

The Hermetic Imagination: A Critical Anthology of the Latin American Short Story

For a very long time, Hermeticism was considered a significant system of thought in Western culture. It provided a different mode of perceiving substances, processes, relationships, and the cosmos itself; that is to say, it offered an intelligent explanation of the world, at the level of philosophy and science. For centuries, Hermeticism was composed of a set of textual practices, religious or scientific (such as mysticism or alchemy). These discourses were marginalized by canonical religions, and severely repressed by authorities. After a long time of disappearance, Hermeticism emerged again in the 19th Century, mainly as the Romantic search for unity between man and nature, and in French Symbolism (as Abrams and Senior have pointed out). But this hermetic discourse has been even a greater force in Latin American countries and literatures than in Europe. Related to the short story, Hermeticism can serve as a key that allow us reveal the unity of the prodigious imagination of Latin American writers. I am currently working on the identification and description of hermetic short stories that had the greatest impact on this culture, and I would like to ask for the support of the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture for my project of study, which is conceived as a critical anthology of them.

Why did Hermeticism reemerge with such strength in Latin America? In the nineteenth century, the vision of the world as created by Modernity was imposed to these countries. Eurocentric visions of culture and politics were rampant within the Latin American intellectual circles. Positivism seemed back then the answer to all dreams of development order and progress. Instead, it created racism, xenophobia, and discrimination. One cultural reaction to this positivism was the rewriting of hermetic texts, because they have been the strongest alternative to hegemonic discourses in Europe since the Middle Ages. Another important reason for the manifestation of a strong root of Hermeticism in Latin America is that it has been a space where several different cultural identities and religions collided (Christian, Jewish, Afro-American, Native, etc.). We have to realize that Hermeticism is, above all, a syncretic force: it allows for the possibility of cultural integration of the different branches of religion and culture present there. As a result of these two main factors, Hermeticism creates a privileged place for cultural resistance to any kind of domination, and especially to the modern project, which necessarily departs from the absolute hegemony of positivism over other epistemologies.

But due to centuries of repression, Hermeticism, as a religious doctrine, has undergone a great process of fragmentation. It survives mainly in minor genres, such as in the short story. Only the short story (because of its didactic nature) has the ability to incorporate the lessons of the aforementioned differing traditions within itself. In consequence, the short stories I am interested in are neither clearly literary discourse nor religious; they stand on the threshold of discursive kinds, and both disciplines are needed for their thorough understanding. In many cases, these short stories imply the affirmation of supernatural forces, beyond modern rationalism. It would be a great mistake to consider this supernatural affirmation as merely “fantastic,” or as only forming a part of “magical realism”. They are part of a different vision of the world. Hermetic themes are more or less known by the critics of the Latin American short story, but they are not recognized as a part of the specific vision of the world they represent. Some examples of this include: creations of a new Man (Borges, Asturias); magic overwhelming science (Darío, Lugones, Arreola, Arlt); descriptions of hells and dialogues with the dead (Rulfo, Onetti, Bolaño); atrocious or ambiguous miracles (Cortázar, García Márquez); and lastly, development of enigmas (Vallejo, Monterroso). Only an anthology focused on Hermeticism would be able to provide the mechanisms for perceiving this marriage of symbols and narratives.

My critical anthology will have two different sections. The first will be a long introduction to the Latin American short story and Hermeticism in the 20th Century. I will focus on sociological, aesthetic, intertextual, and religious problems. The second part will be a compilation of texts. The corpus is considerable, and its coherent organization will require a great effort. I will travel to the library of The University of Texas, Austin, in order to collect the most important short stories that can be considered a part of the hermetic contribution to Latin American culture. I will classify them and select the most interesting cases for my anthology. I will prepare a small introduction to each one of them, explaining the specific relation to the hermetic vision of the world these pieces represent. And finally, I will organize all this material into a volume and present it to the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture for its evaluation. This book will help us understand that a dialogue between disciplines is necessary in order to make sense of the massive amount of literary masterpieces that have been written in Latin America during the 20th century, and it will serve to clarify the main characteristics of the hermetic vision of culture in these countries, its competence with other visions, and its possibilities. With the generous support of the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture, I plan to work hard on this project during the summer of 2006, and publish the anthology before I finish my dissertation, in November 2007.