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## Fantasy and Reality

Some days ago, our friend the writer Gabor Szanto said that, being a “realist writer”, he feels alone in the Hungarian literary milieu. He described most of Hungarian writers of fiction as “postmodern” –and I suppose that this label served Gabor to name some kind of non-realist fiction. This statement of his struck me, not only because I also feel quite alone in the literary Argentinean milieu; but also because my writing is “non realistic”, and I have been called, very often, “a postmodern”. Unlike Gabor, who did not suggest any political implication in his description, certain critics and writers have accused me of escaping from reality, from political commitment. Since I am neither a critic nor a literary theorist, I will try to show you how I feel about the apparent antithesis implicit in the title of the panel, and I will try to show it, of course, by telling you a story.

In my three books of fiction, Patagonia, a place where I’ve never been, is the background, and as it usually happens with the most important aspects of my life, I cannot explain really why. The first answer that comes to my mind is this. My father, who was a sailor, traveled at least once a month, during almost thirty years, to that “uttermost part of the earth”. And thus the names he included in his rather laconic stories –names like Ushuaia, a city, Bahia Desolation, a bay, or the terrible Cape Horn, appeared in my life, awakened my imagination, with all the glamour, the almost sacred prestige of our fathers’ work when we are children. I remember climbing the ladder of the huge ship with the feeling of entering a temple –not a profane temple at all, although its goddess was *Patagonia*.

It was ten or twelve years later when I began to read passionately any book I could find about those southern seas –*Moby Dick* was my bible, but Joseph Conrad was my guru. I wanted to know, I suppose, everything about my father’s experiences and, especially, his feelings towards me. But very soon I discovered that most of seamen in both fiction and real chronicles, never remember their family. When I published my novel *Inglaterra, a fable* (*Inglaterra* is the Spanish name for England), someone told me that I had wanted to write a typical southern seas novel, populated, however, by all the characters that never appear in Conrad’s books. And I thought that this was indeed so. In fact, that is the way my imagination works: not on reality itself, but on representation of reality: moreover, not on the words or images that represent reality, but on their silences, on their voids.

Now, as you probably know, *Patagonia* is a name given to that “uttermost part of the earth” by a member of one of the first expeditions of conquerors at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. When this Antonio Pigafetta suddenly saw on the shore an Indian, a very big one in fact, of the *tebuelche* pueblo, he remembered a certain giant from a chivalrous romance called Patagon, and concluded crazily that he had really seen one. Now, this kind of misunderstanding, almost fifty years later, would be the very essence of Don Quixote’s folly, who mistook real persons and places of the real life of Castilia and Catalonia for characters and backgrounds of the chivalrous romances he also adored. But what I want to point out is that, four centuries later, that place of imagination, *Patagonia*, has become real, an aftermath of the struggle between that typically western imagination of the pioneers, and that of the aboriginal peoples. In fact, the stories of the inhabitants of the “uttermost part of the earth” are so bewildering, so wonderful, that many writers –me among them- feel today inclined to represent them in their fiction. After five centuries, Patagonia is one of the most wonderful

kingdoms of literature –where my imagination lives too. And that’s another very good example of how fantasy interacts with reality, or moreover, of the way reality and fantasy are entangled, so that it frequently becomes impossible to say what is real and what is imagination.

But why have I chosen Patagonia, then? Why Patagonia and not one of the countless ports of the southern seas –Buenos Aires, for example where I have lived for almost all my life and which I certainly adore? I think that the reason is this: in the Western imagination, deeply and wonderfully shattered by the discovering of America, Patagonia inherited the prestige that Portugal or Iceland had had before. After Columbus, Patagonia became the farthest shore man could reach, the last territory to be conquered both by sword and knowledge. And I found in that image of the western fantasy a wonderful metaphor of the work of the poet: we all write on the border, confronted, like pioneers, with all the things we cannot give a name, that is: with all the impossibilities of our language, and of any human language perhaps.

Now, as we all know, it is not only in the *meaning* of the words of a story that we can appreciate how an author sees the world: also the structure of that story reflects the architecture he intuits under the chaotic surfaces of reality, beyond the confused perceptions of our senses. And most frequently, neither meaning nor structure are entirely created by a storyteller: they are the inheritance of a certain literary tradition, the rules of one adopted genre. Realism as a genre that can be quite precisely dated in history of literature, proposes a vision of the world which I could not accept as mine: beginning to write I felt that realism, at least that kind of realism that was the main trait of Argentinean literature of that moment, during the dictatorship, left too many things out –too many things unspoken, too many things aching and anxious to be redeemed by words. Thus I began to adopt for my writing ideas and techniques of any “non realistic” story I could find –from (and especially) the fairy tales to fantasy/science fiction fables, from the gothic of Isak Dinesen and Angela Carter to the Indian myths of America, from the fantastic literature of Borges to the romantic German novellas. By becoming less and less realist, I intended to be more faithful to our reality – which is composed not only of our external actions and superficial thoughts, but also of the dreams and all the aspects of the unconscious mind. Every time I tried to reflect in a realistic way, for instance, the life of the families of the 30.000 *desaparecidos*, disappeared persons, during the dictatorship, I failed. But while I was trying to imagine, in *Ingelterra*, the Indian genocide by the mercenaries of the international trading companies and the Argentine army, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I was so concerned about concrete details –colors, sounds, smells, tastes, etc-that my deepest feelings and thoughts and memories came naturally and powerfully into my story.

It is always like that. If I try to tell you who am I, and although I am quite an sincere person, I lie, because I am under control. If I subject myself, or, if you want, I surrender to fantasy, then my whole reality appears. So, let’s tell another story.