, is a time when the writers themselves were shaping the way we think about the fantastic by producing works that signaled a new direction for this kind of writing.<sup>7</sup> It was, as Bioy Casares had observed, more grounded in the modern world, the recognizable and familiar world of an ideal reader, witty and urbane on the surface, but unable to feel completely at ease in his surroundings. Masterful storytellers used the fantastic to explore existential themes that related to problems of identity, both on the individual and national levels. In this way, their writing coincides with the philosophies of important European intellectuals like Jean Paul Sartre, who in turn wrote about the fantastic as an expression of his own beliefs.

## The Boundaries of the Fantastic in Europe

Although Sartre does not make reference to Latin American writers, nor move his argument beyond the boundaries of Western Europe, it is clear that his conceptualization of the fantastic is in line with the thinking of writers like Borges, Bioy Casares, Ocampo, Cortázar, Fuentes, and others who were working in the genre at the time, and that together their work describes a midcentury angst prevalent on both sides of the Atlantic, rooted in different causes but with the same general effect. The possible existence of a new kind of fantastic literature intrigued the French philosopher, who claimed that it was initiated by Franz Kafka and developed in Europe during and after the two world wars. But, in

essence, Sartre echoes the idea advanced by Bioy Casares a decade and a half before in the *Antología*, when he writes that “in order to achieve the fantastic, it is neither necessary nor sufficient to portray extraordinary things. The strangest event will enter into the order of the universe if it is alone in a world governed by laws” (57). Sartre posits that man is at the center of the new fantastic and that its main theme is man’s abandonment in the world of his fellow man. The only fantastic object in the modern world is man himself. According to Sartre, the fantastic “seems to be stripped of all its artifices; there is nothing in its hands or pockets. We recognize the footprint on the shore as our own . . . . For contemporary man, the fantastic is only one of a hundred ways of mirroring his own image” (60). Without a doubt, these are accurate descriptions of how the Spanish American writers we have set out to study here conceive of the fantastic.

Sartre claims that man is a fantastic being living in a fantastic world; therefore, man does not perceive it as fantastic. The reader, however, must be made to observe things from a more objective point of view (as an outsider), which creates a technical problem for the writer. When seen from the outside, human activity appears reversed, and the world seems upside down or “topsy-turvy.” For Sartre, this is the essence of the fantastic; it is “a world in which these absurd manifestations appear as normal behavior” (61). Whereas the absurd signals a complete absence of ends, the fantastic is “the revolt of means against ends” (61). In the fantastic, we still believe in cause and effect, we still believe that means and ends exist, but they are beyond our comprehension. They are blurred or contradictory, and we are never able to discover the ultimate end of our actions. When confronted by a fantastic situation, Sartre claims that the modern hero is never surprised, but he is angry and frustrated by the unfathomable world that envelops him. In this way, his ideas about the fantastic reveal his ties to existentialism.

Three additional European critics from the 1950s and 1960s should be mentioned here for their contributions to our modern-day understanding of the fantastic in Spanish America, although they did not speak directly about Spanish American literature. They are Caillois, Vax, and Ostrowski. Caillois and Vax were highly respected French theorists whose work was surely known in academic and literary circles in Buenos Aires and Mexico City, where writers like Cortázar, Ocampo, Fuentes, and Garro worked. Ostrowski is perhaps not so well known, but his approach to the fantastic bears examination because it challenges some of the same notions we see in Spanish American fantastic stories, specifically

the tendency to understand realism in literature in too-universal terms. Caillois was clearly aware of the anthology put together by Bioy Casares, Borges, and Ocampo in Argentina, but he ignored it completely (along with Bioy Casares's introductory comments) in his 1958 essay on the fantastic. Instead, the French critic followed Sartre's lead in terms of how he conceives of the fantastic, defining it in reference to the "real" world, as most scholars of this era tended to do. Caillois characterizes the fantastic as an "almost unbearable irruption in the world of reality" (53). It represents a break in the acknowledged order of the universe, an irregularity, an intrusion of something unfamiliar into the familiar world of the reader. Caillois frames his discussion by situating the fantastic historically, as Bioy Casares had done in his 1940 essay. In its modern sense, the fantastic appeared with romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century in northern Europe as a reaction against an excess of rationalism. Caillois believes that prior to the eighteenth century, it is difficult to speak of the fantastic because we are speaking of "a universe that is still supernatural" (53), or a world where the marvelous is considered part of human experience. The masterpieces of fantastic literature, such as the works of Hoffman, Poe, Hawthorne, and Irving, appear in the first half of the nineteenth century when scientific advancements added fuel to supernatural possibilities and man's notion of reality was heightened. The themes of the fantastic are not new, Caillois claims, since "like myths, tales of the fantastic readily take up the same themes under different plot arrangement" (54). Caillois links the fantastic to the emergence of a scientifically minded society, and he believes that it reflects a certain nostalgia for the passing of an era: "The fear which is peculiar to the fantastic tale crops up only in an incredulous world in which the laws of nature are deemed to be rigid and unchanging. It appears as the nostalgia for a universe that is accessible to the powers of darkness and to the emissaries of the beyond" (55). According to Caillois, "The fantastic supposes the solidity of the real world, the better to ravage it" (51). This intrusion can be sudden or gradual, but "the essential step in the fantastic is the Apparition: what cannot happen but *does* happen, at a given moment and point in the heart of a perfectly ordered universe, from which one believed mystery to have been forever banished" (51). Caillois points out that although the writer of fantastic literature probably does not believe in the things he writes about, he plays upon our fear that these things *could* happen. In order for the fantastic to have its full effect, then, writers, readers, and characters must share a similar worldview and believe that certain inviolate laws govern the universe.

Although Caillouis's remarks could apply to Spanish American metropolises like Buenos Aires and Mexico City in the late 1950s, when national projects related to industrialization and modernization were in full swing, it is problematic to talk about Spanish American culture as a singular, unified thing. In fact, much of magical realist fiction deals specifically with coexisting worldviews that contrast the "pre-scientific" or "marvelous" perception of fictional characters who live in remote regions of the Americas with that of Westernized mainstream readers who most likely adhere to the kind of laws of causality described by Caillouis. Furthermore, as Kimberly Nance has astutely observed, "the timing of Latin American fantastic in itself to some extent calls into question the assertion that such literature is a direct product of a sociocultural moment when readers cease to believe in the supernatural" (8). Nance claims, "To maintain this notion in the face of the Latin American fantastic would require as a concomitant that the Latin American literary class (readers and writers who were inarguably connected to European philosophical and literary currents) relinquished its belief in the supernatural much later than its European counterpart" (8-9). Caillouis's idea that readers and writers of the fantastic usually share the same worldview is an important one, along with the notion that the fantastic often feels threatening because it violates the laws that we believe govern the world we inhabit. He also rightly identifies the fantastic as a counter voice to scientific progress and projects of modernity and industrialization, regardless of when or where they occur. But the assertion that a monolithic belief system exists, and that a chronological shift moved us from a pre-scientific to a postscientific understanding of the world, is an oversimplification in the case of Latin America. As Nance argues, literary conventions often lag behind actual belief systems. To play with the idea that the supernatural might exist, and to speculate about how the reader may react to it, is not to suggest that the writer or the reader of a fantastic text actually believes in the supernatural. However, as Caillouis suggests, the fantastic must rely on some vestiges of belief in the supernatural in order to make us think, even briefly, that it *could* exist. How remote those beliefs are, where they come from, and how we conceive of the supernatural may vary from culture to culture, but the fantastic always speaks from a position of absence, referring to a hypothetical moment in time when reason might fail us.

Vax's treatise on the fantastic was translated from French to Spanish in 1965 and widely circulated in Spanish American literary circles. Like Caillouis, Vax makes no reference to fantastic writing by Spanish

American writers, but many of his ideas about the genre are in line with the literature that was being produced there. Vax claims that there is an inversion of cause and effect in the fantastic and that it transgresses the laws of time, space, and matter. As supernatural elements invade a world based on reason and threaten its security, ordinary men, characters, and readers are confronted by something inexplicable in their everyday lives. As he puts it, “el amante de lo fantástico no juega con la inteligencia, sino con el temor; no mira desde fuera, sino que se deja hechizar. No es otro universo el que se encuentra frente al nuestro; es nuestro propio mundo que, paradójicamente, se metamorfosea, se corrompe y se transforma en otro” (17).<sup>8</sup> Vax classifies the fantastic according to themes that have traditionally defined it, such as vampires, werewolves, haunted houses and abandoned gardens, alterations and perturbations of human personalities, the passage of time, and the like, but he asserts that the themes are not as important as the way in which they are used to create a sensation of fear or surprise in the reader. Vax’s emphasis on the reader’s role in the construction and reception of the fantastic element in the text, together with the idea that the fantastic depends on stylistic and narrative devices to produce a desired effect, are insights that open texts up to more detailed study. The fantastic must contain an element that strikes us as impossible, supernatural, or inexplicable according to the laws that govern the world we live in, but it must be presented in a way that makes us wonder if such a thing is possible. Furthermore, like Sartre, he identifies the serious metaphysical implications of the fantastic: “En las narraciones fantásticas, monstruo y víctima simbolizan esta dicotomía de nuestro ser, nuestros deseos inconfesables y el horror que ellos nos inspiran” (11). This observation suggests that the fantastic can lend itself to psychoanalytic readings as well as philosophical ones, an idea that other theorists such as Rosemary Jackson and T.E. Apter would take up in later decades. At the same time, it is perfectly descriptive of the kind of fantastic fiction being written in Spanish America at the time Vax was elaborating his theories about the genre.

A problem exists at the heart of these standard definitions of the fantastic: when it is viewed in a binary way, as something that stands in opposition to or as an inversion of reality, there must be an agreed upon understanding of what reality is. In recent decades, the notion of realism in literature has come under considerable attack by poststructuralists like Roland Barthes and Georg Lukács. They point out that a kind of subjective, middle-class European norm is presented as obvious and true in “realist” texts, but this is simply a way of upholding the dominant



ideology. Ostrowski attempted to address the issue of the fantastic and the realistic as literary opposites by proposing a common-sense view of reality, which he analyzes in terms of a “matter-space-time pattern” (55). He urges us to look for a “certain pattern which is on the whole constant” (55), as a kind of prototype for reality, and then to analyze the fantastic as a rearrangement of that pattern. Anything that does not reflect the usual relations among mind, matter, space, and time can be called the fantastic. Ostrowski acknowledges that our perception of reality is a cultural construct, and that it can vary across cultures and historical periods, which is an important point to keep in mind when we are discussing the development of the fantastic in Spanish America. There is no reason that the fantastic should appear at the same time in all world literatures, or that it should take the same form everywhere it appears. For Ostrowski, the fantastic plays with consciousness, which suggests that it is not simply an essence that mysteriously permeates some texts, but rather an effect that comes from the manipulation of language. He, like most other theorists, sees the fantastic and the realistic as a dichotomy, but Ostrowski leaves room for the meaning of the terms to slip and slide relative to how we perceive them. He is one of the few critics to grasp this important point, which would later be taken up by Spanish American writers, especially women, as a way to question the solidity of dominant ideological constructs.

### Spanish American Attitudes Toward the Fantastic

Prior to the 1970s, Spanish Americans understood the fantastic via three overlapping frames of reference: the *Antología de literatura fantástica* (in its original form and later in its 1965 revision); the production and consumption of fantastic texts by Spanish American writers and readers throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s; and the critical work of European scholars and critics during those same years. Defining concepts from these sources, which are still valid and shape our vision of the fantastic today, can be summarized as follows: (1) the fantastic introduces some element into the text that strikes us as potentially supernatural, impossible, or inexplicable according to logic and reason; (2) some kind of balance between the supernatural/ natural, impossible/ possible, or explicable/ inexplicable must be maintained in the text, so that one does not eliminate the other; (3) in its modern form the fantastic differs from gothic and traditional horror fiction in that it depends less on otherworldly creatures (vampires, werewolves, ghosts) and more on



man's inability to understand the world he lives in; (4) readers play a role in the fantastic, in that it requires us to suspend disbelief temporarily and let ourselves be manipulated by textual strategies that may surprise or confound us; (5) the fantastic is not defined by theme or content alone, but rather by narrative techniques and stylistic devices that influence the way we read the text; (6) although the fantastic appears to set up a dichotomy between the real and the unreal, we should not confuse extratextual objective reality with the mimetic representation of reality in a literary text, and we should not assume that our perception of reality is a monolithic construct that spans all times and cultures; (7) ambiguity is one of the defining characteristics of the genre, which makes it difficult for scholars to agree on its meaning, its origins, or its relationship to other kinds of fiction writing; (8) the fantastic often strikes us as highly subversive literature because it threatens to undermine the solidity of the laws that govern our understanding of relations between matter, time, and space; (9) it is not frivolous, escapist literature, but rather one that can be used to examine important philosophical, ideological, and social constructs; (10) the fantastic has taken on a life of its own in twentieth-century Spanish America, and writers have contributed in important ways to the development of the genre, although they were largely ignored by their European contemporaries during this time. To this latter point, we can add that midcentury Spanish American critics tended to dismiss fantastic literature as something inauthentic and unrelated to national concerns, which created a long-lasting prejudice against this kind of writing as irrelevant and esoteric. The lack of scholarly interest in the fantastic in Spanish America did not prevent writers from producing fantastic fiction, nor did it turn all readers away from it, but it did mean that the fantastic would become stigmatized for some years as marginal literature while so-called realist works predominated.

Consider, for example, that in the same year Sartre's essay on the fantastic appeared, Mexican critic José Luis González wrote a strongly worded attack on fantastic fiction, claiming that the fantastic "no se trata, pues, de una manera 'distinta' y 'superior' de expresar la realidad; se trata lisa y llanamente de no expresar la realidad. La 'literatura fantástica' de nuestros días es la literatura de avestruz" (3). According to González, "En México está ahora de moda, entre una exigua pero vociferante minoría que se autodenomina la élite de la nueva generación, el universalismo literario. El universalismo de estos escritores tiene un punto de partida bien conocido: olvidarse de que México existe" (3). As late as 1967, when writers like Bombal, Borges, Cortázar, Fuentes, and

Garro had already proven otherwise, Manuel Pedro González claimed that fantastic literature in Spanish America was a “producto exótico, importado y artificial, especie de flor de invernáculo, que revisten los pocos que por acá se han escrito . . . Es literatura para minorías ociosas, frívolas y snob, literatura exhibicionista” (qtd. in Olea Franco 124). This solid rejection of the fantastic by Spanish American critics at the very time when some of the best fantastic fiction was being produced explains to some degree the apparent hole in fantastic literary theory in Spanish America between the 1940s and the 1970s. Europeans took the lead in cataloging and theorizing the fantastic, with little or no reference to Spanish American writers, while many Latin American critics promoted “una literatura de corte realista y que tratara los problemas inmediatos de la sociedad” (Olea Franco 119). The tendency to marginalize the fantastic as “artepurista” cultivated by “la inteligencia burguesa” (J.L. González 336) is still apparent at times, despite decades of work by scholars in intervening years to reclaim it and explain its importance. For example, Juana Porro discovered in her analysis of reading texts used in Argentine high schools in 2000 that fantastic literature was significantly underrepresented and very little critical attention was given to it in most books. She speculates that the preference for more realistic fiction in the high schools may simply be a matter of taste, but she also claims that taste is a product of ideology. She believes that “‘lo fantástico’ desestabiliza y perturba más de la cuenta,” and teachers do not want to deal with the challenge of teaching it to adolescents (176). There is an implied comparison at work, making realistic fiction normal and fantastic literature abnormal. We can read realistic fiction if we have semantic and grammatical knowledge of the language, but the fantastic requires special training in terms of how it should be read. To some degree, this harks back to the idea that the fantastic is a genre that thrives on instability and ambiguity and the lack of agreement among critics about what it is and what it means makes it difficult for educators to teach.

### Todorov and His Critics

Parallel to the “Boom” of Spanish American fiction in the late 1960s and 1970s, which brought it to the attention of international readers and critics and inspired a new generation to look at works by important precursors like Borges, there was a sharp increase in critical attention given to the fantastic on both sides of the Atlantic. Much of this was inspired by Todorov’s polemic book on the fantastic, which proposed

severe limitations on how the term was to be used in reference to literature. Todorov's definition of the genre is so restrictive that few literary works conform to it, but he proposes a theoretical model by which texts can be measured and categorized. Despite many detractors who have aspired to prove him wrong, Todorov's influence on how we think about the fantastic today cannot be underestimated. First, he makes a good argument for why we need to come to some agreement about what words like the fantastic, the uncanny, and the marvelous mean, so that we can understand and appreciate the unique qualities of each. Second, he insists that the fantastic is a product of language, and he encourages us to pay attention not only to what the story is about but how it comes into being. Like Ostowski, he insists that in theory literary texts should be analyzed without reference to nonliterary terminology (such as reality, in the extratextual sense), but in practice he shows that it is difficult to define the genre without reference to something we recognize as our own world.

Todorov claims that the fantastic occupies the space in the text created by the reader's uncertainty. The clash between what the reader perceives as real and possible and what the reader believes to be unreal and impossible creates the fantastic effect, although it may be confined to only a brief moment in time. Todorov is particularly interested in how language is used to represent fictional truths in realistic texts, and how the fantastic manipulates and undermines the representative nature of language to produce uncertainty. His major contributions to the debate on the nature of the fantastic are both his insistence on the importance of language and the specific guidelines he offers for the analysis of fantastic texts. For him, the fantastic is defined by these obligatory conditions: the reader must consider the world of the characters to be similar to his own; he must hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation for events in the text; and he must reject poetic and allegorical interpretations of the supernatural and be willing to maintain an attitude of doubt or uncertainty about what he has read. In addition, the reader may identify with a character in the text who experiences doubt and hesitation, and as a result, doubt and hesitation may become inscribed in the text on a thematic level (33). Todorov claims, "Fear is often linked to the fantastic, but it is not a necessary condition of the genre" (35). He defines the fantastic, instead, in terms of the reaction produced in the reader: "*I nearly reached the point of believing*": that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life" (31).

Once the reader resolves his doubt and ceases to feel hesitation, Todorov claims the narrative is no longer fantastic. It will pass, instead, into a neighboring category:

The fantastic . . . lasts only as long as a certain hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from “reality” as it exists in the common opinion. At the story’s end, the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomenon described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous.  
(41)

Todorov illustrates his ideas with a diagram that represents a continuum on a straight line. The fantastic appears midspace on the line, flanked by two subgenres (the fantastic-uncanny and the fantastic-marvelous), which, in turn, border the uncanny at one end and the marvelous at the other end. The uncanny and the marvelous are at opposite poles, but each share some overlapping characteristics with the fantastic, which occupies a space between them. In the uncanny, shocking and extraordinary events are eventually explained with rational arguments (it was a dream; the character is insane). In the marvelous, the shocking and extraordinary are accepted as part of the narrative and elicit no hesitation on the part of the reader (as in fairy tales or myths). The pure fantastic is fleeting, since most readers will move past their initial hesitation and reach a decision: they will either accept a rational explanation, or decide that the entire story is a fantasy. In this way they close the text to multiple meanings and the fantastic ceases to exist. It will dissolve first into one of the subgenres, the fantastic-uncanny or the fantastic-marvelous, and then ultimately into one of the neighboring genres, the uncanny or the marvelous. He compares this idea to our notion of time: just as we think of the present as something that exists on a continuum between the past and the future, the fantastic inhabits a point between the marvelous and the uncanny. Todorov associates the marvelous with the future because it conjures up things not yet seen, whereas the uncanny refers to something that has already been experienced, or the past. The fantastic exists in the present, in the intersection of these two neighboring fields. Todorov defines the fantastic in terms of the *perception* of events, not

the events themselves, which gives it a transitory nature and sets it apart from other genres of imaginary fiction. He also describes it as a reading experience or a textual phenomenon, rather than in terms of content. The fantastic exists only through the written word, since it has no form outside the text. It is not a preexisting essence to be captured in words; it is our reaction to words that bring it to life. While earlier critics had also spoken of the fantastic in terms of the reader's emotional response to it, Todorov insists that he is describing "no actual reader, but . . . the reader implicit in the text. . . . The perception of this implicit reader is given in the text, with the same precision as the movement of the characters" (31). His discussion of the implied reader as a textual construct rather than a real person underscores the notion that the fantastic is created through narrative strategies and language, not merely through the treatment of certain themes.<sup>9</sup>

Todorov's idea of a pure or theoretical genre provides a way of narrowing the field when speaking about fantastic literature and concentrating the discussion on a specific kind of writing that meets the conditions he has laid out. But it is precisely his narrow view of the genre that has caused other critics to bridle at his work. He acknowledges the problem by explaining that literary theory can exist independently of concrete works, and that "there is no necessity that a work faithfully incarnate its genre, there is only a probability that it will do so. Which comes down to saying that no observation of works can strictly confirm or invalidate a theory of genres" (22).

Many complex literary works are multilayered and open to interpretation, but not all complex narratives are fantastic. What sets the fantastic apart, according to Todorov, is the hesitation the implied reader experiences when confronted with two or more explanations for a seemingly impossible event. The idea that the fantastic exists only for the duration of the reader's hesitation is a point some critics reject, for if the fantastic is construed as a literary game, the reader can willingly choose to suspend disbelief for as long as he wants, and as many times as he likes. What is less polemic in Todorov's discussion of the fantastic is the notion that it is a direct challenge to reason. The fantastic cannot exist in a text that privileges a logical explanation over a supernatural one: both explanations must be woven into the text, and both must appear equally valid within the confines of the narrative. It is up to the implied reader to choose between them, but when faced with irreconcilable visions of the world, he experiences a momentary tearing apart at the seams that threatens to destroy established order.

It is this aspect of the fantastic that causes Rosemary Jackson to call it “the literature of subversion.”

Todorov’s structuralist approach to the genre did not concern itself with the social and political implications of the fantastic, but later theorists like Jackson have used his ideas as a point of departure for a broader investigation into the fantastic as it relates to culture. Jackson acknowledges the importance of Todorov’s work but believes it falls short in its scope; she aims “to extend Todorov’s investigation from one being limited to the *poetics* of the fantastic into one aware of the *politics* of its form” (6). But Jackson’s arguments, while astute and helpful for an analysis of the modern Spanish American fantastic, are muddled by her indiscriminate use of fantasy and fantastic as interchangeable terms. This stands her in opposition to Todorov, who had called for more uniform use of terminology and who insisted that what we call things matters. If we understand that for Jackson fantasy is similar to what Todorov and others had called the fantastic, then we can see how her conceptualization of the genre has important implications for the study of the fantastic in Spanish America. She claims that “a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it” (3). According to Jackson, fantasy (or the fantastic as we conceive of it here) “characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints; it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss” (3). Jackson does not define desire in psychoanalytic terms, but her discussion of it echoes Lacanian notions about desire as an indeterminate and inapprehensible element that organizes itself around that which is lacking. She finds Todorov’s repudiation of Freudian theory to be a “major blind-spot of his book,” because in her opinion “it is in the unconscious that social structures and ‘norms’ are reproduced and sustained within us, and only by redirecting attention to this area can we begin to perceive the ways in which the relations between society and the individual are fixed” (6). These ideas are particularly useful for the analysis of fantastic texts that deal with issues related to the social construction of gendered identity and psychological conflicts stemming from problems of self-identification.

Jackson locates the subversive quality of the fantastic in the ways it interrogates our notions of the real. She explains, “Fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that

which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (4). She insists that if the fantastic is to be defined as "a literature of 'unreality,'" then we must acknowledge that "fantasy has altered in character over the years in accordance with changing notions of what exactly constitutes 'reality'" (4). Like Todorov, Jackson reminds us that the discussion of how the fantastic challenges cultural notions must be approached in terms of language, not in terms of extratextual notions of the real. By drawing attention to the limits and failures of language, the fantastic makes us understand that fiction is never "real" or "true."

Todorov's and Jackson's theories about the language of the fantastic have proven extremely useful for the analysis of literary texts, but one additional problem must be addressed before we move on to a discussion of twentieth-century works from Spanish America. Just as their European predecessors were wont to do, both critics ignore writers from Spanish-speaking countries. This is particularly puzzling in light of the fact that authors like Borges, Cortázar, and Fuentes were already established in the genre and had an international reading public. Todorov declared in 1970 that the fantastic was "dead," but his comments reveal that, like Sartre, Cailliois, and Vax, he is thinking primarily in terms of Europe when he discusses the fantastic as a genre. On the one hand, he suggests that modern psychiatry has replaced the fantastic, since the themes of the fantastic have become topics of psychological investigation in the twentieth century. On the other hand, following Sartre's ideas, Todorov hints that a new fantastic may have come into being with the works of Kafka. He says, "With Kafka, we are thus confronted with a generalized fantastic which swallows up the entire world of the book and the reader along with it" (174). Todorov's comments about the death of the fantastic as a genre illustrate what Jackson and others have pointed out, that the discussion of literary texts cannot be divorced from their sociohistorical context, and that the cultural norms that inform the critic's worldview are not universal. In Spanish America, for example, the fantastic continues to be used as a sophisticated vehicle for social criticism, the questioning of cultural stereotypes, and the exploration of issues related to personal and national identity. This idea, which I insist upon repeatedly here, is one of the most important unifying threads of the present study.

## Spanish American Responses

Todorov's claim that the fantastic is dead strikes us now as premature and Eurocentric, but it had one important consequence: it prompted Spanish American scholars and critics to enter into the fray and carve out a space where their voices could be heard. Among the most influential in terms of advancing fantastic theory are Barrenechea, Beleván, and Cortázar, along with anthologists like Hahn and Cócaro, who have contributed greatly to the dissemination and appreciation of the genre in Spanish America in the last four decades. Barrenechea acknowledges the importance of Todorov's work as a useful guide for the analysis of Latin American literary works, but she disagrees with him on several important points. She claims, "Esta rigidez de exclusiones genéricas, buena para ciertas épocas de clases literarias muy definidas, no resulta aplicable a la literatura contemporánea que construye géneros híbridos o con caracteres más fluctuantes" (393). She defines the fantastic instead as "un sistema de tres categorías construido con dos parámetros: la existencia implícita o explícita de hechos a-normales, a-naturales o irreales y sus contrarios; y además la problematización o no problematización de este contraste" (392). It is not doubt about the nature of the narrated events but rather the *problematization* of their nature that Barrenechea singles out for study. She shifts our attention back to the text itself and to the way that the fantastic writer creates or resolves tension between two (or more) conflicting elements in the story, rather than speculate on the implied reader's response to those elements. Barrenechea feels that it is necessary to stabilize the evanescent nature of the genre prescribed by Todorov to include a broader spectrum of works, specifically those by Spanish American authors who might otherwise be excluded from discussion. Specifically, his assertion that the fantastic exists only in the instance when the reader hesitates about the nature of events described in the text is too narrow a definition of the genre. Recognizing the Eurocentric focus of Todorov's study, she insists that Spanish American writers must be included in the canon of fantastic literature. The Argentine critic lists Cortázar, Borges, Bioy Casares, Fuentes, Garro, Hernández, Anderson Imbert, Carpentier, and Arreola, among others, as writers who have cultivated the fantastic and whose works merit further study. She also provides a schema for the classification of these works: (1) "Todo lo narrado entra en el orden de lo natural"; (2) "Todo lo narrado entra en el orden de lo no-natural"; (3) "Hay mezcla de ambos órdenes" (396–97). She notes that through the problematization of what constitutes "lo



natural” and “lo no-natural” in the texts, the contrast between the two orders threatens us with the idea that “quizás en este mundo de los hombres no exista ningún orden” (399). Although Barrenechea sidesteps the vexing problem of the normal and abnormal as preexisting epistemological categories, her essay takes an important leap forward in the conceptualization of the fantastic as it relates to Latin America. She claims a space for the critical discussion of Spanish American authors and asserts that the fantastic is a viable form of self-expression for them. She disagrees with Todorov and others who have suggested that the fantastic is a dying genre. She points out that although scientific discoveries and psychoanalysis have given us new insights into the nature of the universe and the workings of the human mind, there will always be something outside the realm of human knowledge that will inspire ‘*imaginaciones fantásticas*’ (402). She also notes that if the fantastic is born of language, as Todorov claims, then as literature becomes more sophisticated and complex, the fantastic can become a self-referential kind of “*literaturidad pura*” that turns inward on itself and interrogates the relationship between language and the world it proposes to represent (402). With specific reference to the future of fantastic literature in Latin America, she explains:

Los preocupados por problemas sociales, tan alucinantes en nuestra época, acusan de escapista a esta literatura y anuncian su desaparición por obsoleta, por no reflejar los problemas humanos más urgentes, por ser un arte burgués. A ellos habría que recordarles que los teóricos del marxismo no rechazaron por ese motivo a lo fantástico. . . . La concepción marxista del realismo afirma que el arte debe hacer sensible la esencia. Esta posición o la de un Julio Cortázar que cifra la función revolucionaria del artista en revolucionar el ámbito de las formas o la de un Umberto Eco que asigna ese poder revolucionario a la destrucción y creación de nuevos lenguajes, abren también al género otras posibilidades bajo el signo de lo social, siempre que lo fantástico sea una puesta en cuestión de un orden viejo que debe cambiar urgentemente. (402–3)

These comments signal an important shift in thinking in Spanish American criticism in the sense that Barrenechea recognizes the fantastic as a socially relevant form of literature, and she argues that it be recognized for its power to transform our ideas about language and literature.

Like Todorov, the Chilean critic Beleván prefers to approach the fantastic from a purely theoretical viewpoint, and he coins the term

“descriptura” to describe the process through which the fantastic comes into being. *Descriptura* plays with the notion of un-writing, or destabilizing what is written; it refers to the gap that Beleván identifies between written language and its perceived meaning, especially when linguistic signs are used to refer to something that is considered unreal outside of language. He agrees that language plays a major role in the creation of the fantastic, but believes that the fantastic does not constitute a language in and of itself. It belongs completely to what he calls “el mundo de lo imaginario” (27), which exists outside of language. The reader uses intuition and unconscious processes to decode messages in the text through the apprehension of certain signs or signals that Beleván calls “deslices textuales,” or textual slippages. These linguistic signals tell the reader that the fantastic is threatening to invade reality; the implied reader’s security is menaced and he feels hesitation or doubt. Like Todorov, Beleván thinks that the fantastic exists only during the moment of hesitation, but he also states emphatically that the fantastic is never explained. Presumably, then, the reader’s doubt is never totally assuaged. Beleván coined his own term, “basculación,” which captures the essence of the fantastic for him. It is not vacillation, but rather a seesaw effect, a scale eternally out of balance that sets in motion the destruction of one order by another, which then tips back to the other side and forces us to revise our understanding of what we are reading. For Beleván, the fantastic is a conjunction, a simultaneous occurrence, of the real and the imaginary. He observes that because the fantastic exists outside of language, the use of language to attempt to describe it creates a self-referential narrative that calls attention to its own discursive shortcomings and failures. Although Beleván’s abstract theory of the fantastic does not situate itself specifically in the field of Spanish American letters, his work indicates that Spanish American literary critics are no longer willing to sit on the sidelines when the fantastic is under discussion. He advances some useful theories about how to understand the fantastic, particularly in terms of the narrative devices used by writers and the slippery nature of language.

Cortázar, who is one of Argentina’s most prolific writers of the fantastic and a recognized master of the genre, offers what is perhaps the most meaningful, although perhaps at the same time most unorthodox, definition of the fantastic in Latin America. Speaking on “The Present State of Fiction in Latin America” in 1976, Cortázar claims that he is open to the possibility that fantastic worlds exist. He states that he does not write about imaginary worlds, but rather about a world he has glimpsed,

often in dreams. He concedes that play is also a door to the fantastic, and that the reader must be willing to go along with the game, to accept the unacceptable and live in what Coleridge called the suspension of disbelief while engaged with the text. Cortázar suggests that there is a tacit agreement between the writer and the reader of the fantastic, as well as a shared value system and cultural heritage. The writer knows what his reader fears and is thus able to manipulate the reader's reactions by second-guessing what they will be. Before the game can begin, the ground rules about what is possible and real must be agreed upon, for without them, there can be no fantastic. What sets Cortázar's views of the fantastic apart from those of European and North American critics is his suggestion that the fantastic does not stand in opposition to reality but is simply another way of thinking about it. What is real and possible can vary from one culture to another, and from one moment in time to another, as Bioy Casares pointed out in his 1940 essay. Fear is not necessarily its defining element, nor is surprise. Cortázar suggests that the reaction produced by the fantastic is closer to puzzlement or confusion, a momentary disorientation, a realignment of thinking. In this sense, he echoes Sartre's ideas about the new fantastic, where man is at the center of a fantastic universe.

Cortázar claims that "fantastic literature is the most fictional of all literatures, given that by its own definition it consists of turning one's back on a reality universally accepted as normal, that is, as not fantastic, in order to explore other corridors of that immense house in which man lives" (522). He acknowledges that critics have not been able to agree upon a definition of the fantastic because "when it is given to us through a literary text [it is] a sensation which varies considerably throughout the course of history and from one culture to the next" (523). In terms of his own work, he describes the fantastic as an "eruption of the unknown [that] does not go beyond a terribly brief and fleeting sensation that there is a meaning, an open door toward a reality which offers itself to us but which, sadly, we are not capable of apprehending" (526). Cortázar believes that the fantastic inhabits a space he calls "interstitial, slipping in between two moments or two acts in order to allow us to catch a glimpse, in the binary mechanism which is typical of human reason, of the latent possibility of a third frontier" (526). Readers and writers who see the fantastic as merely a literary fabrication, who are not open to the possible existence of the fantastic, are "those who live satisfactorily in a binary dimension" (526). For him, the function of fantastic fiction is "taking us for a moment out of our habitual little boxes and showing us,

although it might only be vicariously, that perhaps things do not end at the point where our mental habits fix them" (527). He ends his essay by urging Latin Americans of the future to construct their own basis for reality and to leave room for the fantastic in their worldview because it will save them from becoming "that obedient robot into which so many technocrats would like to convert us" (532).

Cortázar's claim that the fantastic is not constructed through binary oppositions is an important break with traditional thinking about the genre, along with the assertion that the fantastic might be a bridge to another (third) plane that we have not yet been able to see. Perhaps he refers literally to a dream world or a world governed by the unconscious, where we are suspended between the rational and the irrational, or perhaps he is speaking in metaphors, using the notion as a way to urge us to look at the familiar with fresh eyes. His assertion, that despite scientific and technological advancements the universe is larger and more complex than we know, lies at the heart of the fantastic. It is an idea that accommodates slippage and refuses to be locked in place by whatever vision we have of the real at any given moment in time. For Cortázar, the fantastic is not the opposite of the real; it is something else, unidentifiable and unknowable, always just outside our grasp. We should not be too quick to dismiss it, however, as a literary game if we want to develop our ability to think and see beyond socially constructed boundaries. If its primary function is to make us think in new ways, it has the potential to revolutionize the world we live in. This is a dramatic declaration when we remember that two decades earlier the fantastic was dismissed by many Spanish American critics as a literature of evasion.

## Finding Common Threads

During the past thirty years, theorists and critics have continued to discuss the fantastic, both in general terms and in relation to specific writers and texts. Despite our efforts, we are no closer today to a uniform understanding of the term or the boundaries that govern its use. It continues to intrigue us, but it always seems to outrun our grasp.<sup>10</sup> As Jesús Rodero observed in 2005, "Prácticamente todos los críticos parecen estar de acuerdo en una cosa: la naturaleza elusiva de lo fantástico, la dificultad de categorizarlo de forma sistemática" (86). Rodero outlines three tendencies in fantastic criticism at the beginning of the twenty-first century: a broad view that encompasses all forms of fantasy or supernatural literature (using Rabkin's model); Todorov and his followers and critics

who examine the way doubt, hesitation, or uncertainty are inscribed in our reading of the fantastic text (Barrenechea, Belevan, Brooke Rose, Risco); and those who see the fantastic as a subversive kind of literature that questions dominant cultural values (Cortázar, Jackson, Bravo, Alazraki, Armitt, Rodero). As Rodero notes, the transgressive potential of the fantastic, especially in Latin America, “es una de sus tendencias más destacadas” (88). Rodero’s schema is useful as a way of understanding the different approaches to fantastic criticism, and it also allows us to pick and choose, as most scholars have done in recent decades, from an elaborate buffet of ideas to elaborate our own vision of the fantastic, which we can then use as a tool for the analysis of specific Spanish American texts. Sandner reminds us that the history of fantastic theory is made up of “intractable disagreements, surprising shifts of emphasis, inadequate definitions, and immodest claims of writers and critics” (277). For this reason, any discussion about what the fantastic means cannot lead to a single, definitive answer but will instead contribute to an ongoing debate. As I attempt to summarize what the fantastic means to me and why I believe Spanish American fantastic literature, in particular, is important, I hasten to add a disclaimer (as Sander does in his essay on the fantastic) that “someone could put together a different history of the fantastic and be right” (278). We are inarguably dealing with a literature that is resistant to closure, and while there are some constants that shape our understanding of the genre, there is also an inherent ambiguity in the fantastic that cannot be too tightly pinned down.

First, it is difficult to discuss the fantastic without making reference to reality or the perception of reality. To do so requires us to problematize not only the meaning of the fantastic but to interrogate the notion that reality can be reflected in literature, and how the perception of reality might vary from one time period or one culture to another. We cannot assume that we all mean the same thing when we discuss objective reality or a realistic view of the world in a literary text. It is not within the scope of the present study to examine realism in literature, but we must bear in mind that since the fantastic is often described as a reaction to the real world, we are talking about a representation of reality (and therefore, a personal and subjective vision of reality) in a literary text, or the implied reader’s perception of reality as a cultural construct. Whether the fantastic and realism are to be seen as binary forces that stand in opposition to each other, a sliding continuum, mirror images of each other, or as interstitial spaces that exist within a broader spectrum of human experience, the fantastic contests the rational limits imposed

on our understanding of the real world and cannot be conceptualized without reference to that world. The fantastic is a subversive genre in that it seeks to make the reader question and doubt his understanding of the world around him. It is based on the reader's willingness to entertain the idea that the supernatural *may* exist and can invade the real world and usurp it. The fantastic does not require absolute belief in the supernatural but merely an openness to the idea that there are experiences and situations that defy logic and reason or that are beyond scientific explanation. Whether the reader feels actual fear or uncertainty about the nature of what he is reading is a point left open for debate; as Cortázar reminds us, for some it is merely a literary game played between the writer and the reader, who is expected to suspend disbelief for the time he is engaged with the text. The actual reader of a fantastic text is often encouraged to identify with the characters through an implied reader, who perceives the fantastic through linguistic signs that have ambiguous or multiple meanings. In order to encode the fantastic into the text in ways that will condition reader reaction, the writer must share the worldview and cultural norms of his readers and characters so that they conceive of reality in similar ways and will feel a similar kind of alarm when the order of their known universe is altered. The fantastic does not conform to a preestablished idea of what is possible and real. It pushes the limits of our thinking and opens doors into what Cortázar calls "the latent possibility" of other frontiers.

Second, the fantastic relies on a number of predictable themes, but it cannot be classified or understood only in terms of the themes it addresses. To speak about the fantastic in literature is to speak about more than the story's content, for, as Todorov and others have shown, the fantastic comes into being through language and should be studied as a system of linguistic signs and codes. The fantastic attempts to describe an experience, an object, an essence that challenges representational language because it has no signification outside of the text. The reaction of the reader, which is central to the functioning of the fantastic, is manipulated through language. Therefore, it seems appropriate to analyze individual texts to identify the narrative strategies used by the authors to achieve the best fantastic effect and, especially, to pay attention to the self-referential aspects of the texts to understand how they call attention to their own literariness. As literature becomes more sophisticated and readers more wary of the inherent truth quality of any fictional text, the fantastic becomes a way to deconstruct traditional reading practices and interrogate the creative process itself. As Sartre suggested, in the

twentieth century fantastic literature no longer depends on vampires, werewolves, ghosts, or similar otherworldly creatures. Man, himself, has become the center of much contemporary fantastic fiction, and the fantastic has become, in turn, a way to explore philosophical and psychological issues.

Perhaps for this reason, the fantastic hero or heroine in contemporary fiction tends to be an ordinary person, men and women who are basically comfortable in their existence, albeit at times they lead a lonely, alienated, or dull life. When confronted with a fantastic situation, characters react in predictable ways simply because they are so apparently normal. The best fantastic fiction does not explain the supernatural, but instead allows the reader to form his own conclusions about the nature of what has happened in the text. In many fantastic stories, clues or other slip-pages in the text (*deslices textuales*) appear that point toward the existence of the fantastic before it makes a full-blown appearance in the text, but these linguistic gaps are purposely vague and polysemic so that they create hesitation or uncertainty in terms of how we are to interpret what we read. Short stories lend themselves particularly well to the fantastic because they can be read in a single sitting and the reader can experience the full cycle of the fantastic without disengaging from the text: he enters the world of the characters, encounters the unsettling effect of the fantastic, feels uncertainty about the nature of the events described, chooses how to interpret it, and emerges having reached a conclusion about what happened in the story. The emotional impact (fear, doubt, surprise, unease) is felt most strongly when the reader temporarily forgets that he is reading a fictional story and imagines, at least for a moment, that he is reading about his own world. This willingness to slip into the fictional world of the characters is what Cortázar refers to when he explains that play opens the doors to the fantastic. When we think of the fantastic as a game, it is easy to understand why readers enjoy re-reading fantastic stories. On second and third readings, our interest lies not so much in knowing what happens in the story as to uncover *how* it happens. We go down the same path, but we look for new signs that might warn us of what lies ahead, we watch for gaps that make us stumble, we are wary of tricks that mislead us. We know the characters, their blind spots, their weaknesses, their flawed thinking, and we cannot only second-guess them but our own response to them. We are drawn deeper into the text looking for the strategies that have been used against us, all the while admiring the skill with which the traps were laid. A well-constructed fantastic short story can be read many times because it opens itself up



to multiple readings and may even mean different things to readers at different moments in their lives. Many elements, such as frame of mind, mood, level of physical comfort, time of day, and setting, to name only a few, can influence the actual reader's reaction to a literary text and his/her ability and willingness to identify with the implied reader or characters in the story. Because the story can be read in different ways, it is theoretically possible for a reader to reach one conclusion on a first reading, another conclusion on a second, and then on a third reading, decide that the original explanation was the correct one after all. Details that may not seem important on first reading can later suggest new scenarios on repeated readings, or the reader may simply change his mind about what he thinks. The seesaw effect (*basculación*) of the fantastic allows it to metamorphose into an endless chain of shifting signs and signifiers, always leaving something slightly beyond our comprehension. Those readers who insist on absolute closure, on knowing and understanding clearly the nature of everything they read, will not generally respond well to fantastic texts, which can leave them feeling frustrated, as if they have been tricked into a game they are not willing to play. As Porro has noted, fantastic literature perturbs readers on the psychic level, and individuals have different levels of tolerance for this kind of reading experience.

We can safely say that the fantastic has not disappeared as a genre, and that although it has its roots in Europe and the United States in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it found a home in Latin America soon afterward. It emerged as a reaction against the Age of Reason and the excesses of rationalism that marked the late eighteenth century in the Western world, and it came ashore in mid-nineteenth-century Latin America on the tide of romanticism. Although the fantastic has undergone some changes in terms of style and subject matter, its essence remains the same in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and many of the characteristics of the classical fantastic described by Caillois, Vax, Todorov, and others are still found in contemporary narratives. Hahn has provided a detailed study of the fantastic in the Spanish American short story of the nineteenth century and has analyzed texts by writers like Montalvo, Gorriti, Blanco, Roa Bárcena, and Darío, among others, to show that "lo fantástico, al actualizarse en una obra determinada, adquiere la forma de la tendencia literaria en boga, cuyo sistema de preferencias condiciona los temas y motivos, los personajes y el tipo de acontecimiento ruptural" (83). Hahn establishes a link between romanticism, which he dates in Latin America from 1845–89, and modernism, which overlaps with it in the 1880s and continues until about 1910, through



the writers' interest in the fantastic as a literary genre. At the same time, he stresses that the fantastic is not stable and intransmutable; as society changes, so does the nature of the fantastic.

To discuss the fantastic in the context of Spanish America, we must be prepared to bend definitions of the genre as it has been construed by European and North American theorists, and we must also acknowledge that the fantastic will take different shape at different moments in time and in different countries. Spanish America, after all, is to some degree an artificial construct, a geographical marker that sets the English-speaking Americas apart from those places where Spanish is spoken. There is no reason to assume that an Argentine writer and a Mexican writer will approach the fantastic in the same way, or even share the same notions about it. Nevertheless, we cannot overlook the fact that Spanish American literature in general has been excluded from some of the most important critical discussions of the history and development of the fantastic, and that many of the important theoretical discussions about what constitutes the fantastic as a genre have overlooked Spanish American writing altogether. As a marginalized body of work, then, it can be loosely framed as a unit as a way to distinguish it from fantastic literature in other parts of the world, especially that of Europe and the United States. If we accept the notion that the fantastic in literature automatically carries with it an assumed frame of reference that we call reality, it stands to reason that the nature of the fantastic will shift and change from one cultural framework to another. This idea bears further examination and is one of the motivating factors behind the present study.

## Magical Realism and the Fantastic

Although most critics, theorists, and writers who work with the fantastic argue persuasively that it is not to be confused with magical realism, a neighboring genre in Latin American fiction, the two terms have been so closely linked through decades of use and misuse that it is still difficult to untangle the complicated threads that bind them together. Just as the debate surrounding the nature of the fantastic has raged for decades, so too has the discussion of what magical realism means and what kind of literature it best describes. At the heart of the matter seems to be the attitude or tone of the inscribed narrator toward the subject matter under discussion in the text, where his allegiances lie, what worldview has shaped his thinking, what belief system he subscribes to, and

how he positions himself vis-à-vis the characters he is describing and his inscribed reader. While a fantastic narrator generally aligns himself with Western logic and sees the supernatural in stark contrast to the rational and real world he inhabits, the magical realist narrator appears to embrace the magical and the real as complementary and symbiotic parts of a unified whole. The element of doubt, hesitation, unease, anxiety or fear which characterizes most fantastic texts is usually missing in a magical realist one, since the supernatural or magical is embraced by characters as something that is part of their world. In this sense, magical realism appears to have more in common with the marvelous than it does with the fantastic, as Alejo Carpentier's use of the term, "*lo real maravilloso*," suggests. However, the marvelous has its origins in fantasy and portrays a world that has largely been invented, whereas magical realism, or *lo real maravilloso*, claims to represent a recognizable reality. In Spanish America, magical realism has found its greatest expression in geographical areas where a strong non-European presence is felt: the Caribbean, rural Mexico and Central America, and parts of the Andes. This has led many critics to speculate that it is the conflict between European and African or indigenous worldviews that gives rise to magical realism in literature, for magical realist texts often create a space where politically, socially, and economically marginalized peoples can contest colonial discourse by reframing the notion of reality in ways that hark back to their own belief systems.

In 1949, Carpentier declared in the prologue of his short novel, *El reino de este mundo*, that the entire American continent inherently possessed a mysterious and magical essence that provided writers with a wealth of subject matter that had scarcely been touched by writers. He asked, "Pero ¿qué es la historia de América toda sino una crónica de lo real maravilloso?" (121). Carpentier's claim that the marvelous could coexist together with the real, and that in order to portray Latin America in literature the writer needed to tap into both, was an important new idea but his name for it, *lo real maravilloso*, did not appeal to critics. Instead, for reasons that are not entirely clear, they preferred a term borrowed from the world of European art, *realismo mágico*. German art critic, Franz Roh, had first used the term in 1925 as a way to describe postexpressionist painting in northern Europe. Although Roh made no reference to Latin America in his writing, his ideas resonated there because of his belief that "el misterio no descende al mundo representado sino que se esconde y palpita tras él" (1). Roh claimed that reality could appear unreal when seen from unusual or unexpected perspectives, and that the surprises found

beneath the surface of everyday life could form the basis for art. These notions coincided with Spanish American writers' fascination with their immediate, familiar surroundings in the 1930s and 1940s, and their search for a new, more authentic way of writing about the American experience. By 1948, when Uslar Pietri wrote about magical realism in his native Venezuelan literature, the term had become integrated into the lexicon of literary critics in the New World, although it appears to have no clearly defined meaning, other than "la consideración del hombre como misterio en medio de los datos realistas. Una adivinación poética o una negación poética de la realidad" (Uslar Pietri 162).

The distinguished critic Angel Flores is responsible for popularizing the term in the 1950s, but like Uslar Pietri, he used it as a general category to describe the monumental changes he perceived taking place in Spanish American literature at midcentury. Flores called attention to the importance of style, to the ability to transform "the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal" (190), but he did not clarify how magical realism differed from other neighboring genres like the fantastic or the absurd. Anderson Imbert described magical realism in more concrete terms in 1956 when he wrote, "Everyday objects appear enveloped in such a strange atmosphere that although recognizable, they shock us as if they were fantastic. Reality is so subjectively treated that frequently the reader seems to be following the scenes of a dream or the symbols of an allegory" (148). Two decades later, Anderson Imbert went further, adamantly rejecting Carpentier's claim that the American continent provides ethnographic subject matter that inspires magical realist writers; according to Anderson Imbert, magical realism depends on technique, not content, and is not linked to any particular geographical area. This stance opened the door to heated debate about whether magical realism is distinctly linked to Latin America or is a universal phenomenon, an issue that has yet to be resolved. In addition, Anderson Imbert's claim that the magical aspect of magical realism does not come from reality itself but from "el arte de fingir" (43) signals a reluctance on the part of Eurocentric intellectuals to embrace a non-Western or culturally hybridized view of Latin American reality. Fernando Alegría disagreed strongly with Anderson Imbert's position and urged a return to Carpentier's original conception of *lo real maravilloso* as a basis for understanding magical realism. Alegría names Carpentier and Miguel Angel Asturias as two exemplary magical realist writers; he explains that the magical elements in their work are not invented but instead based on reality, and that "ese realismo vive de una constatación de hechos

históricos que se tornan leyendas en la imaginación del pueblo y actúan, luego, como mitos desde una subconsciencia colectiva” (356).

Luis Leal was among the first to suggest that magical realism is above all about the writer's attitude toward his subject matter. He states that the writer “se enfrenta a la realidad y trata de desentrañarla, de descubrir lo que hay de misterio en las cosas, en la vida, en las acciones humanas” (232). He adds, “El autor no tiene necesidad de justificar lo misterioso de los acontecimientos” (234), because the writer sees the world around him as one that is essentially true and real, albeit mysterious and magical at the same time. Like Carpentier, Leal believes that magical realism is linked to specific subject matter, and that it is content, not form, which gives unity to the genre. He says emphatically that magical realism does not distort reality, it does not rely on oneiric motifs, and it does not attempt to explain psychological motivation. This distinguishes it from neighboring genres like the fantastic, surrealism, and psychological literature. Pioneers like Flores, Anderson Imbert, Alegría, and Leal, unable to agree among themselves about the meaning and use of terms like magical realism and the fantastic, launched ensuing generations of scholars into theory-driven debates that Emir Rodríguez Monegal described as “un diálogo de sordos” (26). He noted that the lack of communication led to confusion, and he urged critics to identify key texts and offer careful analysis of them to illustrate theories about the genres they worked with. This prompted many scholars to write about magical realism in the 1970s and 1980s, and some writers associated with the genre, like Miguel Angel Asturias and Gabriel García Márquez, to discuss their ideas about it. Constant bickering and disagreement about the meaning and application of the term caused some critics to declare that magical realism was “un mero vacío teórico, un concepto ambiguo e innecesario en la crítica hispanoamericana” (Mena 395), but others fell into a tacit understanding that they would agree to disagree on some points and focus instead on common elements that they all associated with this kind of writing. Recent decades have seen a burst of activity surrounding the study of magical realism both in Latin America and world literature, much of it linking narrative discourse to social realities of specific places.

Amaryll Chanady's work in the mid-1980s provided a useful framework for a discussion of how magical realism intersects with Boom and post-Boom writing in Spanish America, colonial discursive practices, and social context. According to Chanady, magical realism is characterized by “two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based on an ‘enlightened’ and rational view of reality, and the other on

the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality" (21–22). The belief system that controls what is real and possible in the text belongs to the characters and/or the narrator, not the implied reader. The reader is invited to enter the world of the characters and temporarily adopt their worldview in order to see reality from a different perspective. Chanady explains, "In magical realism, the supernatural is not presented as problematic, he does not react to the supernatural in the text as if it were antinomious with respect to our conventional view or reality, since it is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictitious world" (23). In contrast to the fantastic, magical realism does not inspire fear, hesitation, or doubt in the reader, which is one of the fundamental differences between the two modes of expression. Chanady notes that "the absence of obvious judgments about the veracity of the events and the authenticity of the worldview expressed by characters in the text" is another important characteristic of magical realism (30). She believes that the lack of hierarchy between two mutually exclusive belief systems or logical codes in magical realism facilitates the acceptance of the mysterious, magical, or supernatural in the text.

Wendy Faris points out that many magical realist texts are set in rural spaces and rely on a Jungian perspective that grounds magical and mysterious elements in a collective experience rather than in individual memory, dreams, or visions. She also notes that magical realism lends itself to an extravagant, carnivalesque style that creates a sense of the outrageous, best represented by *Cien años de soledad*, which is often held up as the most representative work of magical realist fiction in Spanish America (185). Theo D'haen considers magical realism to be "the cutting edge of postmodernism" in that it subverts earlier literary conventions and the metanarratives and ideologies that those earlier conventions upheld (201). When seen as the flip side of the kind of literary realism so popular in Spanish America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, magical realism indeed turns the notion of what is real and possible on its head. It also privileges the worldview of those who had previously been marginalized, ignored, or portrayed as the literary "Other" who could be observed but not allowed to speak from any perspective other than the one embraced by the educated implied reader.

Another fundamental difference between the fantastic and magical realism is that the former finds its best expression in works of short fiction, whereas the latter is most often associated with the novel. The fantastic effect, born of doubt and hesitation, cannot easily be sustained for long periods of time, since a break from the text disrupts the reader's response

to it and encourages him to reach conclusions about the nature of events described in the text. They are fantastic only so long as he is willing to admit the possibility that they may be fantastic; once he puts aside the text, he will most likely reach a conclusion about the nature of what he has been reading and the fantastic will slide into a neighboring category like the marvelous or the uncanny. Magical realism, by contrast, does not depend on the reader's doubt and hesitation and, instead, seduces the reader into entering the world of the characters through lengthy, complex, and elaborate narrative threads that prop up their worldview. Novels like *El reino de este mundo* by Carpentier, *Hombres de maíz* by Asturias, *Cien años de soledad* by García Márquez, *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo, *Siete lunas y siete serpientes* by Demetrio Aguilera Malta, and *La casa de los espíritus* by Isabel Allende stand out as examples of magical realism in Spanish America; for this reason, it has intersected in more obvious ways with so-called Boom of Spanish American literature. From the late 1940s through the 1980s, magical realism became almost synonymous with the Spanish American literature on the international (and commercial) level. The fantastic short story, however, has been somewhat relegated to the margins in critical discourse, perhaps because few of the works have had "best-seller" status. The simple equation of magical realism with the primeval jungles, isolated rural communities, flamboyant and eccentric characters, or the turbulent and dramatic history of Spanish America makes the genre appealing to audiences who enjoy a taste of the exotic. It also conforms to some readers' notions about "primitive peoples" and the effect of economic underdevelopment on certain regions of the world, which allows them to establish and maintain an emotional distance from the text and ultimately relegate the mysterious and magical to realms other than their own.

### Putting Theories into Practice

In Spanish America, the fantastic generally reflects the modern urban experience, with the strongest and most enduring tradition in fantastic literature found in the Southern Cone, especially in Argentina and Uruguay. Cortázar addresses the link between the fantastic and the River Plate by stating:

Many times critics have looked for the answer to this question; they have spoken of the cultural polymorphism of Argentina and Uruguay resulting from the multiple waves of immigrants; they have

alluded to our immense geography as a factor of isolation, monotony and tedium, with the consequent refuge in the startling, the exceptional, in the search for an anywhere, out-of-the-world type of literature. As a participant in that literary current, I feel these explanations to be only partial; and in the end, instead of a rational explanation, the only thing that I can see is once more a mechanism of chance, that same chance which once, and in infinitely greater proportions, concentrated a creative explosion in Renaissance Italy and in Elizabethan England, which made possible the *Pléiade* in seventeenth-century France, and in Spanish the generation of the Golden Age or the poets of the Spanish Republic in the 1930s. Suddenly, and without logical and convincing reasons, a culture produces in a few years a series of creators who spiritually fertilize each other, who emulate and challenge and surpass each other. (527)

In acknowledgement of the importance of writers from the Southern Cone in the development of fantastic literature in Spanish America, more than half of the authors included in the present study are from that region: Adolfo Bioy Casares (Argentina, 1914–99); María Luisa Bombal (Chile, 1910–80); Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina, 1899–1986); Julio Cortázar (Argentina, 1914–84); Leopoldo Lugones (Argentina, 1874–1938); Silvina Ocampo (Argentina, 1903–93); Elvira Orphee (Argentina, 1930– ); and Horacio Quiroga (Uruguay, 1878–1937). Another significant group of writers comes from Mexico: Elena Garro (1920–98); Carlos Fuentes (1928–); and José Emilio Pacheco (1939–). In the 1950s, Luis Leal described the fantastic as a “género poco adaptado a la psicología del mexicano, hombre realista por naturaleza” (129). Nevertheless, Mexico has also been a breeding ground for the fantastic, perhaps because writers there have been especially effective at using the fantastic to explore Mexican issues. Leal’s assessment of the Mexican as a person who is by nature realistic does not exclude the possibility of looking at reality through the lens of the fantastic. As Cortázar suggests, there is an element of chance behind the fact that these texts come in large proportion from specific regions of the world and appear at specific moments in time. When we look at the ways writers and texts coincide and overlap in approaches and concerns, it becomes apparent that they do not exist in isolation from one another. Those who cultivate the fantastic in the Spanish language “spiritually fertilize each other,” as Cortázar claims (527), both within and beyond national borders. As he points out, one of



the characteristics of the modern world is “a growing consciousness that not only is no man an island, but that countries are not islands either” (531). This cross-fertilization may be due, in part, to a shared preoccupation among Latin Americans that Cortázar identifies as “the anguished search for our identity, for our necessary and irreplaceable reality” (532). Although that reality may vary from country to country, what binds Latin Americans together is the search for an autonomous identity, both on a national and personal level, and it is this notion of identity as a cultural construct that is at the heart of many of the fantastic narratives examined here.

If we accept as a point of departure Jackson’s observation that “the fantastic cannot exist independently of that “real” world that it seems to find so frustratingly finite” (20), it seems appropriate to organize the study of individual stories according to the ways in which they challenge the implied reader’s perception of reality. It is, of course, problematic to make claims about what a culture is like, or what human beings are like, based on situations and characters presented in works of literature. However, since one of the functions of the fantastic is to problematize the representational ability of language and literature in general, the study of fantastic narratives allows us to look at the way reality is culturally constructed in a text, the better to understand where the flaws in that construction lie and where the truth of the fiction begins to come apart at the seams. In this sense, it is as appropriate to discuss the social function of fantastic literature as it is to talk about realistic fiction in those terms. Jackson explains, “The fantastic exists as the inside, or underside of realism, opposing the novel’s closed, monological forms with open, dialogical structures. . . . The fantastic gives utterance to precisely those elements which are known only through their absence within a dominant ‘realistic’ order” (25). The fantastic expresses unconscious drives, desires, fears and obsessions and shows “in graphic forms a tension between the ‘laws of human society’ and the resistance of the unconscious mind to those laws” (Jackson 6–7). We know, of course, that literature is not the same as reality, but literary texts do reveal something about the culture in which they originate, even when their aim is to undermine and subvert some of the basic premises that culture holds true. The fantastic provides us with rich territory to explore in Spanish America, not only in terms of its artistic merit but also as a literature that concerns itself with human beings and the world they inhabit. The present study is not a general history of the fantastic short story in Spanish America, although it does attempt to show, through representative texts and writers, how



the fantastic has developed there over the course of the past century. At the same time, each chapter offers an in-depth analysis of the narrative strategies used by the writers as a means of linking thematic concerns to the use of language that generates a fantastic effect.

Chapter 1 situates the modernist fantastic story as a counterdiscourse to positivism, the prevailing philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in much of Latin America. These stories, far from being examples of escapist literature, directly interrogate and challenge the dominant ideology of the times. They call attention to the limitations of language, to the inability of words to express certain experiences or to accurately describe situations that fall outside of normal bounds. They suggest that scientific truth is not absolute and, in fact, can often be manipulated to reach false conclusions. The reader is called on to fill in gaps in the texts, and ambiguity leads to multiple levels of meaning that allow readers to interpret facts in different ways. The fantastic in the hands of modernist writers becomes a subversive genre, one that questions the value of progress at all costs. It is an excellent point of departure for our discussion of the genre in Spanish America because it shows that Spanish American authors have reached a level of sophistication that puts them on a par with European and North American writers of the fantastic, and it also points to some of the thematic concerns later writers will take up in their fiction.

Chapter 2 focuses on stories that explore the relationship among readers, writers, and texts. Specifically, these stories address questions such as who is the ideal reader of the fantastic? Is it possible to create an original work of literature? How can the text convincingly represent something that has no reality outside the written word? The stories explore the role of the literary critic in the construction (and imposition) of meaning and also encode multiple ways of reading the text into the narrative structure through different kinds of implied readers (the naive reader versus the sophisticated reader, for example). As examples of self-referential literature, the stories have as their central preoccupation the process of writing and reading; ultimately, in one way or another, they ask us to think about what literature is and what role it has in our lives. They question the authority of the author, the power of the written word to shape our perception of reality, and the possibility of literature as an escape from reality. They suggest that literature is a game or a construction, not a mirror of truth, and call for an examination of how the interpretative process functions (and sometimes breaks down or goes awry) in the production and reception of literary texts. This is a preoccupation that

European and North American poststructuralists would express several decades later, although usually without reference to Spanish American literature.

Chapter 3 concerns itself with the intersection of the fantastic and history, particularly in terms of how the interpretation of historical events shape personal and national identity. Time travel, which is a common theme in traditional fantastic fiction, has a more complex function here. It is a structural device that brings together different moments in time so that characters can understand more clearly their relationship to the past and its influence on the present. Space becomes symbolic because it splits along lines that reflect historical conflicts. Mexico City is the scene of three of the stories because it is a physical and geographical metaphor for the imposition of one culture on another. Characters can live in both the pre-Hispanic and modern world at the same time because they are one in the same, separated only by time, which proves to be an unstable entity. In a similar way, the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism, the predominant theme of Argentine literature in the nineteenth century, allows Buenos Aires and "El Sur," or the vast plains of the pampas region, to function as a reminder that the conflict has not been resolved in the twentieth century, although history has apparently relegated it to the margins. Characters in these stories come face to face with the Other, the historical shadow of the person they once were, or a representative of the culture they have forgotten and pushed to the side. The stories speak of "the anguished search for our identity, for our necessary and irreplaceable reality," which Cortázar identifies as a major preoccupation in Latin American fiction (532).

Chapter 4 examines the connection between the fantastic and psychoanalytic theory, especially as it relates to the concept of the gendered subject. It takes as its point of departure stories that express themes of the double, but explores how the fantastic treatment of the theme illustrates the workings of the unconscious. In the stories, male narrators position the female characters as mirror images of themselves, but at the same time, they struggle with the need to acknowledge sexual difference in order to take their rightful place in a patriarchal culture. The female metamorphoses from the double into a mysterious Other, a metaphor for longing and repressed desire, and the male, if he is unable to recover the illusion that they are two halves of a single whole, resorts to the fantastic as a mechanism for dealing with the rupture. Women are disappeared from the text or swept aside, leaving only the male narrator's reconstructed idea of them in their place. The males, who recognize themselves

as victims of the fantastic, explain away the bothersome aspects of the female Other through supernatural events. These stories illustrate that the fantastic, like unconscious desire, cannot be contained in language. The fantastic calls attention to insufficiencies in the linguistic system we use to represent ourselves. They bring to the surface the unconscious fear that there is no solid core to the "I" who speaks, and the position from which we articulate our personal identity is an arbitrarily assumed one. At the same time, they undermine societal values that prop up male authority by suggesting that power relations are largely a matter of habit and custom, and not inherently prescribed by gender.

Chapter 5 explores the connections between gothic romance and the fantastic, particularly as it relates to the treatment of the female body and problematizes the nature of feminine desire. In the two novellas studied here, the question of a lover's identity is brought to the fore by a narrator who may or may not be mad. The narratives play off the conventions of gothic romance as a way to explore some of our assumptions about romantic love and sexual desire, and they point to the ways in which narrators establish or lose authority over the texts because of culturally constructed notions about gendered identity. The "real" world of the characters is dull and monotonous, and the possibility of an "impossible" love offers them an escape. But the aging female body becomes the site of resistance in the texts, and her claim to desire, which seems so transgressive in the texts, is the element that opens the door to the fantastic in the narrative. The no longer desirable female who steps outside conventional behavior to act out her sexual fantasies and obsessions positions the male lover as the object of her longing, but this inversion of roles is dangerous, since it changes the way we think about romantic love. The lover in the texts, whether real, imaginary, or supernatural, allows us to explore some of our preconceived notions about gender, sexuality, and the body. The aging female, traditionally cast as the madwoman or monster of gothic fiction, is also portrayed in a more ambiguous light as a human being driven to desperate acts through unsatisfied desire. The novellas challenge us to think about the reader's role in creating meaning based on conjecture and preconceived notions and to think about how we respond to language that is not transparent.

Chapter 6 looks at the fantastic short story in the hands of women writers. The stories examined here establish that the way a writer chooses to frame discourse is an ideological statement. What we think of as natural patterns in language are, in fact, merely the result of dominant practices, and when women break these patterns in an attempt to create

a reverse discourse, we become more aware of the subversive potential of language. The fantastic is a particularly useful tool for women writers because it undermines patriarchal authority by suggesting alternate visions of the real world. The question of who speaks, who sees, and who controls our access to information in the narrative is central to these stories. They make us aware that when we grant (or deny) authority and reliability to a narrator, these reactions are culturally conditioned, and that our perceptions of what is real and possible in a text are never entirely our own but are, instead, encoded into language. Women writers of the fantastic turn narrative practices inside out, creating a space for those who are normally denied a voice. Some of the stories foreground their own enunciation practices by using language that is purposely elliptical, perhaps as a way to reflect the ambiguity of women in male-dominated discourse. They undermine the assumption that language has fixed meaning and that the same narrative strategies are appropriate for everyone. As a feminist practice, the fantastic does not attempt to replace one hierarchical structure with another but merely to extend our perceptions as a way of opening a space for those who have been marginalized.

Chapter 7 frames the discussion of the fantastic in cinematic terms, looking at the way film directors create a fantastic effect in a medium that is primarily visual. The fantastic, which is normally articulated through language and is most often associated with written texts, presents a particular challenge in film. If it resists representation and remains invisible or unnamed, how can viewers perceive that it exists? If the supernatural takes concrete form on screen, most viewers will quickly perceive it as a cinematic device and relegate it to the realm of fantasy or the marvelous. The hesitation or doubt that gives rise to the fantastic in literature requires that the supernatural be suggested but not made explicit. Films most successful at achieving the fantastic effect are those that rely on ambiguity and inference, but this is difficult to accomplish without tipping the scales in one direction or another. The films examined here lend themselves to two or more explanations, one always pointing in the direction of the supernatural and the other(s) suggesting a natural explanation such as madness, delusion, chicanery, allegory, or tongue-in-cheek irony. The fantastic is simultaneously visible and invisible because it takes human form, and there is nothing otherworldly about the characters except in terms of how they perceive themselves. In this sense, it is closest to what Sartre described when he wrote, "For contemporary man, the fantastic is only one of a hundred ways of mirroring his own image" (60).

The epigraphs that appear at the beginning of this introduction open a dialogue about the relationship between reality and the fantastic, and they also suggest that the critical debate about the nature of the fantastic cannot be one-sided. Spanish America has produced some of the most important fantastic literature of the twentieth century, but it has seldom been included in international discussions of critical theory. What I want to do here, then, is to bring the dialogue into the open and look more specifically at how the fantastic manifests itself in Spanish America, both theoretically and in specific texts that illustrate the techniques used by fantastic authors. The stories and films I have chosen for analysis are outstanding examples of the fantastic, in terms of style as well as substance. They illustrate the thematic concerns of Spanish American writers, along with the mastery of their craft. As we know, the fantastic explores the relationship between language and the thing it claims to represent. As Bioy Casares pointed out in his discussion of the fantastic, it is a literature that calls attention to the relationships among the writer/ reader/ narrator/ text. It is also an evanescent genre, one that permutes and transforms itself over time and across cultures. These ideas are woven into my textual analyses, since the fantastic is a genre that is characterized, at least in part, by the reader's response to it, particularly in the way that it interrogates notions of the real. Because fantastic texts are multilayered and language is polysemic, they are usually open-ended and much is left to the reader's imagination. The tendency that leads toward what Barrenechea called "literaturidad pura," or a self-referential kind of writing that interrogates the nature of literature in general, is another idea that ties together the texts chosen for analysis here. I find that the concept can be extended to apply to fantastic films as well as short stories, in the sense that the viewer is called upon to make decisions about the nature of what he sees. Cortázar hinted at the subversive nature of the fantastic when he referred to it as a genre that inhabits an interstitial space, one that breaks down binary oppositions between real and unreal and posits that there are other ways of perceiving and describing human experience that do not fit neatly into any known category. Beleván's emphasis on *descripción*, or the unraveling of the discursive power of language to represent the real, shows us how the fantastic traces the invisible and unknown and inserts it into an epistemological system where it otherwise has no form. Both of these notions provide us with a useful way to approach the analysis of fantastic texts, for they make us look not only at the words used to tell the story but also at the omissions and gaps in the texts where the fantastic can take root. In Latin America, the fantastic clearly is not dead, as Todorov proclaimed it to be. It has taken on the task

of addressing social problems, especially those related to the search for national and personal identity, which makes it as relevant today as it was a hundred years ago. It has also inspired some of the most fascinating narratives in the Spanish language, narratives that deserve more recognition on the international level as exemplary works in the fantastic genre.

While it is difficult to say what direction the fantastic will take as it moves through the twenty-first century, in the concluding chapter I turn to Carlos Fuentes's work, *Inquieta compañía* (2004), for a glimpse of what the future might hold for this kind of literature. It is telling that Fuentes, who began his career as a writer of fantastic short stories, returns to the genre fifty years later as a way to close a cycle in his life. The stories in *Inquieta compañía* are not throwbacks to an earlier era, but rather stories that clearly situate themselves in the contemporary world. They address themes such as globalization, immigration, racism, class conflicts, social injustice, and cultural and economic imperialism, while at the same time they explore what it means to be Mexican or, for that matter, simply a human being in a new millennium. The fantastic is an ideal tool with which to carry out this investigation because it allows the past, present, and future to exist on the same plane and brings together different physical spaces to show us that no country, no person, exists in a vacuum. The contemporary world portrayed by Fuentes in these stories is characterized by fusion, but also scarred by the inability to reconcile difference in a constructive way. This links his work to a long tradition of socially conscious literature in Latin America and shows that the fantastic continues to be a viable genre today.

It is easier to pose questions than to answer them, but when dealing with a literature that is forever in the process of transforming itself, turning back on itself, and opening up new dialogues about its meaning, it is foolhardy to impose a monolithic reading of it. The questions that motivate this study are clear: Does the fantastic have a different nature in Spanish America that sets it apart for special study? Why has it flourished there when critics in other parts of the world have declared it dead? Why are writers like Fuentes, Borges, Cortázar, Garro, and others studied here so attracted to it as a literary genre? What purpose does this kind of literature serve? In my attempt to address these questions, I hope to encourage a new generation of readers and scholars to engage with the texts, so that they, too, may fall under the spell of the fantastic in Spanish American literature.