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A Modernism Against Maestros: Horacio Quiroga and the Transnational Automaton

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A MODERNISM AGAINST MAESTROS: HORACIO QUIROGA AND THE
TRANSNATIONAL AUTOMATON

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
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English

by
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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will explore the possibility that Horacio Quiroga's regional treatment of modernist themes is more than a creole adaptation or mimicry of the European *maestros*, instead placing Quiroga in dialogue with an international framework of contemporary texts that explore conflicting attitudes towards modernity through dark portrayals of science and technology. I focus on Quiroga's 1910 novella *El hombre artificial* (*The Artificial Man*), a text with an amalgamation of themes and plot devices that have caused the work itself to be dismissed for being of "poor quality." Yet these themes and formal features integrally connect Quiroga's novella to a European social and literary tradition.

I will focus my inquiry on the image of the automaton—an artificial or constructed human being that appears throughout Western literature, but becomes especially prevalent in modernist literature. By examining parallel treatments of the automaton by European authors Sigmund Freud and Karel Čapek, I will demonstrate that Quiroga belongs to an international conversation which utilizes the automaton to draw attention to the common nature of these concerns and preoccupations evident in both canonical and marginal modernist literature. This comparative study of different portrayals of the automaton will thus complicate attempts to view modernist literature as a unified whole or single narrative. Labeling Quiroga a mere "predecessor" of Latin American magical realism or imitator of European *maestros* is to remove him to a sphere separate from European modernism in order to preserve a coherent approach to a heterogeneous topic. We should instead utilize a comparison of these representations of

automata to enhance our understanding of a complex, nuanced transnational modernism or modernisms that holds conversations across national borders.

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SECTION ONE

INTRODUCTION

Quiroga and “Regional” Literature

Although his gruesome and gritty stories of life, death and the unpredictability of nature in both rural and urban Argentina speak to universal themes common to modernist literature, the scholarly community largely—and incorrectly—labels Horacio Quiroga (1878-1937) a regional author. The study of his work, generally limited to the fields of Latin American or Spanish literature, acknowledges his short stories as provocative meditations on the uncontrollable nature of the jungle and man’s unsuitability for rural life. Quiroga, however, was an active participant in the literary discourses of his contemporary authors, including authors of the “aesthetic” European modernism from which he is frequently excluded. The author’s dialogue with authors such as Karel Čapek and Sigmund Freud demonstrates the necessity of a nuanced understanding of modernism. To locate Quiroga within an international framework of contemporary texts that explore conflicting attitudes towards modernity through dark portrayals of science and technology is to critique an understanding of modernist literature as a monolithic “modernism” ruled by a few canonical European authors.

I will focus my inquiry on the image of the automaton—an artificial or constructed human being that appears throughout Western literature, but becomes especially prevalent in European literature of the late 1800s and eventually flourishes in twentieth-century science fiction literature. The literary figure of the automaton has the ability to reflect a multitude of societal preoccupations, condensing conflicting reactions

to concerns about advancing technology, globalization, or the human psyche itself. By examining parallel treatments of the automaton by European authors, I will demonstrate that Quiroga is intentionally utilizing the trope to draw attention to the common nature of these concerns and preoccupations evident in both canonical and marginal modernist literature. This comparative study of different portrayals of the automaton will thus complicate attempts to view modernist literature as a unified whole or single narrative. Labeling Quiroga a mere “predecessor” of Latin American magical realism or imitator of European *maestros* is to remove him to a sphere separate from European modernism in order to preserve a coherent approach to a heterogeneous topic. We should instead utilize a comparison of these representations of automata to enhance our understanding of a complex, nuanced transnational modernism or modernisms that holds conversations across national borders.

This multifaceted conception of modernism complicates any attempt to arrive at a single scholarly definition of the period or its literary features. Susan Stanford Friedman addresses the contradictions involved in the attempt to define “modernism” and its ground of study, concluding that these definitions are perhaps irreconcilable (497). In order to draw attention to Quiroga’s dialogue with his contemporary modernist authors, with whom he shared not only a temporal situation but also an interest in transnational motifs and preoccupations, I must attempt to define my notion of modernism. Thus, in this project I share Mia Carter and Alan Warren Friedman’s conception of “literary modernism” as a term that encompasses a wide range of texts published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (approximately 1870-1939) and served to

interrogate, undermine or rupture the dominant trope of “progress” (2). Whether it took the form of the Victorian concepts and institutions of class and gender constraints, imperial colonialism, institutional Christianity or industrialism, progress was challenged by diverse modernist texts that utilized a variety of forms and common tropes. The figure of the automaton is merely one such symbol employed by modernist authors of Europe, Asia, the Americas and worldwide.

This project must heed Jahan Ramazani’s warning that “to impose ‘modernism’ as an umbrella category...is to whitewash differences and tensions among peoples, continents, and histories, blandly assimilating them in an undifferentiated mass of twentieth- and twenty-first century ‘modernist’ cultures (353). Therefore, I aim to examine Quiroga’s unique contribution to this conversation, which is situated in a distinctly Argentine setting and culture yet is not limited in audience or impact to solely Latin America. His participation in the long tradition of automaton literature from the “peripheral” locale of Buenos Aires is, I argue, not an outlying anomaly but a representative event that supports the recent scholarly push towards a less Eurocentric conception of modernism (Mao and Walkowitz 739).

Quiroga’s work that is most central to this understanding of modernism is the 1910 novella *El hombre artificial* (*The Artificial Man*). This text, one of his earliest and one of only two novels that the prolific author produced, contains an amalgamation of themes and plot devices which have caused the work to be dismissed for being of “poor quality.” Yet these themes integrally connect Quiroga’s novella not only to the European modernist tradition from which he is generally excluded but also to a global modernist

conversation. In *El hombre artificial*, three scientists' attempt to create a human being reflects on the modern period's suspicion of new technology without providing a straightforward "Argentine" answer to any of the questions raised by this transnational issue.

First published in the Argentine popular magazine *Caras y Caretas* between January and February 1910, *El hombre artificial* is a prototypical science fiction novella that utilizes the motif of the automaton to depict a complex and conflicted modern society whose borders stretch far beyond the geographical constraints of South America. The story, set in turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires, is a tale of the consequences of creating an automaton, which in the novella is referred to as a *ser vivo* or "human being." This automaton is created through the scientific experimentations of three brilliant scientists of various specialties and nationalities, all of whom have relinquished ties to colonialism, institutional learning, or the socioeconomic elite. The group's leader, Nicolas Ivanovich Donisoff, is a Russian who is descended from a noble family yet renounces the rule of the tsarists, his family name, and his inheritance in favor of the anarchist movement. Marco Sivel, a celebrated Italian doctor, renounces love and his medical license and replaces institutional marriage with marriage to his discipline and a heightened passion for anatomy. Ricardo Ortiz, the Argentine member of the cast, studies electrical engineering in the United States but renounces his family and his large inheritance in favor of tinkering with batteries and invention, and it is his work with electricity that ultimately allows for the animation of their experiment.

The novella's primary characters are initially elated by the seeming success of

their attempts to use modern science to create life. *El hombre artificial* begins with a tone of celebration; Donisoff, Sivel and Ortiz see three years of scientific labor and self-deprivation come to fruition when they are able to create a rat by arranging its elements according to scientific patterns: “Su obra duro tres años. Carbono, hidrogeno, oxígeno, todos los elementos primordiales y constitutivos de la célula pasaron sucesivamente por la electrolisis de Ortiz, las direcciones de Sivel y los reactivos de Donisoff” [Their work lasted three years. Carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, all the primordial, constitutive cellular elements passed successively through Ortiz’s electrolysis, Sivel’s dissections, and Donisoff’s reagents] (Quiroga 28).¹ They bring the rat to life, and although it lives for only a short time before expiring, the three scientists are successful in their endeavor to create an adult copy of a living organism without having to wait for the creation to mature or acquire logic and reason. The team is quickly able to isolate the error in the biological creation process that resulted in the rat’s premature death and proceed with the next stage of their ambitious plan: creating an adult human male with the capacity for language, rational thought and the cumulative knowledge of human experience. The rat, Donisoff explains to his colleagues, was given all of the required senses—nerve transmitters, a cerebral transmitter—but no perception. Donisoff requests the last word in precisely *how* the scientists will go about fine-tuning their creation and imbuing a newborn man with the perception of an adult: a request which is granted.

Ten months later, in June of 1910, the team is able to produce an apparently

¹ All translations of *El hombre artificial* in this paper are my own, from the 1989 Valdemar edition of Quiroga’s text.

² See, for example, David S. Hogsette’s “Metaphysical intersections in Frankenstein: Mary Shelley’s theistic investigation of scientific materialism and transgressive

perfected human body from the same atomic process. They dub this automaton Biógeno, which means “I give life” but which they choose to mean “giver of life.” The height of scientific accomplishment has apparently been attained, and this team of men is able to achieve god-like status through the creation of artificial life. However, when it comes time for Donisoff to endow Biógeno with perception, he turns not to the familiar avenues of biology, chemistry or electrical engineering, but to a “transfer of sensation” between a kidnapped and apparently destitute denizen of Buenos Aires and the prone Biógeno. Their unwilling victim is strapped to a lab table and connected to the automaton before Donisoff removes his fingernails with a pair of pliers. The transfer of this man’s sensation is perhaps too successful, and the created man feels all of the tortured man’s pain and more: every sensation is amplified and excruciating. Instead of aborting the project and killing Biógeno as Sivel and Ortiz beg, Donisoff commands his colleagues to reverse the process, torturing Biógeno and transferring the excess sensation into Donisoff’s own body to release the excess sensation that plagues their creation.

Thus Donisoff, and to a lesser extent Sivel and Ortiz, are presented as unrepentant scientific pioneers, willing to sacrifice love, money and health in their dedication to their potentially world-changing laboratory experiment. At the same time, the men represent the worst fears of a world inundated by new and frightening technologies that had yet to be held accountable to legal or culturally constructed restrictions. The three characters in Quiroga’s novella utilize their technological prowess without seeming to hold their scientific method accountable to any code of conduct—or at least not a code of conduct that would prohibit them from torturing another human

being in order to give perception to their creation.

This project seeks to draw attention to common features between this automaton narrative and other modernist treatments of the trope. If we view the novella merely as Quiroga's straightforward attempt to encourage a Latin American vision of technological progress—ignoring its dialogue with contemporary depictions of the automaton—we miss, I argue, this work's criticism of a conception of a singular, European modernism surrounded but not impacted by peripheral, nationalist texts. Each of the texts studied in this paper—Austrian, Czech and Argentine alike—participate in the long literary tradition of discussion of the automaton, whether it takes the form of a clockwork robot, a realistic android or an artificially created human being formed from a mysterious organic element. *El hombre artificial* converses with other automaton or robot literature of the period, echoing the fear of the rebel machines found in Čapek's *R.U.R* and concerns about human perception of the automaton in Freud's "The Uncanny." If we move past a reading of Quiroga's use of themes and motifs as a regionalist appropriation of a *maestro's* work, I believe that we might come to an understanding of a critique of a Euro-centric understanding of modern literature.

The Literary Automaton

The long tradition of "creating" life has been thoroughly traced in both Eastern and Western literature and history, and while he serves as the crucible of *El hombre artificial*, the artificially crafted man is certainly not a character unique to Quiroga. The tradition of splicing together various human bits and pieces is easily traceable in the

myths and legends of several ancient cultures, and Bruce Mazlish's comprehensive article "The Man-Machine and Artificial Intelligence" provides an overview of humanoid creations over the millennia. Greek myth contains Icarus's wax wings and Hephaestus' automated bronze guardian. Indian and Arabic mythology also touches on the artificially created man. Yet it is not merely myth, and the creative power is not solely the domain of gods: Chinese tradition, Mazlish claims, is rife with detailed descriptions of mechanized doves, automated cup-bearers and chariots that allegedly moved themselves as early as the third century BC. European mechanization came later, with thirteenth-century spring-loaded birds and other automated devices explained as alchemy: "the ancient fascination with automata took on new life. Magic and mechanics were intertwined, and an air of fear and wonder hovered over the statues and angels conjured out of the earth and air: are they alive and real, or not?" (Mazlish). The ambiguity surrounding the veracity of the automaton's "human" body fascinated authors.

While by the eighteenth century, rational explanations had emerged for automated creatures such as Jacques de Vaucanson's digesting duck and Pierre Jaquet-Droz's clockwork child (a figure that functions to this day), these lifelike figures, despite their Enlightenment-era rationale, inspired—or perhaps reflected—a sense of unease in those who viewed them that has yet to be wholly eradicated. Mary Shelly's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, featuring the Promethean Dr. Frankenstein and his horrific creation, is perhaps the most famous example of the literary automaton. As one of the earliest canonical science fiction novels, this deployment of the motif is also one of the most frequently examined texts in the genre and its critics have been thorough in their

examinations of the implications of the created creature for Shelly and her contemporaries.²

Though Shelly's novel may have been the motif's vanguard, the literary automaton of the early twentieth century was distinct from its predecessors in its cultural function. According to Tim Armstrong, literature served a meaning-making function during this era by attempting to process unfamiliar and frightening advances in science and technology vis-à-vis the corporeal form of humanity. Technology such as the x-ray and electrolysis, agents of change simultaneously celebrated and feared in this time period, began to be examined through the lens of the human body. The literary automaton, then, complicated the symbol of the human body as self-contained and autonomous by bringing into question its veracity; is the "human" body presented in a text real and trustworthy, or has technology "duped" readers into trusting an entirely inhuman creature? Readers were forced to examine their notions of technology's effects on their definitions of humanity.

In the twentieth century and beyond, the human-like figure of the automaton has continued to inspire—or perhaps reflect—a sense of unease in its readers and viewers that science and design have yet to successfully eradicate. The progression of time and civilization has been reflected in the changing form of the automaton and the anxieties it represents. By the 1960s, for instance, the automaton came to be recognized as a symbol of subhumanity to an audience increasingly familiar with the figure of the automaton in

² See, for example, David S. Hogsette's "Metaphysical intersections in Frankenstein: Mary Shelley's theistic investigation of scientific materialism and transgressive autonomy" or E.L. Graham's "Frankensteins and Cyborgs: Visions of the Global Future in an Age of Technology."

literature and film, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), to the point where Scott Selisker claims that "the automaton would later become the cinematic and literary focal point for this anxiety" (579) about totalitarianism.. Many 1960s novels that participated in conversations about automata-related unrest, localized in the popularity of the cyborg and criticism of Norbert Wiener's popular book *God and Golem*, in which he implied that a human who creates a cyborg capable of learning is essentially equivalent to God (Hong). This conversation, located largely in science fiction texts, drew the study of the motif of the automaton into contemporary literary criticism.

The extended conversation about the automaton—which stretches from Greek mythology and ancient China to the American Civil Rights movement—and authors' participation therein allows scholars to analyze changing concerns and preoccupations about themes such as technology and the human body across centuries. The study of literary modernism has certainly already endeavored to examine the motif of the automaton across works of literature in the "modernist canon." These studies acknowledge that "canonical" texts such as Freud's essay on the uncanny or Čapek's *R.U.R.* reflect the uncertainties of the era. Marginalized texts such as Quiroga's *El hombre artificial*, however, participate in the same attempt to condense societal preoccupations and fears through the motif of the automaton. An examination of these three texts' deployments of this figure demonstrates Quiroga's participation in and contribution to the transnational framework of automaton-related uncertainty and unsettling depictions of scientific progress. His depiction of the universal figure of the

automaton in a uniquely Latin American setting expands the scope of modernist studies of this figure to encompass more than Europe or North American authors and texts.

SECTION TWO

FREUD'S UNCANNY AUTOMATON

Most studies of the automaton touch on Sigmund Freud's study of the motif. The term "uncanny," used by many critics of the automaton, begs association with Freud's well-known essay "The Uncanny," in which the theorist agrees with the longstanding belief that something about the automaton rings discordant in the human psyche. The studies of scientist Ernst Jentsch, with which this essay converses, were among the first to describe man's notion of the automaton as uncanny. The uncanny, Jentsch claims, can be evoked when a viewer has "doubts [as to] whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate" such as "the impressions made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata" (qtd. in Freud 124). This psychological effect, then, may be produced by the automaton that appears too similar to a human being.

Twenty-first century robotics expert Masahiro Mori expanded Jentsch's theory into the world of design, cautioning artists and engineers about the public reaction to the uncanny nature of robots or other forms of automated artificial beings. Design a robot that seems too similar to a human in form or function, Mori warns, and it will engender a fear of human inadequacy. If a robot is aesthetically indistinguishable from a human being and can fulfill human tasks with greater ease or reliability, what is then left for the humans? Mori's theory of the Uncanny Valley warned artists in the 1970s "not to design robots as too human-like, otherwise the robot would repel the human viewer and thus fall into the uncanny valley, a state of fear and disbelief" (Marynowsky).

In regards to literary study, Jentsch claimed that this feeling of discomfort produced by the automaton may be utilized by authors to produce certain feelings in their readership:

One of the surest devices for producing slightly uncanny effects through story-telling is to leave the reader wondering whether a particular figure is a real person or an automaton, and to do so in such a way that his attention is not focused directly on the uncertainty, lest he should be prompted to examine and settle the matter for once, for in this way, as we have said, the special emotional effect can easily be dissipated. (qtd. in Freud 135)

The cunning reader, according to Jentsch, might make rational inquiries into the nature of the literary automaton, discern whether or not it is actually human, and easily dissipate the discomfort of the uncanny feeling the automaton produces. The automaton, while unsettling, may be understood and dismissed as long as the reader is not left with questions about its status as a human being.

Freud claims, however, that Jentsch's foundational study of the automaton and the uncanny "does not go beyond relating the uncanny to the novel and the unfamiliar" (125). The automaton is not always going to be a cut-and-dry *inhuman* figure that falls into an easy categorization; it will not always be strictly unfamiliar. Freud thus attempts to revise Jentsch's understanding of the uncanny through an exploration of figures that are both novel *and* familiar, whose very resistance to categorization produces the uncanny sensation. "The uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, 'the unhomely')," he claims, "is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, 'the homely')" (134). Each automaton produces

discomfort and uncertainty precisely because of its oxymoronic nature as a “man-made human,” and knowledge of its origins, processes or function may flesh out a story but does not mitigate the ambiguity and ambivalence that a reader or viewer experiences when faced with an automaton.

Freud, then, disagreed with the notion that the uncanny could be conquered through rational thought or scientific study: “clear knowledge in no way diminishes the impression of the uncanny. The notion of intellectual uncertainty in no way helps us to understand this uncanny effect” (139). The doctor instead turns to his own theory of psychoanalysis to attempt to explain the irrational unease prompted by uncanny figures such as the automaton.

Freud denounces scientific certainty’s place in an understanding of the automaton through an extended analysis of the clockwork doll Olympia in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story of “The Sand Man” in *Nachtstücken*. While Olympia is certainly an uncanny figure, who recurs several times throughout the tale to torment the protagonist into fits of madness, there exists no possibility in the *reader’s* mind that she is not a human being, as her clockwork limbs and eyes are clearly described. The reader does not mourn for the automaton when her eyes are removed. Freud is forced to question why the reader is still unbalanced by the story: “we, with the superiority of rational minds, are able to detect the sober truth; and yet this knowledge does not lessen the impression of uncanniness in the least degree. The theory of intellectual uncertainty is thus incapable of explaining that impression” (139). Freud concludes that there must be something in the reader that unconsciously reacts to one of the many emotions evoked by the living doll—not fear but

an infantile desire or belief in the possibility of a living doll—that produces a confusion of possibility/impossibility, familiar/unfamiliar.

So an irrational emotional response of fright evoked by the literary automaton must, Freud claims, be a result of repressed fear that returns when faced with the figure of the automaton. This would explain the dual nature of the *das Heimliche/das Unheimliche* homely/unhomely etymology of the word: “for this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed” (148). To Freud, then, the challenge of the uncanny was the challenge of unearthing the mysterious “frightening element” that “has been repressed and now returns” (147), a challenge quite appropriate to the psychoanalytic miner of the subconscious.

Freud’s automata do not depend merely on occult origins or intellectual uncertainty on the part of the readers to produce a sense of discomfort. They are instead objects onto which the reader’s psyche projects its own—often repressed—fears, desires, etc. Olimpia’s disconcerting effects remain even after the reader understands that she is made of clockwork and feels no pain. Yet even if the doll were sentient and the removal of her eyes and limbs did present a moral quandary, the sense of the uncanny would still pervade, as the *reader’s* situation would remain the cause of the sensation of “uncaniness.”

Diverse presentations of the automaton throughout the early twentieth century, then, all participate in this conversation despite the varied natures of the created beings in these texts. If modernism is seen as a rupture in or questioning of the narrative of

progress, the automaton may stand for the conflicting and indeterminate reactions to this break from the familiarity of tradition or institutions. This simultaneous presence of the homely and unhomely/familiar and unfamiliar in modernism's conception of the present moment is illustrated by the automata of each of the texts examined here.

Regardless of whether the automaton in question is constructed of clockwork, organic material or repurposed human limbs; whether the creature feels pain, speaks, or advocates for its own rights, the reader's knowledge that this familiar human body is simultaneously unfamiliar and threatening in some way to his understanding of "humanity" evokes a sense of fear or doubt. The automaton stands in for some greater anxiety—personal or societal. This foil allows literature to take on a unique meaning-making function as it allows for a snapshot view into otherwise unpublicized—if not repressed—concerns of that text's creators on a small or large scale.

SECTION THREE

ČAPEK'S UNIVERSAL AUTOMATON

One such example of the automaton's ability to stand in for and condense multiple societal and/or personal preoccupations is another modernist text that treats the automaton: Karel Čapek's *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, which emerged on the theater scene in 1921. European theater had shifted to reflect the anxiety of the times, and one exploration of the dehumanization of both industry and society at large was through the trope of the automaton, which *R.U.R.* introduced to a new audience. *R.U.R.*, which was famously the play in which the word "robot" was first introduced, also served as a vehicle for the exploration of societal anxiety, both in the 1920s and in retrospect. As Paul Menard's article "I Am Your Worker/ I Am Your Slave" explores, the technological advances of the early twentieth century were clearly reflected and expanded upon in the theater scene. A European public increasingly unsure about their status and autonomy in a changing world—in the mechanization of industry, the expansion of distance-warfare and the liberalization of the global economy—questioned their necessity for continued industrial production and military action.

European theater shifted to reflect the anxiety of the times: "Like the systematized action of the factory assembly line, this important shift is consistent with the perceived loss of individual autonomy and the lack of agency in the face of increasingly complex networks of economic, social, and political power during the early twentieth century" (Menard 121-22). One such vehicle for exploration of this lack of agency was the trope of

the automaton, which Čapek's *R.U.R.* introduced to an audience faced with different concerns and preoccupations than readers of Shelley.

R.U.R., which is set on the remote island/factory of the Rossum's Universal Robots corporation, explores the dilemmas posed by the factory production of thousands of flesh-and-blood "Robots," which the eccentric character of Old Rossum has created from a mysterious biological substance. These Robots are nearly indistinguishable from human beings, except for their lack of emotion and soul. Young Rossum, interested in the corporation's bottom line, later tinkered with the Robots and removed these two problematic, human features in order to be able to efficiently mass-produce the machines to be sold worldwide in place of human labor. He does, however, grant the Robots the ability to feel pain in the form of the "Robot's cramp" so that they may be punished. As might be predicted, these modifications inexplicably go awry and some of the Robots seem to acquire personality and emotion,

Over the course of ten years, the Robots begin a global takeover, first of production and manufacturing, and then in the form of a deadly military coup. Their leader demands the extermination of all humans and eventually taking the island (and, presumably, the world) from their former masters in what might *seem* to be a direct parallel of both the industrial and political turmoil of Čapek's post-World-War I Czechoslovakia. The Robots stand in as menacing agents of change and the diminished necessity for human labor and independent governance.

Yet the plot of *R.U.R.* is complicated by the uncanny, evolving humanity of the Robots. During the takeover, the formula used to create Robots from Old Rossum's

mysterious biological element is destroyed. Though most Robots were designed to be unfeeling, inhuman laborers, certain Robots appear to have developed the ability to empathize with and love each other. In order to stave off certain extinction, the modified Robot Primus offers himself in place of another Robot, his love interest Helena, to be dissected in an attempt to continue their species. In the play's strange finale, the last surviving human declines to dissect either living Robot and instead sends these two apparently-humanized lovers out to reproduce naturally, in the style of the first humans and with the quasi-Biblical charge to "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth...Our [human] buildings and machines will fall to ruin, the systems and the names of the great will fall like leaves, but you, love, you flourish in the ruins sow the seeds of life in the wild." The automata then become the last hope for the continuation of humanity, and the play's final line is the final human exclamation "life will not perish!" The reader is thus left in a state of intellectual uncertainty about the humanity of Čapek's Robots.

The reader's inability to categorize Čapek's automata may echo Freud's understanding of the uncanny automaton, but the playwright also utilizes the Robot to contribute to a different conversation in the international literature of the automaton. These creations, which have in the course of three acts destroyed all but one human being across the globe, are simultaneously unfeeling murderers and empathetic lovers. The Robot is both an emotionless machine that desires dominance and a flesh-and-blood creature that craves freedom from oppression. While most scholars of the play have examined the Robots as a direct response to specific regional events and disruptions in

the author's time, it is possible to instead read them as a destabilizing reaction to more universal modernist concerns about technology and the body, encapsulated in the self-reflexive figure of the automaton.

The play's many critics explore specific possibilities for the ways in which this text corresponds with the author's situation. Menard focuses on the playwright's location in turbulent post-war Czechoslovakia; although the narrative is set on a remote, "global" island, the bellicose themes that Čapek explores seem particularly relevant to the preoccupations of the author's particular region, and the play, according to Menard, is "a product of post-World War I Czechoslovakia and its unstable political environment, combined with the industrial modernization of the world at large...[the creative spark was] the anxiety Čapek faced from encroaching political, social, economic, and technological 'advances'" (124-25).

Čapek himself, however, was apparently tired of a similar speculative discussion about his play between three of his contemporary scholars. In 1923 he wrote a piece for *The Saturday Review*, entitled "The Meaning of *R.U.R.*," which addresses the critical desire to locate a correspondence between specific national events and ideologies and *R.U.R.*. In this short article, the playwright begs the vanity of saying a few words to correct the speculation about the robots—the created men—and to shift the focus of discussion. Čapek discusses the characters of Old Rossum and Young Rossum, as well as each man's intended motivations for creating an artificial man. Each of the supporting characters is motivated by a different emotion: desire for liberation from hard labor, disdain for technology, desire to modernize, fear of the robots themselves. Čapek

acknowledges that it *is* possible to see in each of these characters an ideology or a worldview that corresponds specifically to events, figures or ideologies within his contemporary global situation. However, he claims:

We need not look for actual names for these various and controverted idealisms. Be these people either Conservatives or Socialists, Yellows or Reds, the most important thing is—and this is the point I wish particularly to stress—that all of them are right in the plain and moral sense of the word...I ask whether it is not possible to see in the present social conflict of the world an analogous struggle between two, three, five, equally serious verities and equally generous idealisms? (79)

Čapek acknowledges the multitude of potential motivations and anxieties wrapped up in the themes and motifs of *R.U.R.* The uncanny and difficult to categorize automata, while they may correspond to regional events, are more than mere artifacts of regionalist literature or direct representations of the 1920s Czech political scene. The more global themes to which the Robots draw attention are also conversations that other modernist authors, vis-à-vis the figure of the automaton, are more complicated than an equation of the Robots with Soviet communist progress or mechanization. The larger motif of the automaton complicates a straightforward reading and takes into account the reader's own complex reactions to the textual automaton, influenced by his own situation, concerns and preoccupations.

SECTION FOUR

QUIROGA'S UNPOLICED AUTOMATON

Quiroga's deployment of the automaton is, like Čapek's, indicative of universal societal pressures and anxieties that connect his text to the larger modernist movement. Quiroga certainly participated in the larger literary discourse of his time in stories that examine labor struggles, senseless death and intimidating technology, repurposing the themes and motifs of the literary modernism that flourished concurrently in Europe and the United States. One of Quiroga's crucial contributions to the literature of the automaton was his depiction of the creation of human emotion through scientific experimentation. He examined science and technology's impact on the human psyche, which is a common motif in modernist literature. Yet, because he treated these themes in a rustic, naturalist setting, Quiroga has been given the minimalizing label of "regionalist" or "creolist" ("Quiroga, Horacio 1878-1937"), which seems appropriate given the author's dislike of cosmopolitan cities such as Paris or Buenos Aires and his eventual retreat to the Misiones region of Argentina and to settle the very jungles about which he wrote. While Quiroga is thus admired as a reclusive, reluctant author whose masterfully grotesque short stories displayed an ability to mimic the power of the great Western authors in a novel, South American setting, this categorization of Quiroga as imitator is demeaning to the author, who is a participant in the same global literary response to modernity as his contemporary authors.

Critics such as George D. Schade and Jason Wilson have focused on Quiroga's

dissociation from the literary trends of his contemporaries and have equated this with lack of political interest and agenda. By consciously choosing to imitate the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe with his own South American spin on the gothic short story, Schade claims, Quiroga turns away from the literary *modernismo* of his European contemporaries and shuns politics, although, in spite of this intentional distancing, “some of the most trenchant social commentary in Spanish American fiction can be perceived in his stories, particularly those concerned with the exploitation of Misiones lumberjacks, like ‘Los mensú’ (‘The Monthly Wage Earners’) and ‘A Slap in the Face’” (Schade). Wilson similarly discusses Quiroga’s derision for the “literary fashions” of his contemporary authors and his desire to create a story “written in blood” by using “Spanish that refused to be “polished” and literary, reproducing local speech, packed with specific plant and animal names, in an attempt to capture what [he] called ‘real life’” (Wilson).

This motion to distance Quiroga from the styles of European literary modernism, however, equates that singular high or “aesthetic” form of literary modernism to the best writing of the period and discounts the artistry of Quiroga’s deliberate choice to reject modernist conventions. Few acknowledge any motivation behind this disdain for modernist “fashions” besides obstinacy or recalcitrance. Michael E. Wong-Russell does credit Quiroga with a deeper purpose for his break from modernism—promotion of a scientific mindset in both content and form: Quiroga is an author who attempted to escape from “rhythmic and metaphor-laden decorative verse to a prose/essay style that makes use of canonical and hypothetical scientific premises as its operatives” (93). Yet, according to Wong-Russell, Quiroga is attempting to bypass his contemporary authors

altogether and transition into a form of literary naturalism, rather than participating in textual conversations between other authors.

This argument echoes Beatriz Sarlo's claim that *El hombre artificial*, like other Argentine futuristic fiction of the early twentieth century, was constructing a narrative of Latin American technological progress overcoming the region's marginal status (71). She ultimately reads the text as a tale of Argentine scientific democratization and locates the author at the beginning of a generation of Latin American authors who optimistically attempt to present rational, positive uses of science (71). Sarlo points to *El hombre artificial* as the novella that jumpstarted "the process by which the hegemony of the 'knowledge' of science in Argentine literature and culture makes room for the 'know-how' of technology and engineering" (8). This democratization, she claims, was mirrored by Quiroga's motion to bring scientific literature to the masses through his accessible scientific language and the serial publication of the novella in a popular magazine. While these critics credit Quiroga with advancing the narrative of Argentine progress—whether technologically or in literary form—they focus on the author's rejection of European literary modernism in favor of a "gritty and bloody" or "naturalist" Latin American style of writing, heavily influenced by Poe or Maupassant, instead of attending to his treatment of universal, modernist themes in a Latin American setting.

The number of occurrences of automata exploded in modernist literature, perhaps because of the era's preoccupation with the human body and the threats imposed upon it by a changing global situation. The human body served as the locus of modernism and technology in many texts—the point at which literature is forced to investigate and

address, if not assimilate, multiple reactions to technology. Tim Armstrong's cultural study *Modernism, technology and the body* suggests that "modernists with quite different attitudes to social and technological modernity saw the body as the locus of anxiety, even crisis; as requiring an intervention through which it might be made the grounds of a new form of production" (4). This fundamental grounding point, which has served as both muse and subject matter for literature in every historical time period, was by the twentieth century a familiar avenue for literary exploration. While the nature of threats to the body certainly evolved over the centuries—the automaton in Mary Shelly's 1818 *Frankenstein* addressed different societal fears than the automaton in Quiroga's 1910 novella—the motif of the automaton connected centuries of literature in a shared tradition.

The "human" body that interacts with technology in *El hombre artificial*—represented in the vague forms of chemical analysis and creation, hypnotism, and electrical transference—is the perfect body of Biógeno. His freshly created form is a canvas that at once displays both the promising and horrifying potentials of technology's impact upon human beings. On one hand the automaton is elementally perfect, having somehow been constructed on an atomic level:

elemento por elemento, miligramo por miligramo, todo había sido prolijamente dosificado, probado y ejecutado... Tal increíble perfección habían puesto en los mas insignificantes detalles de su obra... El ser que yacía de espaldas frente de ellos era un hombre de mediana estatura, de maravillosa proporción. Representaba veinticinco años. Las facciones tenían

una serenidad sorprendente. Los ojos estaban cerrados y el pecho subía y bajaba rítmicamente.

[element by element, milligram by milligram, everything had been neatly dosed, tested and implemented...Such incredible perfection had been put into the most minute details of their work...The being that lay on his back in front of them was a man of medium height and wonderful proportion. He appeared to be twenty-five years old. His features had a surprising serenity. His eyes were closed, his chest rising and falling rhythmically. (Quiroga 34-35)]

While Biógeno thus appears to be the ideal specimen of a twenty-five year old man in perfect health, his body's interactions with technology are not limited to concise measurements and sterile, detailed construction. The scientists soon realize that their creation lacks the perception and human sensations that would allow Biógeno to rise above mere physical perfection to become a functioning human being. Once more, they apply science and technology to their creation's body in hopes of endowing him with these attributes.

This time, however, the process is neither neat nor detached. In order to endow Biógeno with perception, they must torture the vagrant and transfer his pain into their *ser vivo*. Donissoff attempts to explain the scientific premise of the process, using detached language and third-party theorems to justify the production of a "highly acute current of pain" through torture. Biógeno, he claims, is like the coil in a battery:

Si se enrolla un alambre aislado en un cilindro de hierro y se hace pasar por el

alambre una corriente eléctrica, el hierro se imanta. Si ese cilindro así dispuesto se introduce en el hueco de un carretel, sobre el cual se ha enrollado también otro alambre perfectamente *aislado*, sin comunicación alguna con el cilindro, la corriente eléctrica del cilindro pasa por *influencia* a la del carretel, pero *centuplicada* en energía. Esto es lo que se llama carrete o bobina de Rumkhorff.

[If an electric current is passed through an insulated wire wound on an iron cylinder, the iron becomes magnetized. If that cylinder is then inserted into the hollow of a spool on which another perfectly *insulated* wire is wound, without any communication with the cylinder itself, the first cylinder's electric current will be transferred through the *influence* of the spool, but the energy will magnify *a hundredfold*. This is what is called a Rumkhorff reel or coil. (Quiroga 37-38)]

Armstrong claims that this metaphor of the human body as a battery, which may not seem significant to a twenty-first century audience, is actually a common motif in twentieth century examinations of the human body. Society's truce with this relatively novel technology was then more precarious. Quiroga's presentation of Donisoff's attempt to justify his radical experiments through this metaphor thus situates the novella within a larger modernist conversation about the dangers of intimidating electrical technologies.

Armstrong points to the use of electricity and its changing status at the turn of the twentieth century as a device in modernist literature that was "becoming part of a

network of power which transcended the scale of the human body and could kill. Its mobile energies seemed like an index of modernity (particularly American modernity)” (14). He also points to Gerald Stanley Lee’s 1913 articulation of “[electricity’s] ability to connect the individual and the *polis*... this use of electricity to aphorize poet - as portable, networked, and rowing between individuals and the state...” (14).

The dual nature of electricity in this period was the potential and danger inherent in its ability to allow individuals to transcend traditional hierarchical structures. The electric current forms a network that connects all individuals and thus democratizes society. In the modern period, electricity was seen as imitating the body’s neural, “electrical” impulses. Therefore the individual might be connected to others on equal footing, but would at the same time be vulnerable to the dangers associated with the human body’s interactions with electricity. This radical democratization vis-à-vis electrical connection was certainly an intimidating and concerning prospect for a society still much entrenched in a stratified, colonial system of both class and scientific education.

Thus the electrical metaphor was used to explain the “dangers” of an interconnected, overly stimulating human network in both *El hombre artificial* and its contemporary literature. The modern era was an era of stimulation, and exposure to unrestrained or unpoliced technology was considered dangerous.³ The speed and

³ Armstrong’s study references Theodore Dreiser’s masterful turn of phrase on the topic of technological fatigue and stimulation. Dreiser described it as: “a kaleidoscopic glitter, a dazzling and confusing phantasmagoria of life that wearies and stultifies the mental and moral nature. It induces a sort of intellectual fatigue through which we see the ranks of the victims of insomnia, melancholia, and insanity constantly recruited. Our modern

complexity of modern life was seen to produce the affliction of nervous exhaustion or “neurasthenia,” which was the most common psychiatric diagnosis of the late nineteenth century. This conception of the human body equated it to a battery, plugged into a society that, when directly connected without mediation, would drain it: “as the body is plugged into such external systems as the telegraph and railway, its energy needs rise” (Armstrong 18). The fear that humans would, when presented with unpoliced and newly-democratized technology, disconnect from the structured safety and moral guidelines of established society and do damage to themselves and others is clearly reflected in the gruesome result of the scientists’ electrical experimentation with their automaton in *El hombre artificial*.

Despite his attempt to couch the torture in sterile scientific language, Donisoff’s attempt to “charge” Biógeno with twenty-five years’ worth of sensation through the application of a stream of intense pain is messy and violent. Instead of his previous, “virginal” serenity, Biógeno’s body displays the crippling effects of the accumulation of pain and horror as each of the victim’s fingernails are removed with pliers. By the end of the process, his body bears unintended scars created by this application of technology, the tremors and grotesque expression of an adult who has seen and suffered horrors (Quiroga 40).

Donisoff, however, refuses to accept that this grotesque and morally problematic quandary is anything other than a setback in the scientists’ grand experiment—something

brain-pan does not seem capable as yet of receiving, sorting, and storing the vast arm of facts and impressions which present themselves daily. The white light of publicity is too white” (qtd. in Armstrong 22)

that can be adjusted through a reapplication of the same methods, slightly recalibrated. While Sivel and Ortiz urge him to put Biógeno out of his misery, Donissoff refuses to squander four years' worth of scientific production, and leaves the automaton in agony overnight as he reevaluates the premise of the experiment. In the morning, the scientist declares his intent to reverse the process of accumulation of sensation, prolonging the experiment. He again attempts to couch torture in scientific language and to describe the process as a "discharge" of sensation from Biógeno into another "container." Lacking a receptacle to fill this function, Donissoff offers his own body to receive the discharge. To his colleagues, the commitment of his own body to the scientific cause appears to be a noble sacrifice for the sake of scientific progress.

While the process itself is horrifying and gruesome, claiming the lives and dignity of both Donissoff and Biógeno, the novella's conclusion seems to suggest that Donissoff's commitment to scientific progress in the face of setbacks and moral limitations is to be admired as a sort of martyrdom. Donissoff is described as an archangel whose demise precludes any continuation of the experiment by the secondary scientists Sivel or Ortiz, neither of whom was willing to push the boundaries of morality in the same way that Donissoff had:

Everything was finished! Never again would they aspire to anything! Never again would they enter the laboratory! Their entire future was dead now, like the man with the bandaged hands was dead; like their abominable creation was dead; like there lay dead—sublime creature, archangel of genius, will, and beauty—Donissoff (Quiroga 52).

In this final exclamation, the scientific project is mourned over and above the experiment's casualties. The victim whose fingernails were pried out for the sake of science and the automaton whose potential and physical perfection were desiccated by the overambitious attempt to endow him with the totality of human perception are mentioned. Yet the actual outcry is for the death of possibility and the future that the three scientists had imagined for themselves—their amoral visionary, Donisoff, has perished and with him died the unpoliced drive towards scientific progress without attention to the laws of man or morality.

This aspect of the text reveals a societal fear of the worst-case technological scenario: a realization of the fear that widespread, amateur access to science via technology could not be policed. Yet at the same time, the three scientists were able to make substantial developments in their fields that resulted in an impressive interdisciplinary collaboration. The three scientists' attempt to create a human being speaks to the potential dangers of scientific knowledge being converted into mass-produced, widespread technology available to all. Donisoff, Sivel and Ortiz may deserve praise for achieving their monumental discovery through only widely accessible technology. Yet the text goes on to encourage skepticism about the destructive potential of technology in unscrupulous hands in Quiroga's revelation of the cost of this accomplishment, counted in dismembered human bodies. These three characters utilize their technological prowess without seeming to hold their experiments accountable to any code of conduct—or at least adhering to a moral code that would prohibit them from torturing another human being in order to give life to their creation.

Here Quiroga examines the implications of technology's interactions with the body: does the exciting scientific possibility of creating sentience or knowledge out of pain justify torture? Haywood points to the disparity between the narrator and the victim's perceptions of the three torturers: the narrator claims that "horrible era sin duda; pero para aquellos tres hombres que habían sacrificado a su ideal, uno su cariño de hijo, otro su amor, otro su fortuna, el tormento aplicado a un pobre ser inocente no podía ser obstáculo al triunfo de su ideal científico" [Doubtless it was horrible, but for these three men who had sacrificed all for their dream: one a son's love, another his lover, the other his fortune, the torment of a poor innocent being could not be an obstacle to the triumph of their scientific dream.] (Quiroga 38). From the victim's perspective, however, the laboratory is described as "that laboratory with its hellish appearance, and the three demons, devourers of men" (Haywood 200). The purity of the scientists' goal juxtaposed with the victim's perception of these men as hellish demons exposes the Machiavellian conundrum that scientific progress is frequently forced to confront. The reader is forced to weigh the value of the experiment's end result against the gruesome means by which it is obtained—the torture victim's eventual death balanced against the myriad scientific advances that it could produce.

This line of inquiry is further complicated by the figure of the automaton, Biógeno. The text certainly encourages its readers to consider whether the sacrifice of two *human* lives is worth an immense scientific gain and the acquisition of the god-like ability to create new human life. Yet that "essential paradox" is perhaps less paralyzing than what I believe is the real ethical quandary of the novella: the morality of torturing

the automaton in the name of science. While it is easy to decry the abduction and torture of the vagrant victim, or even the ultimately futile self-sacrifice of Donisoff's life in the name of the experiment, these are both human lives. But what of Biógeno? He is no one's son or brother, and did not have the human ability to feel until he was endowed with the sensation. He is essentially created in the same manner as a petri-dish culture or the scientists' early experimental rat. Sivel, Ortiz and Donisoff seem to see the automaton in this manner, valuing not the being but the scientific breakthrough that he represents. They refer to killing the automaton as "ending the experiment" instead of murder, as in the death of the vagrant.

The reader nonetheless sees humanity in the "perfect specimen." Biógeno weeps, feels pain and exhibits other signs of humanity. As with Čapek's robots, it is easy to sympathize with the automaton, who in *El hombre artificial* is both innocent and passive. The knowledge that this character is not actually human undermines this sympathy but is unable to fully overcome it. The confusion caused by Biógeno's evocation of sympathy for human suffering, concurrent with his exploitation by Donisoff and company in the name of scientific progress produces a conflicting, and perhaps uncanny, reaction for both the morally divided scientists in the novella and the modern readers of Quiroga's novella.

Thus *El hombre artificial* is a text that participates in and contributes to a conversation that encompasses more than a regional Argentine perspective on globalization or a naturalist tradition that serves as precursor to magical realism or the Latin American boom. The framework provided by the greater context of international

modernism allows this novella to speak to transnational concerns and preoccupations. *El hombre artificial* reflects the multi-faceted nature of modernism's reactions to technology through the complex figure of the automaton Biogeno, illuminating the conflict located in modern society's relationship with technology and a shift towards globalization.

SECTION FIVE

CONCLUSION

None of the three texts examined in this paper—Freud’s “The Uncanny,” Karel Čapek’s *R.U.R.*, and Quiroga’s *El hombre artificial*—present a one-to-one correspondence between the figure of the automaton and a global event, leader or ideology. Even the possibility that the automaton directly reveals a single memory or neurosis in the individual reader’s subconscious seems to be precluded by the myriad occurrences and varying natures of the automaton in the convoluted and often abstract plots of the many modern texts that make use of the motif. Yet read in conversation with each other, each text contributes to an understanding of modernism that incorporates multiple regional or national perspectives on common themes.

Quiroga does not attempt to present a single answer to—or even a single perspective on—the issue of human morality and responses to the newfound and relatively unrestricted power granted by modern technology. He instead locates his novella—with its Latin American setting, modern preoccupations and cosmopolitan cast of characters—within the global tradition of the automaton that can be traced back through thousands of years of literature. This established tradition, though generally studied in the context of nineteenth and twentieth century Western European literature, nonetheless provides a lens for examination of any number of diverse cultures and time periods. Quiroga’s novella, in its conversation with texts such as *R.U.R.* and “The Uncanny” that feature the automaton, transcends classification as a regional text

concerned only with distinctly Latin American issues. Instead, the reactions to the uncanny nature of the automaton presented in this novella are global reactions that reveal preoccupations of a transnational—not regional—modern era.

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