

Science Fiction and Fantastic Literature as Realms of Freedom

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The gift of imagination has provided solace throughout history, particularly in repressive societies. And I am not referring to escapism or alienation —though these options could be valid and justifiable in an environment of social asphyxia— but to its function as a conspiratorial tool.

The fantastic genres, with their overload of symbolic elements, can serve to camouflage ideas that human beings intend to safeguard or disseminate in the midst of social or political chaos, inherently opposed to freedom.

In the case of my country of origin, Cuba, the restrictions imposed on freedom of thought and creativity fostered a particular connection between traditional fantastic literature and science fiction. Such elements as the fable, the parable, and the metaphor have enriched and transformed both genres. In order to understand this development, it is necessary to provide some background.

Before I was really aware of what was happening around me during the 1960s, Cuba went through a brief period of creative euphoria. By the mid-60s, the first Cuban science fiction titles were published, including, *La ciudad muerta de Korad* (Korad's Dead City), by Oscar Hurtado; *El libro fantástico de Oaj* (Oaj's Fantastic Book), by Miguel Collazo; *¿Adónde van los cefalomos?* (Where are the Cephaloms Going?), by Angel Arango; and others that today are considered Cuban sci-fi classics. It is significant that the first appearances of that genre coincided with that fleeting period in which most Cubans were wary of the changes that the new government heralded as truly exceptional. It was a period of imaginative euphoria that didn't last long.

In 1968 the “revolutionary offensive” began, putting an end to independent, private businesses and starting a campaign of persecution against those who did not agree



with the new ideology. Literature, along with other forms of creative thought, fell under this onslaught of repression. Any work that could be considered spiritual, fantastic, or that in any way altered reality, no matter how minimally, was banished. This involved a wide range, from traditional fairy tales to Walt Disney movies. A film like *Fantasia*, for instance, was completely banned for years. When it was brought back, it was not until it was properly “edited” to eliminate the final sequence with its references to heaven and hell. On the other hand, twentieth-century avant-garde movements, such as surrealism or symbolism, were deemed decadent. Schools taught that romantic and gothic works were of scant or doubtful value because they were somehow rooted in bourgeois patterns of thought.

During this time I still didn’t have a clear idea of the political implications of these restrictions. I was a young child, always sheltered under fairies’ wings and always dreaming of exploring other worlds. But somehow I felt the lack of imaginative oxygen and, in order not to die of suffocation, I started to write my own stories.

Without really intending to, I began to proclaim my right to dream as if it were the air I needed to breathe. That is why I believe that this dark decade marked my identity as a writer. I do not mean to imply that without those restrictions I would have written a different type of literature. But there is no doubt that my definite passion for these genres developed as a consequence of the prevailing circumstances.

Finally, after a decade of severe restrictions, fantasy entered the country again in a new guise: science fiction from the European Communist Bloc.

The official position during this period was that anything coming from the Soviet Union was free from the vices of capitalism and, therefore, could not contain any germs harmful to the Cuban society.

Perhaps one of the sci-fi works that contributed the most to this opening was *Andromeda*, by Ivan Yefremov. The novel depicted a future communist Earth, from which war and violence had been vanished, money did not exist, and working was a pleasure. In short, *Andromeda* reflected the ideal of the communist utopia. Other works such as *Aelita*, by Alexei Tolstoi, or *Hard to be a God*, by Arkady and Boris Strugatski, just to mention two examples, had plots portraying the struggle between classes or the superiority of a communist hero facing difficult tasks such as a revolt in Mars or espionage in a feudal society.

Relying on this criterion of ideological warranty, the official rejection of imaginative genres softened somewhat, and the Cuban Writers’ Union called for the first science fiction literary contest ever to be held in the country. The award



went to *Los mundos que amo* (The Worlds I Love), by a young university student. This was my first published book.

Amoroso planeta (Loving Planet) followed, including stories that, though written before the award-winning book, already revealed my breaking away from the canons of Socialist science fiction. I always rejected the idea of sending my fairies and gnomes into the inquisitorial pyre burning at 451 degrees Fahrenheit. That is why, in spite of the heavy Soviet influence of the times, Bradbury appeared as the most obvious presence in that book.

This literary contest allowed the publishing channels to begin opening to a greater acceptance of fantastic literature. It was a slow process because writers knew that it was impossible to break certain rules. This impelled some writers to experiment with mixing genres, jumping from one to the other in order to avoid falling into dangerous terrain and, at the same time, finding a new way to rebel against the [socialist] realism that had pervaded Cuban literature for a decade.

In one of those books, *Strip Tease: Cuentos de mal humor* (Striptease: Ill-Humored Stories), a writer of my generation, Antonio Orlando Rodríguez, dealt with characters immersed in repressive circumstances that included alienation, lack of freedom, and depersonalization as the most salient elements.

In a later work of his, *Querido Drácula* (Dear Dracula), the tone changes. Fantasy alone is abandoned in favor of mixing it with a sci-fi style that becomes absurd. This turned science fiction—usually a quite rational genre—into an extravagant satire. One of these stories, “Ánima de la lluvia” (Soul of the Rain), for instance, is a narrative in two dimensions in which sci-fi is mixed with the kind of fantasy of *A Thousand and One Nights*. One dimension takes place on a planet where, every afternoon, space explorers watch a flock of extraordinary flying objects that look like migratory birds. The other dimension is a monologue of a water sprite that dwells in a pond. The two worlds never meet, and yet there is a suggestion that the migrating objects that the astronauts see crossing overhead could come from the dimension that the water sprite inhabits. It is a story about two close worlds that can never interact, as well as a metaphor about the wonders that are close at hand but forever out of reach.

Let me point out that this story is from the 1980s, when for the first time people in Cuba were able to meet again with relatives who had left for the United States two decades earlier. The impoverished local population was in awe of the exiles, whose arrival demolished the long-held perception of their poverty and failure that had



been the primary ideological support of those born after the 60s. The impact of this meeting was greater among the young, who had no prior frame of reference.

Another story by the same author illustrates the scorn of this generation for the regime's ideological propaganda, which was not working anymore.

This narrative is deliciously absurd. Five characters —a Raphael Madonna, a lion, an Egyptian princess, a seminarian, and a werewolf— meet for dinner. They are all very good friends, and their greatest pleasure is to feast on the meals prepared by the lion, who is married to the ethereal Madonna. The banquet, consisting of a delectable cream of watches, telephones simmered in butter and yogurt, and a pie made out of a television set filled with custard and fruit, is the setting for their evening gathering. While delighting in these dishes, they offhandedly comment on the latest news that within an hour the world may come to an end owing to a nuclear war between two cosmic empires that had chosen Earth as their field of battle.

The characters' indifference reflected the attitude of the Cuban population, already fed up with similar warnings about an imminent attack by the "Enemy to the North." The characters in the story show a flippant attitude toward such news, as if it had nothing to do with them.

The story makes use of the banquet itself —notice that the ingredients are indispensable gadgets of communications and propaganda— in order to destroy those elements instrumental to the structuring and control of a society. The characters literally eat them up. By depriving these devices of their primary usefulness, they not only deride their essential functions but also highlight the actual hunger of the people, ready to devour just about anything.

In another example, a couple of writers married to each other —Chely Lima and Alberto Serret— created Terra Uno, a world they used as a setting for countless stories. Books inspired by Terra Uno provide clues for understanding the inner, spiritual world of a large portion of the Cuban population.

One of these books was *Consultorio terrícola* (Terrestrial Consulting Room), by Alberto Serret, that begins with the story "Aquí nunca nos pasa nada raro" (Nothing Strange Ever Happens to Us Here). In the story, a couple settles in Terra Uno, lured by the promise that they would experience the most extraordinary things. But actually nothing ever happens. It is only when the characters realize that they have been duped that they both begin to experience a metamorphosis. The room in which they were talking is transformed into an open-air landscape and, significantly, they themselves become birds, flying toward freedom.



Throughout the same book, there is a series of narrative poems in which a character who calls himself The Possessed has the ability to interpret the silence of some mysterious creatures from Terra Uno. Such creatures seem to represent Cuban social outcasts and all of those who dare not voice their opinions. This allegory of The Possessed—who in the story is perceived by all to be a madman—is obvious: In a country where being different is politically objectionable, where everybody has to conform to the same lifestyle, think alike and vote alike, only a madman could act as a channel for these voiceless dissidents.

Moreover, when The Possessed looks at himself in a mirror, he sees the opposite of what he actually looks like. It is a clear metaphor for any Cuban: nobody is really who they seem to be. People may think in one way, but are forced to express themselves differently. This character reinforces the allegory of the dual morality and the duplicitous conduct that has to be sustained in a society that demands a specific public behavior, though one can think and act otherwise in private. The Possessed embodies the social schizophrenia of the Cuban people.

Recently I reread several texts from that period and also what the critics had said about them. Nobody ever mentioned, or even suggested, what these stories obviously reveal. Could it be possible that the critics never understood them? Perhaps. But I suspect that many of them opted for silence out of fear of being considered heretical, just for interpreting these texts in such a manner.

I remember a joke making the rounds in Havana while I was still living there: A drunk on a city corner began shouting: “I know who is to blame for all this misery... I know who is to blame for all this hunger...” A policeman hears this and starts to beat him up until the drunk shouts: “Wait, wait! Yankee imperialism is the one to blame for this misery.” “All right,” the policeman says, “then you can go.” And the drunk answers, “Hey, why then did you beat me up? Whom did you think I was blaming?” This joke is a reflection of the notion that interpreting other people’s thoughts can be a dangerous exercise, because the interpreter, in assuming the existence of heretical thoughts, reveals his own, thus becoming an accessory to them.

Perhaps because of this, the first one ever to interpret certain details of my novel *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre* (Fables of an Extraterrestrial Grandmother) was a Colombian writer.

Shortly after the first Cuban edition (1989), Antonio Mora Vélez—a SF author from Barranquilla, Colombia—wrote an analysis of this work for an essay contest held in Cuba. Before submitting it, he managed to let me read a copy of his essay. I sent him a note immediately, begging him to cut some sections that could be dangerous



for me if the Cuban cultural authorities read them. He understood my request, and deleted the compromising paragraphs. Only after I arrived here was the article published in its entirety.

The action in this novel occurs in three parallel worlds. In the first one, called Rybel, a race of winged beings with a third eye for psychic vision, go through a rite of passage into maturity that allows them access to what they call the "Transdimensional Frontiers." The main characters of this narrative thread are a grandmother and her grandson. The novel begins at the moment when a whole village is fleeing from some creatures whose intentions, in their occasional appearances, are assumed by all to be hostile, but with whom they have been unable to communicate. In the midst of this exodus, the grandmother starts telling her grandson the story of a young female astronaut who, due to an accident, had to take refuge on a planet technologically inferior to her own. In this new world there are two magic talismans, each in the hands of a different group. According to legend, if the two talismans were to act together, it would be possible to access any point in the universe. Gradually, the young woman astronaut comes to realize that these talismans are simply mechanisms that allow time-space travel, and she devotes herself to the adventurous attempt to get them. On the same planet there is a wizard who has visions of a strange girl who lives in another world...

I am not going to tell you the whole story. I will just add that it deals with contacts among these three worlds, and the attempts to get hold of the magic talismans in order to open the temporal-spacial frontiers, sealed thousands of years before.

When I began this story, I never intended to write an allegory, nor did I give a thought to the possible interpretations of these frontiers or what it was that my characters were after in their desire to open them. I realized what I had done only after reading Antonio Mora's essay, which established a link between the opening of these frontiers and Cuba's isolation. It took me by surprise. The guise of fantasy had been to no avail, because his analysis left no other interpretation possible when he wrote: "Daina's man is the real contemporary man, with his conflicts and his goals; he is today's Cuban man facing the crisis of a system and the despotism of a political regime that does not allow him to propose alternate solutions [...]. The entire novel is a masked proposal for a solution to the crisis. To open the frontiers, not in Rybel but in Cuba, is the recognition of the failure of the given model and an opening in search of solutions that do not follow any dogma."

There are, as we already know, two levels of creative writing. One deals with elements used quite willingly by the writer: conscious creativity. But in certain



cases there are ideas and symbols that escape any control. These are the slips of subconscious creativity.

Beyond a doubt, the hidden meaning of frontiers in my novel was one of those slips. But I had included another message, this time quite consciously, in the image of those supposedly monstrous creatures with whom the native inhabitants of Rybel never succeeded in establishing communication. The analogy I established was politically dangerous, because these creatures did not turn out to be what the legend had pretended, and because the ones avoiding contact were the Rybelians themselves. The proper interpretation was that the isolation those people had been subjected to was self-generated, and not in response to actions from a pretended outside enemy. This enemy, moreover, was neither as monstrous nor as inhuman as it was purported to be.

With both elements (one conscious, the other involuntary or subconscious), it was obvious that the grandmother's world —isolated by a danger fabricated from within— represented the Cuban mythology of the embargo, which the government had been feeding and reinforcing in order to prevent the people from having access to the outside world. I do not know whether there were readers in Cuba who understood both allusions but, in fact, this novel became the biggest bestseller that year.

I should clarify that *Fábulas* is primarily an adventure story in which the fate of the protagonists is constantly precarious. That is the most obvious reading. There is another possible reading, one more deeply rooted and universal, about the dangers posed by intolerance and lack of social communication. But in the Cuban context, my readers could give it a more specific interpretation. Maybe they did not perceive it consciously, but the allegory was there.

In any case, readers are less innocent than one might suppose.

The last book I published before leaving Cuba, *El abrevadero de los dinosaurios* (The Dinosaurs' Watering Hole), assumed that dinosaurs had never been extinct, as was believed, but that after going through a period of evolution, they settled in a dimension parallel to ours, though under quite different social mores. The volume contained 70 short stories, each of which tells an anecdote that deals with some clash between the two cultures. There is a humorous tone because it is a satire, full of absurd situations that ridicule or place in question the most traditional values of our civilization.

When I wrote that book, I was fully conscious of what I was doing. Even years later, I have been able to discover nothing that entered into these stories without my



being aware. The truth is that, by then, I was so fed up with the Cuban situation that I could not forget it on any possible level of consciousness.

El abrevadero de los dinosaurios was a reflection of my rebellion against the so-called equality that was being forced on us by the regime, and my resistance to following certain social norms. I have never liked enforced egalitarian canons. I believe that every human being is a unique creature, and that our differences enrich us. But in Cuba, psychological and emotional uniformity is the daily, obligatory goal. To be different or think differently can be stigmatizing.

That is why I transformed creatures, which were supposed to be extinct, into representatives of the values generally believed to be extinct or nonexistent. In brief, dinosaurs symbolize a departure from some of the essential prejudices and taboos inherent in our civilization.

A dinosaur will never renounce his feelings, his spirituality or sense of justice, even if pressure to do so. A dinosaur loves liberty in all its forms, but such liberty must be conquered without violence. Violence is a repulsive concept completely against his nature. That is why I totally invested my creatures with a pacifist philosophy and behavior.

In response to external pressures, the dinosaurs always acted in a guileless manner. That had been my attitude —and that of many Cubans— during the past few years: a passive resistance in the face of the surrounding, oppressive violence. It was too clear a message. “Don’t present any opposition, don’t fight openly against anybody,” the dinosaurs seemed to warn. “But follow only your heart.”

After I left Cuba, I received a letter from an unknown reader in the island. From this letter I learned that a group of youths had founded a clandestine club named after the title of my book. Its members considered themselves as creatures rising in defense of every bit of their personalities, just as the dinosaurs in my book had done.

We already know that no work of art can ever change the world; but with good luck, it is possible to touch a sensitive chord in its readers and illuminate a space that was dark or that had not found enough encouragement to exist and grow. To keep the ideas of freedom and rebellion alive, even though ensconced just in the inner self, could be such an enlightenment.

Fantastic narratives provide a means for a coherent exposition of the most heretical notions. That is part of their defense against the lack of freedom. That is why I believe that one of the vital functions of fantasy is to safeguard the very essence of



human existence: that which allows the individual to rebel against all sorts of restrictions and prejudices.

A society that does not curtail the use of the imagination also fosters spiritual development.

The infinite number of options provided by a fantastic story is still the greatest gift of literature to human beings: the opportunity to explore all the impossible and possible realities, to connect the most disparate or heretical ideas, and to make use of resources that do not exist in real life or in conventional literature. It is a gift that can help satisfy our most basic emotional hungers.

The precious gift of imaginative transgression should never be disregarded. When I resort to fantasy, therefore, I feel that I am defending something vital for our species; something that transcends the borders of a country and encompasses the mental and spiritual condition of a whole civilization.

The concept of freedom is changeable, fragile, very malleable. People can easily lose it, by accident or decree, but creative people should not forget that there is still fantasy to help us jump over any physical barrier and to establish improbable links capable of escaping the most ferocious censorship.

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