THE BOUNDARIES OF SERIAL NARRATIVE

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Genre and reading in serial fiction
The study of short story cycles – that is, of series of stories united by theme, genre, or style – belongs in borderline writing: in terms of length and internal structure, these textual series are halfway between novel and short story, so analyzing them allows us to reframe some fundamental problems of theory and literary criticism concerning the existing boundaries between writing, editing and reading. Furthermore, their very existence points toward the need to formulate a new normative theory of literary genres.

In other words, the study of short story cycles is an opportunity to reframe the persistent problem of defining literary genres: what is a short story? What is a novel? And, more recently, what is a minifiction? What are the boundaries between these genres? And, even more important in the case of minifiction series, how can the differences between prose, essay and prose poem be produced by the context of each reading?

Insofar as the writer is the first editor of the text he is writing, writing may be a strategy that advances modes of reading, not only of a specific text, but also of former texts.

Short story cycles and other forms of serial narrative
In Anglo-American literature there are a number of studies of short story cycles; however, Spanish-American literature lacks analyses of such works, even though there are magnificent serial and fragmentary narrative compositions which deserve theoretical attention. The abundance of minifictions (ironic, hybrid texts of less than four-hundred words), minifictional series and novels consisting exclusively of this type of text represent literary contributions specific to this region. At present, we need to distinguish between different forms of
minifiction, since this term can refer both to short-short stories\(^1\) (which are primarily narrative and have a traditional structure) and to microfictions (which are of a hybrid nature and have an unconventional structure).

A field of literary studies that has seldom received theoretical attention is that of generic literary norms and the reading processes they involve. The tradition of genre experimentation in Spanish-language literature poses specific problems linked to the concept of fragmentation, which goes back to avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. Furthermore, if, as some critics have affirmed, the lingua franca of the novel (in its purest realistic form) was French during the second half of nineteenth century, and the lingua franca of the short story (in its most canonical form) was English during the first half of the twentieth, then perhaps the lingua franca of minifiction (as a protean genre, distinct from the tradition of short-short story) has been Spanish, especially Latin American Spanish, during the second half of the twentieth century.

At the same time, the study of short story cycles and other genres of a hybrid, fragmentary and serial nature reveals the gradual relativization of the genre’s canonical forms. Perhaps today a really experimental task would be to write a novel or a short story completely free of fragmentation and generic hybridity. Thus, the mandatory generic references are no longer the novel (in its most traditional form, subject to rules of realism and verisimilitude), nor the short story (in its classic and epiphanic variety, characterized by its surprise ending), but rather minifiction, a literary genre practiced throughout the twentieth century that in turn prefigures the birth of hypertextual writing.

In this article I explore various strategies for writing, editing and reading serial narratives that can relativize the generic conventional boundaries of textual unity (particularly those of the novel) and of generic diversity, that is, the identity of each short story or minifiction. Studying short story cycles and other forms of serial and fragmentary narrative obliges us to rewrite the norms of generic definitions.

Studying short text series can sharpen one’s awareness of various possibilities of reading offered by textual manifestations of the one and the many and by shifting the boundaries between the whole and

\(^1\) The “short-short story” is a term generally used as an equivalent to very-short story.