The Impossible Moment: Shape-Shifting Nonfiction and Magical Realism Influences on a Work of Original Fiction

Citation

Permanent link
http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:33797291

Terms of Use
This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA

Share Your Story
The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Submit a story.

Accessibility
The Impossible Moment:
Shape-Shifting Nonfiction and Magical Realism Influences
on a Work of Original Fiction

Lia Oppedisano

A Thesis in the Field of Literature and Creative Writing
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University
May 2016
Abstract

This thesis investigates the idea that impossible moments given realistic treatment in literature can lead us to think more creatively about what is possible. Until the 1970s, social conditions in much of America made it impossible for a woman to raise children as well as have a career. Some might argue that, though the laws have changed, it is still very difficult even now, if one wants to slight neither the children nor the career, for women and for men. This is the dilemma at the heart of my novel, and I introduce an impossible event into the story in order to see what fruitful disturbance it might produce.

In developing the implications of that intervention, I have sought guidance from three authors who regularly toy with the boundary between the real and the unreal. John McPhee offers what are clearly facts, then pronounces them to be lies, or presents an actual event with facts that sound like a case against its reality; by these methods, he moves from the original tenor of the facts to something more nuanced and profound. Gabriel García Márquez flings an inexplicable fragment into the midst of everyday life in places where everyday life has been roughly the same for centuries, and the result is that the settled routines begin to open and change. Jorge Luis Borges focuses on one man’s life, with the normal divisions of the younger and the older self, and inverts the natural order by setting the two selves on the same park bench or in the same room, conversing with each other; each time, his characters grow and deepen from their strange encounter.

This kind of wonder and openness is what I hope my novel will bring to the question of what is possible in a woman’s life, and in a man’s, in the one life that each of
us has. In my novel, I present an ideal case that could not occur and that contradicts the rules of reality. This allows the heroine to travel an impossible path wholeheartedly; at the end, she understands and incorporates sorrows and triumphs she could never have undergone in an actual human life. It’s a dream, of course, a fiction, but that’s what fiction is for: to give us experiences we otherwise might never have had.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to all the Feeney family with love
and with special gratitude to
Dorothy Jane Feeney and Brigid Riley Feeney.
Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank and acknowledge:

Karen Heath, whose thesis direction was a master class in writing a novel;
Talaya Delaney, who gave clear, expert, and perfectly tuned guidance;
Bill Holinger, whose writing class and thoughtful conversations nurtured an odd idea into scenes and structure;
Christina Thompson, who taught us to aim for clarity, power, and beauty in our writing;
Robert Kiely, whose class opened a wide, long view on the world and who told me to “Keep writing!”;
Mark Tomass, whose feedback built confidence in my ideas about writing and editing;
Peter Becker, who assigned all those great novels to read and made us write about them;
Maxine Rodburg, who generously showed me what she found good in a fledgling draft;
Karen Elizabeth Bishop, who revealed that criticism was not a path away from but deeper into a creative work;
Chris Mooney, who said, “Scene, scene, scene,” and “Read everything”;
Ruth and Rocco Oppedisano Webb, my parents, whose stories and love of stories inspired mine;
Julia and Dino Livolsi, my aunt and uncle, whose early praise encouraged me, and who said, “I want to read that book!”;
and Al, Phin, and Uly Feeney, whose calm in the face of my rather intense focus was a bedrock of sanity.
Table of Contents

Dedication ................................................................. v
Acknowledgments ...................................................... vi

I. The Impossible Moment: Shape-Shifting Nonfiction and Magical Realism Influences on an Original Work of Fiction ........................................... 1
   The Impossible Moment ............................................... 1
      John McPhee: Confounding Expectations ....................... 2
      Gabriel García Márquez: Dignity and Distance ............. 7
      Jorge Luis Borges: Unreality within Reality ................. 14
   Drawing the Reader into the Impossible Moment ............. 20
      McPhee’s Strategy of Surprise ................................... 20
      García Márquez’s Strategy of Dignified Distance .......... 21
      Borges’s Strategy of Bounded Unreality ..................... 22
   Bibliography .......................................................... 24
I.

The Impossible Moment: Shape-Shifting Nonfiction and Magical Realism Influences on an Original Work of Fiction

“It’s expressly trying to stand on a realistic foundation, while the story itself isn’t realistic.

Somehow, I believe this is a good combination.”

– Kornél Mundruczó, writer/director of *White God*

The Impossible Moment

The line between the possible and the impossible is one I think most of us cross or see crossed more than once in our lives. The heart of my generally realistic novel is an impossible event: a young woman wrestling with a deep dilemma has a strange and crucial experience, one not possible in an ordinary human life, which allows her to accomplish impossible things. The writers John McPhee, Gabriel García Márquez, and Jorge Luis Borges have memorably explored the moment where ordinary life moves from the known to the unknown in their work, and they have had an important influence on my thinking about this novel.

This thesis will look at several essays by John McPhee and stories by Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges to examine their inclusion of cognitive dissonance and impossible events in nonfiction and realistic fiction narratives. In these authors’ works, the element of the incredible serves not to create a shocking or
otherworldly effect, as in science fiction, but to achieve something more subtle—a jarring but humorous or eerie effect—which invites the reader to consider the thing that cannot be, to imagine it, play with it, sense its deeper implications, and follow it in the narrative without needing it justified as a fact.

John McPhee: Confounding Expectations

Roland Barthes writes that “the goal of literary work … is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4). To encourage the reader to take on this active role while reading a story, it can be useful to upset the reader’s expectations about a narrative’s direction. This is a specialty of the nonfiction writer John McPhee, and it is showcased in his essays “Silk Parachute” and “North of the C.P. Line.”

The first paragraph of “Silk Parachute” opens with McPhee’s difficulty distilling the truth from his numerous memories of his aged mother. Describing his dilemma, McPhee begins the essay intimately, through the use of the second person, and even seems to identify with the reader: “When your mother is ninety-nine years old, you have so many memories of her that they tend to overlap, intermingle, and blur” (3). Jack Roundy, in his essay “Crafting Fact: Formal Devices in the Prose of John McPhee,” says that “prior [literary] forms clearly condition both McPhee’s and his reader’s expectations” (Roundy 76), and so the sense of loss and the intimacy of the first paragraph might be expected to set the tone for the essay; indeed, McPhee returns to this warmth and nostalgia by the end of the essay. But while McPhee’s reader-buddy persona signals, and the reader anticipates, that the tone will remain what it was in the first
sentence, McPhee the writer has designed the essay to change direction drastically before it gets back to that tone and to the problem of how to keep hold of precious memories.

For the reader, the next paragraphs abruptly dive away from that aching awareness, in a series of set pieces that sound like Sergeant Joe Friday reporting a crime on the old television show *Dragnet*. “Set pieces, by their very nature as adumbrations of independent subjects, take on forms independent of the larger scheme” (Roundy 78) and these curt descriptions certainly do. By choosing a new tone and format—the police procedural—McPhee breaks out of the sense of loss as well as the closeness he offered the reader in the first paragraph and is suddenly free to pursue his more troubling memories of his mother. He is able to keep the reader with him because the change in tone is funny and possibly because of the shock of it, but also because the memories are rendered in such a stylized, distanced way that they steer away from any discomfort the reader may feel regarding their emotional revelation. They are, as Sergeant Friday often admonished his witnesses, “just the facts, ma’am.”

McPhee continues to change the game within the format of the set pieces, too, unsettling the reader further by shaking up the order of the “facts” and their denial. The first five of these procedurals are one paragraph each, and the first, third, and fifth begin with “It has been alleged that” and end with “I do not recall this,” “I do not recall that,” and “facts don’t lie,” respectively. In addition, that fifth set piece refers to the initially bewildering danger of “attack from overhead.” Here McPhee toys with the abruptness and even macho tone of the police format, and it may take the reader a while to understand that the moves of older siblings are being described:
It has been alleged that she spoiled me with protectionism because I was the youngest child and therefore the most vulnerable to attack from overhead—an assertion I cannot confirm or refute, except to say that facts don’t lie. (3)

That last line is a particularly wild and gleeful invocation of Sergeant Friday’s dictum, since no facts but only “allegations” have been presented in any of these paragraphs. It would be impossible to judge the truth of any of the allegations, and the ridiculous conclusion “that facts don’t lie” only mocks logical possibility in this paragraph.

Commenting on the author’s structural repertoire, Jack Roundy writes that McPhee must choose whether to keep the format of the set pieces consistent or to mix them up. These set pieces are themselves a diversion from the earlier structure, where McPhee speaks directly to the reader, and fiddling with their structure takes a risk: it might throw the reader off balance or it might get a laugh. “Characteristically, he will play with them,” concludes Roundy (78), and so he does here. The order of the police procedural changes to denial first and facts last in the second and fourth paragraphs. In the sixth paragraph, McPhee begins a longer story of nearly half a page, comprised of eight paragraphs, that includes dialogue as well as action, and he ends the set pieces with a paragraph that returns to the crime report format.

McPhee relates the incidents as set pieces full of bald-faced illogic and “hilarity,” making crime reports out of his family memories to “provoke shock, laughter, and truth” (Howarth xix). He leaves the reader attentive to the mystery he presents: the stories aren’t sad, they’re funny, and every one is denied, though they all feel true. In the end, the sense of loss from the first paragraph is gone, but the sense of intimacy is restored: McPhee
bares the complexity of his memories to his readers without explaining it, trusting them to construct their own sense of the “alleged” incidents, draw their own conclusions, and share in his true and false, sad and funny joke on them and himself.

In his essay “North of the C.P. Line,” McPhee presents his encounter with a Maine “game warden who is literally and figuratively McPhee’s ‘other self’” (Pearson 60). The essay begins briskly, moving right into the mystery, a bit strangely: “My other self—as he might have been called in a brief, ambiguous novel—was in this instance a bush pilot, several hundred feet above Third Matagamon Lake, face to face with a strong winter wind” (249). This is surprising and puzzling for the first line of an essay—how can McPhee have another self and why is that self so high in the air pitted against a freezing wind?

In the following scenes, the pilot and McPhee matter-of-factly discuss their small plane’s ability to withstand the buffeting wind and McPhee highlights the pilot’s expertise with the plane, the forest, and the extreme weather for another full page before he broaches the subject of this “other self-ness” again. There, he offers the reader the crumb that the bush pilot is “an author as well, and he had written magazine pieces about the North Maine Woods—its terrain, its wildlife, and related subjects—as had I” (251).

Still, it is unclear why he called this man his “my other self.” He continues to tease the reader in the next sentence: the man had written a complaint to *The New Yorker*, for whom McPhee is a staff writer, saying ‘For all practical purposes he is using my name (and I his)’” (251). The two writers are using the same name, but it must occur to the reader that “John McPhee” might be a pen name for one or the other. McPhee waits another few lines and then reveals the game warden’s real dilemma and reason for
complaint: as a public official, “he was under oath to be neutral on public issues” (251). He continues, finally telling the reader for sure why reading the man’s letter was like reading one he had written to himself:

And now his oath seemed to be hanging out like a wet necktie, because right there in The New Yorker was a tirade worthy of Rumpelstiltskin, ranting against the people who wished to flood the North Maine Woods by building the twelfth-largest dam on earth—in a piece of writing that many people he knew assumed he had written, as well they might, for it was signed with his exact name. (251)

The story of their discovering their shared name is structured like a joke, with a long lead-in before the punch line. This keeps the “normal” version of reality intact for as long as possible before it is disturbed, and the impact is made more visceral by a couple of McPhee’s “extreme analogies” (Howarth xix), the oath like a “wet necktie” and the “Rumpelstiltskin” rant. “Persistent good humor,” says Howarth, is characteristic of McPhee’s style, where “events are explicit yet improbable; their hilarity precipitates from a wicked trace of acid” (xviii). The “acid” stings in the imagery of this passage: in that humiliating necktie, in the comparison of McPhee’s own writing to Rumpelstiltskin’s tantrum, and in the emphatic, fist-pounding rhythm of those last words, “his exact name.”

McPhee can be serious, too, using lyrical imagery to create an eeriness that places the reader on unknown ground. His sketch of his relationship to the other John McPhee as they skate together over a Maine woods pond reflects this mood: “Our double track, one trail, extended through the otherwise untraceried snow, in a silence we left unbroken” (292).
Quoting a letter from the other John McPhee, he gives an inside view of how this strangeness feels to his double and a shiver to the reader: “You know, I really didn’t believe you were possible, because I was John McPhee” (292). This touches on the “improbable” element that Howarth mentions (xviii) as well as the incredible heart of the story, and the *New Yorker* writer shares his own thoughts on it:

> I feel such a strong sense of identification that I wonder if it is not a touch of envy … I envy him his world, I suppose, in the way that one is sometimes drawn to be another person or to live the life of a character encountered in a work of fiction. Time and again, when I think of him and such thoughts start running through my mind, I invariably find myself wishing that I were John McPhee. (292–93)

The theme here is, astonishingly to anyone who has followed McPhee’s brilliant writing career, one of regret; it is not exactly that he feels his life has been wasted, but that he wishes he could have also been the bush pilot, having adventures in the outdoors and protecting the wilderness both these men love. This is a theme in my novel; when one path is chosen, another is relinquished, and perhaps missed with the “benign and wistful envy” (292) McPhee writes about here.

Gabriel García Márquez: Dignity and Distance

In the work of Gabriel García Márquez, mystery requires dignity and respectful distance in order to fully unfold and astound. In the two short stories “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” and “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World,” García Márquez presents “a space of consciousness,” two seaside villages, “invaded by an
unknown presence” (Mark Milligan, quoted in Oberhelman 37). Though both stories are subtitled “A Tale for Children” (“Wings” 217 and “Drowned” 247), this label is not credible: the squalor and cynical exploitation of the “angel” in the first and the sexual innuendo in the second seem to overrule it. It is possible that there was another purpose besides the literal meaning for the subtitle, namely that it “makes the point that the reader must accept a world of the marvelous, not unlike the world of Macondo [the setting for García Márquez’s novel One Hundred Years of Solitude] with its remarkable magical qualities” (Oberhelman 37).

What is the best way to approach a mystery? “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” answers that question, following the case of that surprising creature landing in the drenched and stench-filled courtyard of a country couple. As García Márquez describes the couple soon after they discover the winged old man in their courtyard, “they looked at him so long and so closely that Pelayo and Elisenda very soon overcame their surprise and in the end found him familiar” (218). From this familiarity came a lack of respect, a loss of awe, and the old man is talked about, gossiped over, and put on display like a circus sideshow, even suffering the mundane indignity of losing his audience to another attraction (217–25).

For the ancient, winged creature to regain his majesty and power, especially his power to fly, García Márquez introduces silence and secrecy at the end of the story: “He remained motionless for several days in the farthest corner of the courtyard, where no one would see him” (224). Thus hidden and protected from the prying of the neighborhood, the old man begins to grow “stiff feathers … on his wings” (224). The old man seems to understand what these new feathers mean and is “quite careful that no one should notice
them, that no one should hear the sea chanteys that he sometimes sang under the stars” (224). Magic, resurrection, as in the Bible story of Christ’s three days in the tomb (*King James Bible*, Matthew 27), requires privacy.

The result of this solitude and silence is a transformation that ends the story very quickly, as witnessed by Elisenda who “went to the window and caught the angel in his first attempts at flight” (225). These first efforts were painfully inept. Elisenda watched quietly and did not interfere, even when the old man “was on the point of knocking the shed down with the ungainly flapping that slipped on the light and couldn’t get a grip on the air.” Even Elisenda’s silence does not keep her presence from interfering with his restoration, “[b]ut he did manage to gain altitude.”

She breaks her silence then and sighs, expressing both her awe and her more mundane emotion of “relief for herself and for him, when she saw him pass over the last houses, holding himself up in some way with the risky flapping of a senile vulture” (225). There she lapses into the earthbound view of him, losing sight of his transcendence until “it was no longer possible for her to see him, because then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea,” and she can’t miss it. The angel is fully transformed there, in the image of the dot, but before that Elisenda’s images ridicule him: his inadvertently digging up the vegetable patch and threatening the shed in his first attempts to fly, his “ungainly flapping,” the way he looks to her like a “senile vulture.” In the middle of the angel’s efforts, García Márquez makes a space for Elisenda to sigh and to see the creature’s difficulties in their true surreal context, as he “slipped on the light and couldn’t get a grip on the air.” Light and air are not things that Elisenda would ever be able to conquer or grab hold of, and they culminate in the final
triumph of the old man and his wings to return him to his dignity and incomprehensibility.

In the end, Elisenda partakes of this mystery: she sees the creature neither as an “annoyance” (225) nor as a disappearing human figure, but in his inexplicable essence, which she is able to understand not with her physical eyes but with her imagination. She is participating in his transformation by watching him then as an “imaginary dot” she can no longer physically perceive over the still physical waves “on the horizon of the sea.” She has transcended the hold that the real has on her; she has transformed her understanding of life, and her life, to include wonder and the impossible.

In García Márquez’s story “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World,” not just one person but the entire village is able to participate in the transformation of the drowned man, and through this process “both the nature of the village and that of the drowned man are revealed” (Oberhelman 40). The children of the village are the ones that find the drowned man. They see him as inanimate, a “dark and slinky bulge approaching through the sea” and “let themselves think he was an enemy ship” and later “a whale” (“Drowned” 247). The “slinky bulge” is washed onto the shore, and the children remove some of the detritus from it, realizing then it is a corpse. Instead of treating the drowned man’s body with respect or even pity, they use it as a plaything “all afternoon, burying him in the sand and digging him up again” until finally an adult “chanced to see them and spread the alarm in the village.” The word “alarm” shows that the adults acknowledge that the corpse is something fearful, an emergency, a danger. It is unknown, and the first one to see it calls his fellow villagers for help with it. The others
come and carry the corpse to a village house for cleaning up in preparation for a proper burial (247).

The difference between this story and “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” is already interesting, in that it specifically addresses the idea of respect for a mysterious event, for an “unknown presence” (Mark Milligan, quoted in Oberhelman 37). The children treat the corpse with laughable familiarity, like a fun new playmate they don’t have to worry about hurting, but the adults immediately remove him from them, recognizing the impropriety in their games. This is in contrast to the treatment of the angel in the earlier story, who was “locked up with the hens in the wired chicken coop” by the couple who found him, even though he could speak and was clearly alive (“Wings” 218).

The village men are quickly aware that this dead man is different from them and soon there is a supernatural tone to their speculations. They notice he is extremely heavy as they carry him, weighing “almost as much as a horse,” and they think he might have been in the water so long that it “got into his bones” (“Drowned” 247). This explanation for the man’s weight is unusual but sounds reasonable enough for an isolated village of uneducated people; it shows that they are still applying a form of logic to the situation. But once they have brought him into a house and “laid him on the floor they said [he was] taller than all other men because there was barely enough room for him in the house.” Quickly there, concerning the man’s height, these people seem to sense that they are out of their depth. They then abandon reason and plain thinking about the dead man, inventing the explanation “that maybe the ability to keep on growing after death was part of the nature of certain drowned men.”
While the men asked in the surrounding villages for anyone recently lost, the women who clean the drowned man notice things about him that increase the general sense of awe in the presence of this “huge” body. “Enormous” is the adjective given to the old man’s wings in the earlier story, and his wings’ size makes no difference in how the villagers there treat him; in fact, even at the end, when the wings are finally working again, Elisenda thinks of their movement as “ungainly flapping” (”Wings” 225). But with the drowned man, after the men establish his size, the women notice his other surprising attributes: “that the vegetation on him came from faraway oceans and deep water” (“Drowned” 248), that his clothing was shredded as if “he had sailed through labyrinths of coral,” “that he bore his death with pride” and did not look “lonely” or “haggard” as had other drowned men they’d seen. Finally, after the cleaning is done, the women can see him clearly; “they become aware of the kind of man he was and it left them breathless.” They are astonished at his size, his “virility,” and they find him “the best built man they had ever seen,” but then even the imagination, the faculty that allows Elisenda to see the departing angel in the dot above the horizon, fails these women, it is too small to encompass the drowned man. García Márquez writes “even though they were looking at him there was no room for him in their imagination” (248). Their emotion goes past respect and becomes awe.

The women’s response is to work harder to honor the drowned man. He is too big for any pants they have to fit him, so they sew him some pants made from part of a ship’s sail and a shirt from expensive imported bridal linen “so that he could continue through his death with dignity” (249). The women imagine what amazing powers, including sexual powers, he must have had in life, and then the oldest among them “who as the
oldest had looked upon the drowned man with more compassion than passion, sighed” as Elisenda did when she glimpsed the divinity of the angel, finally in flight, “‘He has the look of someone named Esteban.’”

The men, when they returned, scoffed at the women’s foolishness and saw the dead man as mainly an “annoyance” then, as Elisenda had seen the angel before he flew away (“Wings” 225). While the women wept over the corpse, the men called him “a drowned nobody, a piece of cold Wednesday meat” (“Drowned” 252, italics in original). This leads to a dramatic confrontation, and a woman takes the cloth the women have placed on the drowned man’s face. The result is “the men are left breathless too” and when they are told his name, “it was not necessary to repeat it for them to recognize him.” The men, having seen the uncovered face recognize something beyond themselves in it, respecting it and the name that came from it.

The women, as they dress him, decorate Esteban’s body with religious medals, “main-altar decorations,” and “holy-water jars” (251) and there is a religious cast to their respect for him. When the villagers give Esteban “the most splendid funeral they could conceive of,” they supply him with family mourners by making relatives for him out of themselves, “so that through him all the inhabitants of the village became kinsmen” (253). This suggests the Christian story, particularly one moment before Christ’s death: “When Jesus therefore saw his mother and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son!” (King James Bible, John 19:26). At Esteban’s burial, men and women became aware for the first time of the desolation of their streets, the dryness of their courtyards, the narrowness of their dreams as
they faced the splendor and beauty of their drowned man. (“Drowned” 253)

“The idea of purification by baptism in the sea [Esteban’s burial was, like all burials in the village, at sea] and the ultimate rebirth of the village after Esteban’s departure is clearly present” (Oberhelman 41). The villagers “knew that everything would be different from then on,” that they would strive to be what they felt Esteban must have been, hard-working and better people, whose village could accommodate even someone as large as Esteban, so that it would be known around the world, “in fourteen languages” as “Esteban’s village” (“Drowned” 254). Because the villagers all come to revere the mystery of the drowned man’s beauty, they are at the end transformed in their turn.

In a similar way, the main character in my novel considers the life she has led, trying to comprehend what she has been able to accomplish in the world, not without awe. This transforms her, as the conflict which tormented her and was an impediment to her self-understanding in the beginning is defused, resolved. At the end, she sees both sides of it with respect and admiration and achieves a peace with all of herself.

Jorge Luis Borges: Unreality within Reality

In Jorge Luis Borges’s linked stories “The Other” and “August 25, 1983,” a young man and an old man meet as if by chance and find themselves arguing at length about whether or not they are the same person at different ages of his life. In both stories the young man steadfastly resists such an improbable idea, while the older man ultimately succeeds in convincing him that they are in fact the same person by the use of logic and irrefutable evidence. These linked stories show that a warping of the rules of accepted
reality can be limited and specific and does not have to be secret to keep its mystery. In fact, Borges is careful to refer to the laws of conventional reality.

In “The Other,” the older Borges sits down on a bench in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and experiences a sudden feeling “that I had lived this moment before” (3), which he is careful to dismiss as something “psychologists tell us is associated with states of fatigue.” Someone has sat down on the same bench with him, and it turns out to be his younger self. Borges deduces this, tells the younger man that they are in Cambridge, and reports:

“No,” he answered in my own slightly distant voice. “I am here in Geneva, on a bench, a few steps from the Rhône.” (4)

Borges uses three forms of evidence based in conventional reality to produce a sense of unreality in this conversation. First, he mentions an eerie moment of déjà vu that the older man experiences just before he is aware of the younger man’s weight on the shared bench; this is such an accepted and common illusion that it has earned an ordinary name, “déjà vu,” which appears even in English dictionaries. Second, he brings in the testimony of “psychologists” to give the heft of science and logic to his discounting the feeling, repeating their opinion that it is related to fatigue. Third, he makes the somewhat unflattering and therefore disarming comment that his voice is recognizable to him in the other man because of its “slightly distant” sound. These three points convince the reader that at least the older protagonist is real, and the resistance of the younger man to the older’s view of their encounter makes him a credible character also. Naomi Lindstrom notes in her analysis of this story: “Although ‘The Other’ is more of an occasion for reflection than a fantastic story, Borges has been scrupulous in observing many of the
conventions of time-travel narrative” (105). Those conventions include the use of “careful attention … to the specific mechanisms involved,” as in the precision with which the older man questions the younger man concerning his address: “At number seventeen Malagnou, across the street from the Russian Orthodox church?” (Borges 4). The time-travel genre also relies on “concrete detail” (Lindstrom 106) to reveal anachronism and confirm the time disparity. This device, as well as the language of proof and evidence, are seen as the older man frightens the younger into belief by reciting a line of poetry that he realizes his younger self does not yet know:

“I can prove to you this minute,” I said, “that you aren’t dreaming me. Listen to this line of poetry. So far as I can recall, you’ve never heard it before.”

I slowly intoned the famous line: “L’hydre-univers tordant son corps écaillé d’astres.”

I could sense his almost fear-stricken bafflement. He repeated the line softly, savoring each glowing word.

“It’s true,” he stammered, “I could never write a line like that.”

(Borges 8–9)

Thus, the younger Borges concedes that the elder is right: he cannot be dreaming because he knows himself incapable of dreaming such poetry. He is convinced, against his will, by his own logical sensibility. This is the method of Borges’s own fiction, of creating the unreal with the tools of the real, and it gives his work a startling power.

At the end of his story “August 25, 1983,” Borges creates a direct confrontation of the impossible and the real in a hotel room where the older man is dying, and he does so
mainly through a conversation that neither diminishes nor familiarizes the incredible event. While the older Borges was the narrator in “The Other,” here it is the younger man who tells the story. The two men argue again about whether the meeting is a dream or reality, and they even fight over whose dream it is. The older one, still the cagier one, is still using conventional logic and the conventions of time travel fiction in his argument: “That hotel in Androgué [where the younger man believes he is] was torn down years and years ago—twenty, maybe thirty” (102). But now he adds a touch of humility to support his view, when he ends that line of argument with “Who knows?” and earlier expresses doubt about who is the dreamer: “Who is dreaming whom? I know I am dreaming you—I do not know whether you are dreaming me.” The younger man protests, but also responds emotionally, as he did before by conceding the argument to the emotional impression the unknown poetry made on him: “I am the dreamer,’ I replied, with a touch of defiance.” To this, the older man reverts to his insistence on logical convention: “‘Don’t you realize that the first thing to find out is whether there is only one man dreaming, or two men dreaming each other?’” Both of these men are acting as full human beings who have grown since the earlier story, though they are still recognizable, and thus they prove that neither of them is dreaming. The younger would not have been able to predict the addition of humility to the older man’s repertoire, though the older man could have known that this younger self would be defiant. But his furious response is more reminiscent of an older self looking back at the folly of his younger self than an advancement of the logic; he actually seems to lose his temper at the younger man’s defiance. Borges seems to be making the logical argument that they are both real, not in spite of their disagreement, but as evidenced by it. This takes the reader beyond science
fiction, into seriously considering a possibility beyond the bounds of science or reality.

This speaks to Italo Calvino’s comment that, “every one of [Borges’s] pieces contains a model of the universe (infinity, the innumerable, time eternal or present or cyclic) … [partly] because his stories often take the outer form of some genre from popular literature, a form proved by long usage, which creates almost mythical structures” (119).

At the end of the story, Borges looks to horror to keep a sense of awe in the scene. Just before the elder Borges dies, the younger narrator stops arguing and is silent:

He motioned me toward him. His hand sought mine. I stepped back; I was afraid the two hands would merge. (Borges, 103)

Later, the elder man says the younger will forget their conversation and the knowledge of how he will die, and the strangeness of the event deepens:

“I won’t forget it—I’m going to write it down tomorrow.”

“It will lie in the depths of your memory, beneath the tides of your dreams. When you write it you will think that you’re weaving a tale of fantasy. And it won’t be tomorrow either—it will be many years from now.”

There is a nod here to the beginning of “The Other” and that old man’s déjà vu, dismissed in that story as a symptom of fatigue (see page 13 of this paper), a grace note in this later story of the same man dying, trying to tell his younger self that this, their second meeting, will be forgotten but still live “in the depths of your memory, beneath the tides of your dreams.” The scene continues beyond logic, and although a gesture is made to the science fiction convention of the disappearing environment that can’t exist in the younger man’s
world, the story moves beyond science and the conventions of science fiction, ending on
tenderness, grief, and even hope, the younger man’s emotions.

He stopped talking; I realized that he had died. In a way I died with
him—in grief, I leaned over his pillow, but there was no one there
anymore.

I fled the room. Outside, there was no patio, no marble staircase,
no great silent house, no eucalyptus trees, no statues, no gazebo in a
garden, no fountains, no gate in the fence surrounding the hotel in the
town of Androgué.

Outside awaited other dreams. (104)

The conversation between the two selves transcends genre and reality to leave the reader
with a sense of expanded reality and a new way of seeing a life. Borges shows one part of
a person experiencing sympathy for another, the older for the younger and then vice
versa, without any internal drama or soliloquy. He makes them into two people, and the
dialogue is natural, clear, and free in a way that interior monologue cannot be: they are
two equal presences, and they stand up for their views accordingly. Each has a dignity
and strength, and their sympathy for each other is hard-won and moving in a way it could
not be if it had been an internal conflict.

In my novel, the heroine’s conflict is similarly concretized for the reader in my
novel. It is realistically portrayed as a clear and significant obstacle for her in the opening
chapters. After the mysterious event that frees her from that conflict, she still has some
doubts about her new freedom, but they are externalized; they are not the same uneasy
fears she experiences before the disrupting event, but speculation and curiosity, as when
one person reflects on another’s path. She can see with objective distance, then, that both sides of the dilemma have merit and attract her deeply, that both could lead to unequivocal happiness. This is what the concretization of the heroine’s conflict by a magical event offered my novel: the transformation of the stereotypical debate about a woman’s life, motherhood versus career, in order to reveal that both choices are profoundly worthy of a lifetime’s devotion.

Drawing the Reader into the Impossible Moment

A reader comes to a novel from a concrete, rule-bound world, one where reality doesn’t bend or change completely from one second to the next. A writer who wants to play with those rules would be wise to handle their warping in a way that tells the reader clearly that, as Dorothy said to Toto in The Wizard of Oz, “We’re not in Kansas anymore.” To that end, I have adopted in my own novel the approaches to breaking reality that I have explored in the work of John McPhee, Gabriel García Márquez, and Jorge Luis Borges.

McPhee’s Strategy of Surprise

I hope to borrow for my novel the brazen tone and humor in John McPhee’s essay “Silk Parachute” and the bold use of coincidence in his “North of the C.P. Line.” I use a deadpan humorous tone in parallel scenes and play with my main character’s thoughts a bit, inviting the reader along for the surprise and the fun, as the heroine moves into her new path with no apparent memory of the impossible disruption that made it possible, no memory of the earlier limits she has now transcended. At the end of the novel, through
the intervention of another character who is also aware, in spite of a tough and down-to-earth nature, that something unusual has occurred in the heroine’s life, she is reminded of that event and gradually makes her peace with it and the conflict that produced it.

García Márquez’s Strategy of Dignified Distance

Given the effectiveness of McPhee’s device of sticking to an obviously false story, one question I had when I started this novel was how much my narrator should admit, or my characters should acknowledge, the unnatural event which is the crux of the story. At first, I thought I would not speak about it at all, in the narration or any of my characters’ voices, because I wanted the event to retain a mysterious quality and not be subject too much to my characters’ ways of emotionally coping with it. This idea was reinforced by my reading of Gabriel García Márquez’s story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” where that surprising creature lands in the back courtyard of a country couple.

While I wanted some parts of the novel to be humorous and playful, I saw the value of García Márquez’s use of dignified distance in retaining a baseline sense of wonder in the story. I decided to keep my characters from discussing the impossible event for most of the book. I didn’t want my characters to joke about it or dismiss it as simply a negative story they needed to downplay, because I didn’t want my readers to get the chance to examine it at length and to feel it was “familiar,” to “normalize” it. Those reactions would unbalance the novel’s tone in the direction of everyday realism.

Accordingly, I used my heroine’s ambition and fear to distance her from the strange event and thus prevent her from denying it its mystery and power. I concentrate
first on the ambition that partially drives this strange disruption in her life. She sees the change, understands it, and quickly takes advantage of it, without looking back. This is because she desperately wants the freedom it offers her, and she will protect its secret with all of that desire. She is also deeply frightened at what could not make sense to her: she is afraid both that she might be going crazy and that she is not. I do not spell out those fears at this point in the novel; I don’t want to slip the idea of a psychotic break into the reader’s mind, making room for easy conclusions about something I want that reader to consider seriously. Therefore, I maintain my own silence as narrator here and also silence my heroine’s speculations on what is happening. With this respect for the inexplicable event, I model the attitude I want the reader to have towards it: that it is real, that it makes no sense, that it must be accepted.

Borges’s Strategy of Bounded Unreality

In a section toward the end of my novel, the heroine tells another character about the strange event. I have tried to ground the scene in reality, a simple conversation between two people, using their intimacy and familiarity with each other, their humor, to make the impossibility of the subject feel both real and unreal to the reader, as Borges does in “August 25, 1983.” The scene parallels Borges’s scene of the younger and older self debating the impossibility of their meeting that confronts them. In my novel, the conversation at first degenerates into a simple argument, both parties retreating from the scary reality of something that could not have happened into simple irritation at each other, even making, as Borges’s two selves did, attempts at logic. The irritation of the pair in my novel subsides and their affection returns; they find a way to let their mundane
reality bump up against the unknown: how will they talk about this, between themselves and with others? They are trying to make the unreal real, look at it logically and sensibly, as when the dying Borges blurts out his solution to the dispute with his younger self, trying a rational, step-by-step approach: that they need to figure out first of all who is dreaming whom. The resolution of the scene in my novel echoes Borges’s transcending of his characters’ logical argument in favor of grief, affection, and hope.

This conversation occurs after the book’s turning point toward the final resolution—a third character’s death, two-thirds of the way into the narrative. Without the reality of life and death to balance the unreality in the conversation, the scene would pull the tone toward the exaggerated unreality of melodrama. It is my hope that, if the conversation comes after the impossible fact has been accepted by these two characters and the reader, it will not detract from the seriousness of their talk or its humor, that the correct relation to reality and unreality will be achieved. I am aiming at the mystified yet matter-of-fact tone that worked to balance those two sides of Borges’s stories here, so that the reader will be left with a sense of wonder at the end.
Bibliography


Oppedisano, Lia. Untitled manuscript. 2016. TS.


