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Autofiction and its fantastic modalities in César Aira's *Cómo me hice monja*

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Introduction

Despite the fact that autofiction -which in Anglo-American contexts is referred to as “self fiction”, “factual fiction”, or “faction” (Alberca “El pacto ambiguo” 142)- is a narrative practice that is closely linked to postmodernism (Vanden Berghe “Retrato del autor” 267) and has been thoroughly studied from the seventies onwards, its affinity with the fantastic genre is still controversial. In order to interpret this relationship, this article will first delve into the theoretical principles of autofiction in order to describe how the ambiguity between two narrative pacts and the tight connection with reality it presupposes fit in with the general principles of fantastic narrative. Consequently, we will demonstrate how autofiction, in accordance with these mechanisms, links up with the two basic modalities of the fantastic in *Cómo me hice monja* (1993), a short story by the Argentine writer César Aira (°Coronel Pringles, 1949), which has been considered to be relevant in this context by many scholars.

First, we will determine how, at the level of ‘perception’, this specific narrative situation gives birth to a monstrous identity, emblematic of nineteenth-century fantastic literature, and, secondly, how it relates to the level of ‘language’ by installing an enunciation that takes advantage of techniques related to ‘unnatural narratology’. By acting together with monstrousness, the posthumous narration eventually revitalizes ancestral fears and highlights the unusual nature of fantastic narrative, which that has been progressively eroded in recent practices through a process called “the domestication of the monster” (Roas “el monstruo posmoderno” 110).

1. At a crossroads between autofiction and the fantastic

Vincent Colonna defines ‘autofiction’, a term coined by Serge Doubrovsky while unveiling the correspondent strategy in his novel *Fils* (1977), as a narrative practice in which the author conjures up a personality and an existence while keeping his personal identity and his true name intact: “une autofiction est une oeuvre littéraire par laquelle un écrivain s’invente une personnalité et une existence, tout en conservant son identité réelle (son véritable nom)” (Colonna “Autofiction & autres mythomanies” 239)¹. As a consequence, the practice of autofiction is based on the fact that, from the intention of the novelist or from the reader’s expectation, the story and its characters are perceived as a disguised projection of the author’s own life and personality or that, at a minimum, the fiction includes a figure in which they recognize or find similarities with the real author (Alberca “El pacto ambiguo” 113). This strategy takes shape as an autodiegetic narrative² governed by an onomastic identity between author, narrator, and character³.

By adopting this equation, which is reserved exclusively for the genre of autobiography, autofiction seems to fill in a gap in the famous typology of Philippe Lejeune (Darrieussecq 370). Lejeune considers the combination of the equality between the names of the narrator-character and the author with a

novelistic pact to be a “blind’ box” (28). He does not exclude the possibility that this combination could exist but postulates that, if this were the case, it would constitute an internal contradiction that would be read as erroneous (31). As a result, autofiction occupies a borderline position between the autobiography and the autobiographical novel. It differs from the latter by using the author’s name and from the former by implying a fictional instead of a veracious representation. Hence, Colonna defines this narrative position in which, as mentioned earlier, the author, while maintaining his true name and personal identity, invents a personality and an existence, as “a fictionalization of oneself” (“L’autofiction, essai sur la fictionalisation” 10).

Tant par sa matière que par son inscription intime et par sa stratégie discursive, la fiction de soi se sépare du roman autobiographique. En elle, le contenu de l'histoire est fictionnel, l'auteur n'emprunte aucun masque et n'a aucune prétention à la vérité personnelle. Plutôt qu'un déguisement, c'est un travestissement; plus qu'une transposition, c'est un “libre jeu des forces imaginatives” (Colonna “L’autofiction, essai sur la fictionalisation” 11)⁴.

In accordance with the description of this mechanism, Gasparini confirms that the autofiction is not presented as a true story, but rather as a novel that create multiple stories about the author (15). Rather than opposing the genre of autobiography, the author problematizes it by maintaining a dialectical relationship with it and by developing its possibilities (16). As a result, in autofiction the ‘I’ is not the starting point (as it is the case for the autobiography), but rather the point of arrival and its objective is more exploratory than retrospective (19). Such a paradigm switch also tends to grant a ‘negative’ connotation to autofiction, which, liberated from the ties of the autobiographical prescriptions, produces authorial projections of famous writers that are inaccurate, fragmented, cheating or parodied and are perceived as reflections of a potential identity that never succeeds to confirm itself: “como reflejos de una identidad en potencia que nunca llega a confirmarse” (Casas “La autoficción en los estudios hispánicos” 12)⁵.

According to Vanden Berghe, such an evolution can be interpreted as a sign of the times. Since the 1970s, autofiction questions a truthful representation of reality and, additionally, fictionalizes this reality by staging less heroic authorial figures whose minuteness invokes the impression that they are fragile subjects. This idea is prevalent in postmodernism and allows for the supplementation of the inauthentic image of the writer with literary fictions (“Retrato del autor” 267). These observations match the opinion of Doubrovsky, who points out that autofiction -unlike autobiography, which would be the privilege of great authors leading memorable lives- could be considered to be the refuge for ordinary people, for the humble, who have no right to history but who may claim the right to the novel: “Les humbles qui n'ont pas droit à l'histoire, ont droit au roman” (90). The unrestrained invention and

transformation of identities generated by such a viewpoint prompts Colonna to categorize autofiction as a product of contemporary society, dominated by mass media and a lack of respect for privacy and intimacy.

Cette réception sans précédent qui engendra le besoin du mot “autofiction” a bien sûr à voir avec ce grand mouvement social où se mélangent juridisme et individualisme, dont la manifestation la plus voyante est cette montée de l’ “extimité” des dernières années du XXe siècle. Une vague de dévoilement de l’intime que reflètent et fabriquent tout à la fois la télévision, le monde politique, les moeurs, la vie privée et professionnelle –dont on n’a pas fini d’entendre parler (Colonna “Autofiction & autres mythomanies littéraires” 102)⁶.

Besides these distorting effects, the dubious character of the autofictional text also fosters a process, which has often been neglected and, therefore, merits our attention in this article: its operational congruence with fantastic narratives, irrespective of its definition from a reception standpoint or from the writing act. As we will see next, the ambiguity of autofiction, inherent in its oscillation between two narrative pacts, connects with the very nature of the fantastic narrative, which is dominated by the concept of “vacillation”, launched in Todorov’s seminal work (20). Moreover, the reference to the physical person of the writer it implies meets another requirement of the genre: its relationship with reality and everyday life.

1.1. An ambiguous narrative pact and the principle of vacillation

As we have derived from Colonna’s descriptions, the distinctive feature of autofiction is its hybridity resulting from the collision between two opposed narrative pacts. Manuel Alberca reinforces this idea by insisting on the sense of ambiguity it generates in the reader:

La indeterminación genérica de la autoficción proviene de su posición liminar entre la autobiografía y la novela autobiográfica. [...] En definitiva, la autoficción provoca un choque de pactos antitéticos, que desencadena la perplejidad y ambigüedad al no saber en principio a qué pacto de los dos debemos atender [...]. Cuanto más sutil sea la mezcla de ambos pactos, más prolongado será el efecto de ambigüedad del relato y mayor el esfuerzo para resolverlo (Alberca “¿Existe la autoficción hispanoamericana?” 116-117).

Given the fact that autofiction attempts to break generally acknowledged receptive schemes by proposing an ambiguous reading – if it seems to announce a novelistic pact on the one hand, it also suggests an autobiographical approach through the identity of the author, narrator on the other (Alberca “¿Existe la autoficción hispanoamericana?” 119)- it has a puzzling effect on the reader. By

means of its undetermined character, autofiction makes the reader oscillate between two options - “[una] oscilación, el no ser ni autobiografías ni novelas, o no serlo en exclusiva, simulando a veces ambas opciones y jugando a la confusión” (Alberca “El pacto ambiguo” 172)- and puts forward the principle of doubt as its trademark.

At this stage, the ambiguity contained in the clash of conflicting narrative strategies provokes in the reader a perplexity comparable to that induced by the “vacillation” between “the strange” and “the marvelous”, which, according to Todorov, casts the foundations of the fantastic (20)⁷. Precisely this congruence between the autofiction’s narrative situation and the mechanism of hesitation is lexicalized and justified by Colonna: because the autofictional discourse, due to its border position between autobiography and novel, upsets the narrative codes, it creates an ambiguous atmosphere which engages the reader in an intellectual play through continual misleading and the casting of doubt at every turn (“L’ autofiction, essai sur la fictionalization” 207-208)⁸.

Moreover, the affinity between autofiction and fantastic narrative goes beyond the famous principle of ‘vacillation’, which has been widely criticized. Many scholars such as Béatrice Amaryll Chanady object against Todorov’s viewpoint that it only takes into account the perspective of reception by emphasizing the effect generated in the reader instead of trying to describe the fantastic from the writing process. More specifically, Chanady focuses on the textual aspects and defines the fantastic starting from an “antinomy” (12), which consists of a simultaneous and conflicting presence of the real and the supernatural. Especially the coexistence of these exclusive codes is the second way in which the mechanism of autofiction links up with the fantastic genre.

1.2. Referential aspects integrated into the unusual

By conjuring up referential aspects through the author’s real name or by alluding to some episodes of his/her life, autofiction establishes a tight relationship with reality and strengthens the corresponding pole of the aforementioned antinomy. According to Roas, “la irrupción del fenómeno sobrenatural en la realidad cotidiana, el choque entre lo real y lo inexplicable” (Roas “La amenaza de lo fantástico” 32), in other words, the clash between these representative aspects and supernatural events, is to be considered as the fundamental requirement of the fantastic genre.

Although Roas does not actually adhere to Todorov’s vacillation concept, he eventually does link the compulsory referential setting with the effect it creates in the audience, by generating confusion, which obliges the reader to question the surrounding reality, “[...] a cuestionarnos si lo que creemos pura imaginación podría llegar a ser cierto, lo que nos lleva a dudar de nuestra realidad y de nuestro yo” (32). Conditioning the reader’s restlessness - a feeling that proceeds from the incapacity to comprehend the coexistence of the possible and the impossible, “la inquietud ante la incapacidad de concebir la coexistencia de lo posible y lo imposible” (Roas “Más allá de los límites del

lenguaje” 263)-, the relationship with reality, implied in the autofictional pact, paradoxically, has to be regarded as an element the fantastic genre can eagerly make use of⁹. While, because of its highly referential character, the autofiction does not fit in well with the strange, its integration into a story that represents unusual facts fosters the idea of vacillation.

The autobiographical elements do, indeed, evoke a sensation of everydayness and familiarity, and become a fundamental resource in convincing the reader of the “truth” of the impossible phenomenon, “un recurso fundamental para [...] convencer al lector de ‘la verdad’ del fenómeno imposible” (Roas “Más allá de los límites del lenguaje” 263). As a result, the autofiction seems to be one of those narrative artifices that are diffusely set up and cause the narrator’s expression, when representing the impossible, to become “dark”, “clumsy”, “indirect”, “[la] expresión [...] se vuelve oscura, torpe, indirecta” (264). Since it experiments with self-referential narration by installing an uncommon narrator as a duplicate of the author, this strategy can be considered to be one of the many “structural elements” that play with “the expression of subjectivity” (Honores “Mundos imposibles” 195) and participate in the “formal renovation” (36) of the fantastic genre as such.

In this regard, it is relevant that Colonna lexicalizes the affinity between the autofiction and the fantastic by distinguishing a category “l’autofiction fantastique”¹⁰ that works according to the following principles:

L’écrivain est au centre du texte comme dans une autobiographie (c’est le héros), mais il transfigure son existence et son identité, dans une histoire irréaliste, indifférente à la vraisemblance. Le double projeté devient un personnage hors norme, un pur héros de fiction, dont il ne viendrait à personne l’idée d’en tirer une image de l’auteur. A la différence de la posture biographique, celle-ci ne se limite pas à s’accommoder à l’existence, elle l’invente [...] (Colonna “Autofiction & autres mythomanies” 75)¹¹.

In order to illustrate how the autofiction infiltrates the fantastic genre by configuring such an “irreal story, indifferent to veracity”, and by staging such a “character out of the norm”, we will analyze Aira’s novelette *Cómo me hice monja* starting from the two main modalities described by Rodríguez Hernández: the “fantastic of perception” (“lo fantástico de percepción”) and the “fantastic of language or of discourse” (“lo fantástico de lenguaje o de discurso”) (4). The pertinence of both perspectives is also corroborated by Bush, who states that Aira, “through his direct challenges to the cohesiveness of realist narrative” usually “present[s] a realism that destabilizes the concept of textual reality” (415).

First, we will see how the autofiction takes advantage of the prototypical combination of a mimetic language and a supernatural element (Rodríguez Hernández 3) by shaping a monstrous entity. Secondly, we will describe how the installation of a posthumous narration relies on a combination of narrative

resources (5) that establish hesitation at the discursive level¹². This linguistic variant concurs with the evolution of the fantastic genre which, in the words of Rosalba Campra, is characterised by a “turn, towards the second half of the [20th] century, from a fantastic determined by its themes, inherited from 19th century practices, to a fantastic that, by renouncing ghosts and vampires, explores the disturbing possibilities of the unspoken” (8). Therefore, in the postmodern era, the fantastic genre subordinates the aspects of content in favor of the autonomy of language and is increasingly constructed starting from the enunciation itself (Erdal Jordan 38). Finally, we will determine how these two modalities act in concert in order to provide dystopian interpretations and increase the fantastic character of *Cómo me hice monja*.

2. Fantastic of perception: autofiction and the monstrous

César Aira is renowned for several important novels and short stories - *Emma, la cautiva* (1981), *Los fantasmas* (1990), *La prueba* (1992), and *El sueño* (1998) among many others- and for his controversial and playful style in which the autofiction fits. According to Decock, many of Aira’s works are driven by “[e]sta obsesión del autor de ficcionalizar de alguna manera su propia vida recurriendo a juegos identitarios entre el protagonista o el narrador, por una parte, y el autor, por otra parte (18). This desire to fictionalize his own life by setting up identity games between the protagonist, the narrator, and the author is prominent in *Embalse* (1992), *El llanto* (1992), *La costurera y el viento* (1994), *La serpiente* (1997), *El Congreso de literatura* (1997), *Las curas milagrosas del doctor Aira* (1998), *La trompeta de mimbre* (1998), *El juego de los mundos* (2000), and *Cómo me reí* (2005) (Decock 18).

This is also the case in *Cómo me hice monja* (1993), which will be the object of this study and is to be considered as one of these “literary toys for adults” -“juguetes literarios para adultos” (Aira “Entrevista”)- constructed by the author. More specifically, its ludic and transitional character -“yo no escribo, hago transiciones” (“Entrevista”)- proceeds from the unexpected nexus it establishes between the autofiction and the fantastic genre. Aira carries out this remarkable shift by deriving meaning from the monstrous, a vital aspect which he employs in his narratives and theorizes on, to the extent that he is regarded as “un especialista en monstruos” (González Mouat “La retórica de la monstruosidad” 11) by literary critics. This amazing propensity to stage incompatible realities is also challenging for the reader who is supposed to function as a point of intersection between readings and experiences, “un cruce absolutamente particular de lecturas y experiencias” (Villanueva “Generación y degeneración” 21), a disposition that also will be triggered later on by narrative experiments which could be specified as a monstrous entity at discursive level.

The plot of the short story can be synthesized as follows: the protagonist, a six year old girl, is invited by her father to taste the first ice cream of her life. Contrary to what the father expects, the girl is disgusted by the sweet treat,

which seems to be contaminated. This disenchantment has some important consequences: the father has a violent fight with the salesman and the girl has to be hospitalized because she suffers from severe food poisoning. Due to this infection, she experiences hallucinations by which she is intellectually stunted. As a result, she enrolls in school late in the year and is barely able to adapt to the group. When a class-mate teaches the heroine to curse and insult people on the playground, her mother is upset by such a dissonant behavior and ends up complaining about the teacher. This is the moment when the fantastic comes in, creating an amazing and illogical postmodern autofiction, according to Amícola: “la más posmoderna de las autoficciones que no duda en crear identidades sexuales nómadas e inestables, al servicio de una trama que [...] se agota en los vericuetos de una lógica de pesadilla sin previsión posible” (195). More precisely, to exact revenge on the mother, the teacher begins to discriminate against the girl, who undergoes a surprising and substantial change by adopting the author’s name, which, from that moment on, constantly pops up in the work:

El niño Aira... Está entre ustedes, y parece igual que ustedes. Quizás ni lo han notado, tan insignificante es. Pero está. No se confundan [...] Hay que tener cuidado, de la yará, de la araña pollito y del perro rabioso. Pero de Aira más. Aira es mil veces peor. ¡Tengan cuidado con Aira! ¡No se acerquen a él! ¡No le hablen, no le miren! Hagan como si no existiera [...] ¡No se ensucien con él! ¡No se enfermen con él! No le den ni la hora. No respiren cuando él está cerca, si es necesario muéranse de asfixia pero no le den bolilla. ¡El monstruo mata! [...] Pero si se cuidan del monstruo no va a pasar nada. Hagan como si no existiera, como si no estuviera aquí. Si no le hablan ni lo miran, es inofensivo (Aira “Cómo me hice monja” 52-53).

By giving the girl the author’s name, the narrator establishes the autofiction in a “grotesque” and “contrafactual” way¹³, which “flout[s] the expectations of any reader of autobiographical fiction [...]” (O’Connor 272). Or, in Pron’s words, the autobiographical pact is only established at the level of discourse and not at the level of the story: “el pacto autobiográfico existe en el plano del discurso pero no en el plano de la historia” (115). Furthermore, it is worth stating that the incongruence -“la incongruencia” (112)- between the sex of the author and that of the protagonist not only supports the autofiction, but also goes hand in hand with an evolution towards the fantastic, which is completed in the office of the girl’s attending physician. She sees the specialist as “una especie de hipnotizador que me transformaba” (Aira “Como me hice monja” 37) and experiences his intervention as a “change of level”, as a rupture established in her inner self: “Salí del delirio, como se sale de la cárcel. El sentimiento lógico habría sido el alivio, pero no fue mi caso. Algo se había roto en mí, una válvula, un pequeño dispositivo de seguridad que me permitiera cambiar de nivel” (32). In contrast to Ana Casas, who interprets this spectacular

superposition of the identities of the heroine and the writer as a parodic, humoristic modulation which mitigates the fantastic effect -“una modulación paródica, humorística [que] resta potencia al efecto fantástico” (“Fantástico y autoficción” 90)-, it is striking that the protagonist’s transformation is interwoven with procedures emblematic of the fantastic genre.

At this point, this transformation fits in among many other “expressions” that indicate a sudden change such as “se produjo un giro completo” (Aira “Cómo me hice monja” 21) or “[l]a escena cambiaba radicalmente” (Aira “Cómo me hice monja” 23) (Pron 115) and its fantastic character is announced by elements that are typical of the ‘fantastic of perception’. These take shape by the staging of extraordinary characters such as Ana Modena, the corpulent nurse who constantly surrounds the girl and is described as “fantasma”, as a “ghost” (Aira “Cómo me hice monja” 38-39) or Arturito, obsessed with his “fiestas de disfraz”, “disguise parties” (81). This play on identity enables the heroine to satisfy her inclination to cheat -“jugar, mentir, disfrazarse y esconderse” (Vanden Berghe “Retrato del autor” 273) and to steadily unfold herself -“se desdobra a sí mismo o se desdoblan sus facultades o rasgos”- since she seems to be made up of “distintos y contradictorios yos” (272).

These unusual connotations also extend to the global context of the story that describes Argentina as a country harassed by “una ola de vampiros”, a wave of vampires (Aira “Cómo me hice monja” 91). This context is important since it relates to the ice-vendor’s wife, whose uncommon character comes to light in her disproportional desire to exact vengeance on an innocent child. More specifically, she is regarded by the girl not only as a kidnapper but also as a female vampire: “una secuestradora, una vampiro” (92). Despite the fact that the heroine quickly admits her misunderstanding -“esta mujer no era un vampiro”- she is even more confused by the presence of the lady, who makes her lose her balance and incites a “rupture of the situation”: “una ruptura de la situación” (92). Finally, the transformation culminates in the problematic personal evolution of the girl into a monster as she beholds the world that surrounds her with “ojos horadantes de monstruo [que] impedían que ningún ser vivo se mimetizara con mi vida” (77)¹⁴.

All of these changes contribute to the marginalization of the autofictional hero/heroine -César Aira is reduced to a child and actually takes on the female sex, which is regarded as “softer” and refers to the fragile condition of the postmodern subject (Vanden Berghe “Retrato del autor” 271)- in such a way that it propels him/her to become the defender of the weak. This inclination finally leads to the girl’s death. While she lives with her mother, she regularly visits her imprisoned father, who ended up killing the ice-cream vendor and to whom she wants to offer a better life. During one of her walks she is kidnapped by a terrifying woman. The lady claims to be the wife of the murdered salesman and throws the girl into the drum of the ice-cream machine, where she is triturated and ends up in the strawberry ice-cream, a destruction which, as we will study next, will have a considerable effect on narration.

Although Casas correctly states that the absurd superposition of the author and the girl theoretically does not fit in with the realistic atmosphere required by the fantastic, its connection with the commented modalities of the fantastic of perception invites us to consider the present autofiction as an instrument of the fantastic genre. Instead of repealing the exceptional character of the impossible event by questioning a possible autobiographical reading – “desbaratada la posible lectura autobiográfica, la violación de la regla [...] anul[a] la excepcionalidad del acontecimiento imposible” (Casas “Fantástico y autoficción” 90-91)- the “humoristic”, “ironic” or “absurd” tonality, as it is adopted by this autofiction, intertwines with the fantastic (Honores “Mundos imposibles” 33)¹⁵, a relationship which is also strengthened at discursive level. As Bush puts it, since “[i]n Aira, autobiography is no guarantee for authenticity [...] the confessional intimacy of the autobiographical”, which emanates from the present autofiction, “encourages an even more intimate relationship with the text” (416).

3. Fantastic of language: autofiction and posthumous narration

At this point, the autofiction increases its impact by shifting its influence from the ‘fantastic of perception’ to the modality of ‘language’ as it connects with procedures that are typical of unnatural narratology¹⁶, which deals with variants of narration that are not channeled through the conventional ways of story-telling. In the present case, the unnatural aspect is induced by the fact that the narration, which already passes through a transgression of age and sex, is also carried out from beyond the grave (Alber 41). As we have mentioned before, this narrative situation is installed in the last lines of the story which describe in detail how the heroine is aware of the physiological processes that prefigure her imminent death.

Pero ella [= la mujer del heladero] puso la tapa antes de que yo lograra asomar la cabeza, y la enroscó sobre la crema que rebalsaba. Contuve el aliento porque sabía que no podía respirar hundida en el helado... El frío me caló hasta los huesos... mi pequeño corazón palpitaba hasta estallar... Supe [...] que eso era la muerte... Y tenía los ojos abiertos, por un extraño milagro veía el rosa que me mataba, lo veía luminoso, demasiado bello para soportarlo... debí de estar viéndolo no con los ojos sino con los nervios ópticos helados, helados de frutilla... Mis pulmones estallaron con un dolor estridente, mi corazón se contrajo por última vez y se detuvo... el cerebro, mi órgano más leal, persistió un instante más, apenas lo necesario para pensar que lo que me estaba pasando era la muerte, la muerte real... (Aira “Cómo me hice monja” 97-98).

This unforeseen end clashes with the autodiegetic narration, which the protagonist asserts by referring overtly to her own story –“este libro” (Aira

“Cómo me hice monja” 69)- or to her story-telling act towards the audience – “mis lectores” (70)-, and creates an uncommon atmosphere.

Moreover, this supernatural situation is reinforced by an art of memory, “un arte de la memoria” (74), which is exploited by two mechanisms related to the fantastic of language. First, the memory is related to a striking intertextual reference: according to Hoyos, Aira’s novelette “offers a lesson in the smart art of literary parricide” (105) as it irrefutably ironizes the famous opening scene of García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad*, in which Aureliano Buendía remembers how he got enchanted by the magic of the ice. By “[displacing] the wonders of ice in the tropics to comfort food in the Southern Cone”, the narrator “condenses [...] death and childhood” (105). Instead of disclosing some principles of the material world, as it does for Buendía, the present ice experience objectivizes the protagonist -the heroine is aware of the fact that her father watches her vomiting the poisoned ice-cream “como si yo me hubiera objetivado (Aira “Cómo me hice monja” 20)- and initiates the deconstruction that culminates in her death. Second, the memory is said to be infallible and capable of restoring the protagonist’s failures: “[...] mi memoria perfecta. La memoria me ha permitido atesorar cada instante que pasó. También los instantes eternos, los que no pasaron, que encierran en su cápsula de oro a los otros” (63). This perfect functioning can be interpreted as a manifestation of a “pandeterminism” -which Todorov considers a topic of the fantastic genre (119)- that dominates the discourse and provides the narrator with an untouchable status. Such a privileged position is explicitly associated with some unusual dispositions –“confiaba en mi impasibilidad, que era sobrenatural” (Aira “Cómo me hice monja” 82)- and empowers the narrator’s fantastic nature.

It is clear that in this case the hesitation experienced by the reader is induced by the play with narrative techniques and establishes the fantastic at the level of ‘language’ or ‘discourse’. Indeed, the fantastic seems to be grounded on the evidence that textual composition determines real life. As Vanden Berghe puts it, the narrator seems to consider reality as a text and reduces the historical truth to a mere discursive construction which justifies the posthumous narration:

El final del texto completa el círculo y postula la misma idea: ya que entre texto y vida no hay diferencia clara, cuando termina el texto, necesariamente termina la vida del protagonista narrador, que ocurre nueve meses después del inicio del relato. Cuando termina el periodo de gestación de éste en la pluma del autor, cuando termina el proceso de escritura, muere también el autor de autoficción, que solo vive por gracia de sus textos y que sólo renace de sus cenizas cuando vuelva a publicar (Vanden Berghe “Retrato del autor” 275).

As we may deduce from this quote, the autofiction seems to be an instrument that demonstrates how writing prevails over living. Similarly, Fernández González considers that, in this novel, the narration puts the evoked reality at risk as it is firmly determined by the initial memory of the ice-cream

experience, which he describes as “un recuerdo sometido a escritura [...] trabado en un discurso de interrupciones, de retrocesos y derivas que atentan incluso contra la veracidad de lo evocado” (387). As a result, the narration creates the impression that the story will be over before it even began -“la narración [...] disuade a la propia historia de comenzar” (388)- and ensures that, as in many of the author’s works, its rhythm is unbalanced and jerky: “la narración airana no parece *discurrir*, sino, más bien, *saltar*” (389). Because of its questioning of the traditional order of reality and fiction, the autofiction can consequently be considered a manifestation of the epistemological turn which is typical of postmodernism and consists of a fundamental doubt about the possibility of discovering truth and/or apprehending reality.

En este sentido y en cuanto a su contexto epistemológico, quizás incluso se podría considerar que la autoficción se encuentra en la continuación de lo neofantástico: si este parte de una nueva visión de la realidad que incluye lo irracional y lo sobrenatural, aquella supone la imposibilidad de conocer la realidad o de acceder a ella en la medida en que demuestra un profundo escepticismo acerca de la posibilidad de escribir un relato que sea una autobiografía verdadera sobre un sujeto que se pueda conocer y que sea estable. Así, tal y como la literatura neofantástica, la autoficción se relaciona con una quiebra en el poder representativo de las poéticas realistas (Vanden Berghe “Wasabi” 33).

Hence, Vanden Berghe explicitly associates autofiction with the recent evolutions of the fantastic genre, referring to the modality of ‘language’ which deploys and manipulates an arsenal of narrative techniques in tune with its postmodern constitution¹⁷. The fact that in *Cómo me hice monja* the narration is carried out from the beyond not only gives the autodiegetic narrative an omnipotence which is only reserved for traditional omniscient heterodiegetic narrators, but it also endows the corresponding autofiction with an additional power.

In this respect, these discursive tricks fit in with the aforementioned “parodic” and humoristic” tone of the autofiction and refute Casas’ assertion that it spoils the fantastic effect (“Fantástico y autoficción” 90). As Flores states in her analysis of Aira’s *La broma* (1997), jokes and humour imply the same sense of uncertainty, which pervades the fantastic: “[la broma] permite la oscilación, un instante separa un nivel de realidad del otro, de lo real de la realidad con relación a un simulacro bromista sobre ella. Esa realidad es la suspensión del juicio, la incerteza” (Flores 453). By tying up intimately with such a sophisticated narration, the autofiction, despite its extravagant features which are inherent to the “antirrealismo aireano” (451), definitely increases the vacillation experienced by the reader and puts forward its compatibility with the fantastic genre.

4. Perception and language in concert: unleashing the textual monster

The posthumous narration is not only to be interpreted as fantastic from the viewpoint of its abstract functioning, but also because of the specific shape it imposes on the protagonist after death. The passing away of the autofictional hero/heroine constitutes the last of the transformations (s)he undergoes after being cured from his/her strawberry ice cream poisoning and crystallizes, through an inextricable confusion of dream, delirium, and reality, in the image of an angel.

Eso transformaba la situación, la volvía un sueño, pero como realidad. Era una transformación de la realidad. Los crueles delirios que había sufrido durante la fiebre eran una transformación, pero de signo opuesto. El sueño real era la forma de la realidad como felicidad, como paraíso. En el mismo movimiento la realidad se hacía delirio o sueño, pero el sueño también se hacía sueño, y eso era el ángel, o la realidad (Aira “Cómo me hice monja” 62).

Despite the fact that this angelical figure, which consistently transpires as a premonition of the hero's death, first seems to have a heavenly connotation (“Felicidad”, “paraíso”), it becomes more threatening over time by unveiling a worldview that could be qualified as “dystopian”. More specifically, the celestial status the girl takes on seems to favour the outcast of society since it allows her to take care of “the criminals, the thieves, the assassins” among whom her own father is caught.

Lo [= papá] multipliqué por todos los hombres que había allí adentro, los hombres desesperados, los expulsados de la sociedad, que no podían abrazar a sus hijos... Y yo allá arriba, planeando inmóvil sobre todos ellos... Yo era el ángel. Eso no podía asombrarme. Todas las peripecias que habían sucedido, desde el comienzo, desde el momento en que probé el helado de frutilla, me conducían a ese punto supremo, a ser el ángel ... El ángel de la guarda de todos los criminales, de los ladrones, de los asesinos ... (Aira “Cómo me hice monja” 60).

By defying through posthumous narration the laws that usually govern story-telling and by proposing herself as the guardian angel of the wretches with promises of fortune and wealth, the girl rebels against the social constraints and the absurdity of life which has put many of them in prison. At this point, the monstrous aspect she takes on in a facetious way can be associated with the power that, according to Flores, comic monsters have to ironize the beautiful and to simultaneously draw the attention to “the ugly” and “the miserable” by means of discursive strategies that can be interpreted as monstrous as well:

[los] monstruos que dan risa, impugnan también la puja por la moda [...] por lo bello que es la que triunfa en lo cotidiano o la moda por mostrar lo más feo, bajo y terrible de la miseria de la vida cotidiana de muchos argentinos [...] Como la representación es siempre más tranquilizadora que la vivencia [...], las discursividades [...] no sólo muestran monstruos, son ellas mismas monstruosas” (Flores 456).

Moreover, the aforementioned strategies teach the protagonist to cope with a gnawing sense of guilt. Even though she does not justify her subversive role as a standard-bearer of society's pariahs, through which she attempts to gratuitously overturn social laws, she does motivate her transubstantiation in terms of culpability by means of a remarkable syllogism: since, refusing to eat the ice-cream, she was the indirect cause of her father's crime, she concludes that the end of her own existence might liberate him: “Eso era yo. La niña que no era. Viva, estaba muerta. Si yo estuviera muerta, papá estaría en libertad” (Aira “Cómo me hice monja” 58). By restituting the paternal figure and by counteracting her guilt, the autofictional hero does not only offer an antidote against the fears of the writer Aira himself -who confesses that, in childhood, he was obsessed with the idea of losing his father and getting lost in the world when leaving his town (Vanden Berghe “Retrato del autor” 267)- but also globally sublimates an anxiety which, according to Honores, torments all of us in an “insubstantial” and “unjustified” way (“La civilización del horror” 44)¹⁸.

By focusing on such ancestral fears through the strategies elaborated at the levels of perception and language, autofiction links up with the essential conditions of the fantastic genre. Because of the paradox it establishes, by evoking through the name of the author a person of flesh and blood and by simultaneously linking that person to a monstrous entity, it deeply puzzles the reader. Since this figure eventually sets up a posthumous narration, an ingenious artifice which transcends the limits of space and time, and breaks the generally accepted narrative codes, it ends up strengthening the vacillation effect in the audience. This way, the autofiction -as it takes shape in the present novel-counters an important evolution in current postmodern fantastic narratives, films or television series, defined by Roas as “la domesticación del monstruo”, “the taming of the monster”.

Eso explica que la ficción posmoderna no haya cesado de producir todo tipo de monstruos imposibles y, por ello, inquietantes. Pero al mismo tiempo, también se están prodigando las obras que banalizan y/o domesticar al monstruo, despojándolo de su excepcionalidad, lo que provoca un curioso fenómeno [...]: dotarle de esa normalidad supone incorporarlo a la realidad, convertirlo en un posible más del mundo y, con ello extirparle su original naturaleza imposible (y por ello amenazante) y situarlo dentro de la norma (Roas “El monstruo posmoderno” 110).

Even though the presentation of a monster as a narrator fits in with a postmodern tendency -“la tendencia cada vez más acusada a darle voz al monstruo y convertirlo en narrador de su historia [por la que] el Otro, mediante su discurso, nos hace cómplices de sus experiencias y de sus sentimientos, un proceso que lo humaniza y, en cierto modo, atenúa su otredad” (Roas, “El monstruo posmoderno” 114)-, the posthumous narration prevents the reader from interpreting the fantastic setting as normal. Instead, in *Cómo me hice monja*, the sophisticated narrative situation and the eccentric beings linked to it underscore the unusual character of the fantastic genre and present it as “algo más allá de su concepción de lo real” (114).

At this point, the autofictional strategy that has been employed in this short novel can be seen as a resource to keep the basic fears of a human being alive, “los miedos básicos del ser humano siguen siendo activos (la muerte, lo desconocido, lo imposible)” (Roas “El monstruo posmoderno” 114). Moreover, by using subtle techniques, this example of autofiction reactivates problematic feelings in the reader’s mind, “para [...] con ello, causar la inquietud del lector” (114). As a consequence, the autofiction in this Aira novel can be regarded as a parody -which is mirrored in the absurdity of its title and in the way it challenges the hermeneutics¹⁹- of the postmodern skepticism that questions the stable conventions that ruled the fantastic genre in the past.

This way, this autofictional practice includes a humoristic touch and operates as “a subversive instrument”, “como vía de subversion”, which reinforces the fantastic effect in the contemporary genre. According to Roas, such a viewpoint does not mean that fantastic narrative will provoke a roar of laughter -“la carcajada” (El monstruo posmoderno” 116)-, which would relinquish this fantastic effect altogether or convert it into a purely comic one. On the contrary, the ingenious and ludic narration wielded in *Como me hice monja* demonstrates how the autofiction, by means of the skillful combination of real and impossible elements, succeeds in establishing a distorted perspective that keeps the reader puzzled.

Conclusions

In short, *Cómo me hice monja* displays an onomastic homonymy by which Aira simultaneously casts himself as the short story’s author, narrator, and protagonist. However, more than setting up a mere autofiction, which has become mainstream in this writer’s work, the short story exemplifies how such a narrative strategy ties in with fantastic literature. On the one hand, this analogy is motivated by the fact that this genre is ruled by ‘vacillation’, a concept founded on an ambiguity between the strange and the marvelous, resembling the confusion of distinct narrative pacts which is the hallmark of autofiction. On the other, by pretending that the story is about the real person, autofiction tightens its link with reality and fulfills a necessary condition to conjure up the fantastic effect. This propensity towards the fantastic takes shape, at the level of ‘perception’, in the transformation of the autofictional voice into a monstrous

entity, which scatters unusual elements throughout the text in accordance with the protagonist's gratuitous logic. At the level of 'language', this process is strengthened by a posthumous narration that corroborates the uncommon aspect of the story. By unleashing both a physical and textual monster, these modalities intensify the reader's sense of doubt and perplexity, and, contrary to recent tendencies to domesticate the uncanny, underscore the disturbing capacity of fantastic fictions.

Notes:

¹ An autofiction is a literary work in which a writer endows himself with a personality and an existence, while preserving his real identity (his real name) [My translation].

² As far as the narrative person is concerned, Colonna does not exclude the possibility of a "fiction about himself in the third person", in other words, "a heterodiegetic autofiction" that leads to a splitting of the author into an actor and a character but without assuming the role of a narrator ("L'autofiction, essai sur la fictionalisation" 130). Colonna proposes the term "autofiction hétérodiégétique" as a more fictitious variant of the concept "autobiographie hétérodiégétique", coined by Genette (72-73) and cites as an example in Spanish-American literature the novel *La vida exagerada de Martín Romaña* (1981) in which the novelist, Alfredo Bryce Echenique, fictitiously projects his own person in the protagonist Martín (Colonna "L'autofiction, essai sur la fictionalisation" 208).

³ Although Alberca accepts that the autofiction can also be generated "implicitly" and "the nominal identity can be suggested or substituted by some trait or facet of writer, which allows the author to be unequivocally identified [...]" ("¿Existe la autoficción hispanoamericana?" 119, my translation), in our opinion, the concordance between the names of the author and the character seems vital in order to be able to speak of an 'autofiction' and to avoid confusion with an autobiographical novel.

⁴ Because of its subject matter, its intimate inscription and its discursive strategy, the fiction of oneself is separated from the autobiographical novel. In such kind of discourse, the content of the story is fictitious, the author does not borrow any mask and does not pretend to reach the truth. More than a disguise, it is a distortion, it is a "free play of imaginative forces" [My translation].

⁵ At this point, Casas already seems to allude to the relationship between the autofiction and the fantastic narrative, mentioning its link with the perplexity it generates within the reader and with the ironic and parodic strategies as they will be developed in Aira's short story: "Algunas de estas reflexiones permiten establecer una posición intermedia entre la autoficción como modalidad de la escritura del yo sobre un eje básicamente referencial [...] y la autoficción como un rechazo –o cuanto menos de una actitud de perplejidad- ante la supuesta factualidad del autor gracias a extremar determinados mecanismos disruptivos y paradójicos, como los recursos transgresivos de la ficción (metalepsis, mise en abyme) o las diversas formas del humor (parodia, ironía, sátira)" ("La autoficción en los estudios hispánicos" 12).

⁶ This unprecedented reception, which generated the need for the word "autofiction", has of course to do with this great social movement where juridism and individualism mix, whose most striking manifestation is the rise of "extimity" in the last years of the 20th century. A wave of revealing the intimate that is reflected and manufactured by television, politics, morals, private and professional life -which we have not yet heard the last of [My translation].

⁷ In this regard, we disagree with Darrieusecq's conviction that "l'aspect indivisible de l'autofiction cesse [...] dès que un événement invraisemblable intervient dans le récit. Elle se transforme alors en roman à la première personne" [My translation: "the undecidable aspect of

the autofiction disappears [...] as soon as an implausible event intervenes in the story. In such a case it becomes a novel in the first person”] (378). This presentation of the autofiction underestimates the faculties attributed to it by Gasparini in general and the possibilities of being linked to the fantastic in our particular case.

⁸ Colonna clarifies this observation in the following fragment in which, incidentally, he also acknowledges a similar effect on the use of the third person: “Sans engagement autobiographique et sans relais qui pourrait assurer de sa réalité, la représentation de soi à la troisième personne est constitutivement déréalisante” [My translation: “without autobiographical commitment and without any indication that can assure its reality, the representation of one self in the third person is constitutively alienating”] (“L’autofiction, essai sur la fictionalisation” 208).

⁹ At this point, one could consider the autofiction as a manifestation of “suprarreferentiality” that, according to Barrenechea, is a way in which literature written since the 20th century tries to account for the crisis of the mimetic contract. This crisis consists of questioning “the mimesis which was typical of the nineteenth century and the confidence that its realism had in the relationship between language, literature and the world” and that, contrary to the “infrarreferentiality”, “does not abandon the dialogue with the referent, but enhances it to the limit” (381, my translation).

¹⁰ Furthermore, Colonna delimits this category from three others. In the “biographic autofiction” (“l’autofiction biographique”) the writer is always the hero of his story, the pivot around which narrative matter is ordered. He enriches his existence based on real data but adheres to reality as closely as possible to reality and credits his text with a subjective truth (Colonna “Autofiction & autres mythomanies” 93). In the “specular autofiction” (“l’autofiction spéculaire”) the veracity of the text becomes a secondary element, and the author is no longer necessarily at the center of the book. He, may be only a silhouette and places himself in a corner of his work, which then reflects his presence like a mirror (119). Finally the “intrusive autofiction” (“L’autofiction intrusive”) supposes that the writer's transformation does not take place through a character. His interpreter is a kind of commentator, a ‘narrator-author’ on the margins of the plot, who harangues his reader, endorses, connects or contradicts the established facts, or gets lost in digression, embodying a solitary ‘voice’, running parallel to the story (135).

¹¹ The writer is at the center of the text as in an autobiography (he is the hero), but he transfigures his existence and identity into an unreal story, indifferent to veracity. The projected double becomes an extraordinary character, a pure fictional hero, from whom no one would think to draw a likeness to an image of the author. Unlike the biographical posture, it is not limited to representing existence, it invents it [...] (My translation).

¹² As Roas also points out, the hesitation can be induced by a transgression in the semantic, syntactic or discursive levels of the text (“Más allá de los límites del lenguaje” 268). The first two transgressions take the form of thematic elements such as the figure of the double, the presence of the bestiary or the use of colossal objects, whereas those occurring at the discursive level have to do with formal procedures. These include the play with space and time (such as a regressive denouement or metalepsis), “discursive strategies” (metaphors, neologisms, oximorons, literalisation of the figurative sense, use of connoted adjectives) or the manipulation of enunciation by means of “metafictional games [...] that endanger the illusion of reality that mimesis postulates [...]”: “juegos de metaficción [...] que ponen en crisis la ilusión de realidad que postula la mimesis [...]” (266).

¹³ Colonna (“Autofiction & autres mythomanies”) considers the “grotesque” and the “contrafactual” as two tendencies of the “fantastic autofiction”, which respectively question a biographic interpretation of the story by stylistic modulations and reinvent the author's existence by changing his/her personal data. These differ from other manifestations such as the “modern”, the “oniric”, and the “tragic” fantastic autofiction. The “modern” variant confronts the author with an impossible element, like Borges in *El Aleph*, the “oniric” relates the superposition of character and writer to a confusion between dream and the representation of reality, and the “tragic” derives benefit from the death of the author, told in the third person, to modify some aspects of his/her life.

¹⁴ At this point, this transformation process and the autofiction as such also relate to the issue of the ‘döppelgänger’, “la figura del doble”, which is interpreted by Honores as a typical phenomenon of the fantastic of perception (“Mundos imposibles” 166).

¹⁵ In his taxonomy of Peruvian fantastic literature, Honores hints at some fantastic short stories of Julio Ramón Ribeyro, such as *La insignia* or *La botella de chicha* in which absurdity, irony, and grotesque humour all contribute to the establishment of the fantastic setting.

¹⁶ This branch of narratology differs from the ‘classical’ one -inspired by structuralism, which systematically investigates temporal, focal and narrative relations in the text- and is therefore defined as ‘post-classical’. More specifically, it focuses on contexts that particularize the reading act, paying attention to the generic and post-colonial implications of narration, and it also searches for narrative structures in poems and pictorial arts.

¹⁷ At this stage, Van den Berghe refers to the term “neofantástico”, which was coined by Alazraki but does not completely cover the recent evolutions of the fantastic genre (“Wasabi” 32). Although this concept takes into account the importance of narrative manipulation, it globally neglects the influence of such operations on the perplexity experienced by the characters and the reader.

¹⁸ More specifically, Honores states that anxiety (“angustia”) does not find any justification in the immediate reality and generally proceeds from the readers reaction against a hypothetical danger such as the possibility of becoming sick, having an accident, missing a cherished person or losing authenticity or face. Although it consequently contrasts with fear (“miedo”), which is more specific as it reacts against something concrete causing repulsion, it nourishes the fantastic effect in a same way (“La civilización del horror” 44).

¹⁹ Although the title *Cómo me hice monja* is generally seen as an insignificant joke, Astutti intends to give it an explanation. Considering it as a manifestation of the Argentinian argot which consists of spelling syllables in an inverted order, the “*vesre*, [...] que le permitiría leer al revés” (162), ‘monja’ could be read as an inversion of ‘jamón’. Signifying also ‘fiambre’, ‘cold meat’ or ‘dead body’, this word may playfully refer to the death of the protagonist: “how I became a dead body”. This also would lead to an ironic interpretation of the girl’s declaration that her story continues “hasta que tomé los hábitos”, until she “took the habit”, entering a monastery called death (163).

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