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UTOPIAN ESCAPISM IN JULIO RICCI: GOLDEN AGE TRANSMUTED INTO GEOGRAPHY

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Much of the fiction of Julio Ricci centers on various types of grotesques who inhabit what Meo Zilio refers to as *la plúmbea cotidianeidad montevideana*.¹ On the other hand, a significantly high proportion of Ricci's short stories concerns characters who originate in Eastern Europe or the Middle East. While a great deal of the Uruguayan writer's fictional world is bathed in an aura of poetry and magic,² this poetry and this magic are much more evident in the works that deal with Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Russian and Turkish Jews, and Armenians. These denizens of the Middle East and the territory behind the Iron Curtain suffer as much, if not more, than the native Uruguayans, but have a mysteriously noble, spiritual dimension to their lives which is of profound interest to Ricci.³

The Uruguayan narrator of "Pivoski" visits an old friend born in Poland. The flat, in the Old City of Montevideo, is dark, disorderly, filthy, unheated and foul-smelling, yet the narrator has a sense of well-being in this atmosphere because in it he finds human warmth and a sense of intimacy that he has always associated with *la Europa central y ... los Balcanes*.⁴ The narrator is not only more comfortable in this gloomy, stinking pigsty (*pocilga lúgubre y hedionda*), he is actually *ecstatic* in it because *dominaba por sobre todo el espíritu del hombre, de ese hombre único e intransferible*

que era Pivoski (M, pp. 11-12). The narrator becomes more effusive, declaring that being in this apartment is equivalent to having arrived in the Promised Land, the place of his dreams (M, p. 12). His own home is well-lighted, neat, clean and warm, yet the narrator feels that something is missing from his modern, technologically perfect dwelling. In Pivoski's decrepit flat he immediately recovers his happiness and feels like a new man (Ibid.).

An element originating in a different region of Ricci's enchanted geography is introduced and associated with Pivoski: the Turkish coffee to which the Pole had become accustomed when living in Istanbul for three years before settling in Montevideo. At this point, the narrator insists on his enchantment in the presence of Pivoski (M, p. 13). The atmosphere of the flat is summed up with a pair of oxymora: *En un ambiente tan acariciadoramente lúgubre, en una atmósfera tan íntimamente sórdida...* (My emphasis, M, p. 18). This juxtaposition of negative adjectives and positive adverbs links the dark and gloomy surroundings paradoxically to feelings of affection, intimacy and well-being.

The Uruguayan narrator of "La carta," Juan González, writes a letter to a Polish woman he had met at the Warsaw airport and with whom he had conversed on the flight from the Polish capital to Copenhagen ten years earlier.⁵ The narrator considers this woman to be extraordinary precisely because she is Polish.⁶ Yet, in his initial references to his nostalgia for places visited in the past, Turkey is involved once more: *Una boleta de cambio de dinero en Estambul, por ejemplo, desencadena en mi mente decenas de vivencias. Vuelvo al Gran Bazar, cruzo el Cuerno de Oro en un barco, me veo de nuevo en un café de la Calle Galata o de la Plaza Taksim* (C, p. 126). Other items he has saved bring him back to Warsaw and then to Bucharest. As in "Pivoski," in which there is a bridge — the Balkans — joining Poland to Turkey, in "La carta" the same axis — Poland, Rumania, Turkey — unites the territories of Ricci's enchanted region.

González, following in the footsteps of the narrator of "Pivoski," experiences physical discomfort — including, once more, a cup of unappetizing coffee — while being charmed by his companion's humanity. The bitter coffee, the stale cake, the numbing cold of the unheated airliner, are more than compensated by Iwona's warm personality. In "La carta," as in "Pivoski," humanity is preferred to the technological advances of a world which is becoming less human every day: *Entre tanta máquina el contacto humano tal vez sea como una luz en las tinieblas, una ventana a la vida* (C, p. 129). Alone in his apartment in Montevideo, having returned from his soul-deadening, routine-filled desk job, the narrator states and then repeats that he is happy just thinking of his conversation with Iwona ten years earlier.

González associates the city of Warsaw with Iwona. His initial impressions of the city had been of intense cold, people hiding inside their houses, hiding inside their souls, a massive black building dominating the city, and Iwona, clad in black. This negative image proves to be false; he finds that the inhabitants of the Polish capital have a zest for life as well as a desire to help the stranger.⁷ As in Pivoski's flat, the physical surroundings contrast with the traits of the human spirit.

Iwona has about her something *de bohemia, de vencida, de decadente* (Ibid.). The narrator is pleased that she has not attained two qualities he associates with fine, new clothing (her clothing is old and worn): *importancia* and *desfachatez* (Ibid.). This Polish woman is associated, as was Pivoski, with odors that Westerners attempt to avoid. This is a positive factor for González because it indicates that Iwona is not a member of the consumer society which dominates the West: *Hasta tenía el olor de los no muy favorecidos. El consumismo no la había invadido de plano. No estaba tocada por olores artificiales* (C, 129-30). This lack of artificiality confers upon Iwona a modern-day odor of sanctity.

It is revealing that in thinking of Warsaw, González refers three times in one short paragraph to oldness (*vetusta; viejo; reliquia*), while he romanticizes Iwona's links with the past into myth and poetry: *Tal vez Ud. [Iwona] había emergido de las aguas grises, de la espesa niebla del Vístula, de algún poema polaco* (C, p. 130). It is significant that the narrator's leaving Poland prevents him from saying something beautiful, intimate, to Iwona because, *la atmósfera diferente de Dinamarca, los seres mecánicos del aeropuerto, rompieron el encanto* (C, p. 131). The spell of ancient, poetic Poland is broken in contact with the modernized, prosaic West in which the narrator is greeted by robot-like airport employees. He is once more plunged into the sea of incommunication which typifies our advanced Western civilization, and is inhibited from functioning on a personal, human level.

"El Shojjet" is the story of an elderly Uruguayan gentleman, Pedro López, who sets out to find his childhood friend, Lázaro Dorón, a Russian-born Jew.⁸ The narrator deeply admires, even idealizes, the Jewish people. In much the same way that the Polish woman of "La carta" was not an ordinary woman, in "El shojjet" the narrator declares that his friend *no era un muchacho como los demás*.⁹ This is so not only because of Lázaro's intelligence and good character, but because of his exotic origins and the air of mystery which the narrator feels surrounds Lázaro: within this short story there are eleven instances of the use either of the noun *misterio* or the adjective *misterioso* with reference to Lázaro, to other individual Jews, or to the Jewish people (G, pp. 22, 23, 24, 26, 27). The concept is further heightened by the employment of eight other terms conceptually related to the aforementioned noun and adjective.¹⁰

The attribution to the Jews of secrets, incomprehensible mystery and magic had for centuries instilled fear and loathing of this people into the hearts of Christians. Well into the twentieth century Jews were suspected of murdering Christian children for ritual purposes.¹¹ Yet these mysterious qualities, for the Uruguayan narrator of "El shojjet," even as a child, are positive factors. Pedro López even begins to study the Hebrew tongue with his playmate in order to gain entry into the fascinating world of the Children of Israel (G, p. 22). A glance at the lexicon demonstrates that this is because young López sees their magic as good rather than evil. This goodness is insisted upon as though it were a leitmotif; some form of the adjective *bueno* is utilized eight times in this short story with reference to the Jews (G, pp. 23, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32). If related adjectives are added to this figure, there are eleven references to the goodness of this people.¹² In the mind of the narrator of "El shojjet," a surrogate for Ricci himself, the prime qualities of the Jews are magical mystery combined with moral excellence, and the descendants of the ancient Israelites are practitioners of good magic.¹³

They possess other qualities, too. Unlike Ricci's Poles, his Jews are surrounded by material comforts; at any rate, this is the narrator's impression on visiting the shops of the Jewish quarter of Buenos Aires. He sees piles of merchandise, brightly colored fabrics, people energetically moving packages from one place to another, and he smells delightful fragrances. He imagines that behind all this mercantile activity sits *algún anciano hebreo contando dinero o abstraído en meditaciones misteriosas, en esas meditaciones que yo buscaba ahora comprender pero que se me escapaban* (G, pp. 26-27). In the narrator's mind still lurks the ancient stereotype of the Jew counting money as well as engaged in magico-religious meditations.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the context in which the old stereotype is found is positive: López wishes to be a part of this attractive world. Ironically, on observing this perennially persecuted and beleaguered people, the narrator declares, *¡Qué feliz y qué segura era esa vida entre paquetes y colores y perfumes y mercaderías!* (G, p. 27).

In his spellbound observation of the Jewish shops, López experiences the sensation of travelling in time, returning to the ancient world, to the bazaars of Asia filled with *maravillas y misterios infinitos* (Ibid.). He thinks the Jews know how to live like lords among opulent surroundings because *venfan del Asia, eran hombres de La mlí y una noches* who know and control the great secrets of existence. At this point, López feels envy (Ibid.).

As in Pivoski's squalid flat, in which the atmosphere was different from that of most of Montevideo, Lázaro's home contains *una atmósfera distinta* (G, p. 23). The specific atmosphere associated with the People of the Book is one of spirituality, of the sacred.¹⁵ The narrator's

contemplation of the synagogues of Montevideo leave him in a state of ecstasy (G, p. 25). *Ecstasy* is also the state experienced by the narrator of "Pivoski" while in the Pole's flat (M, p. 11).

In the Jewish hotel of Buenos Aires, the narrator encounters great human warmth and homey friendship among the elderly men who gather in the lobby to chat each evening. He is so comfortable among these people — who more than half the time speak Yiddish, a language unintelligible to López — that he, like Odysseus among the lotus-eaters, temporarily forgets his mission in the Argentine capital: to seek his childhood friend, Lázaro Dorón. The reason for the lapse is that *Es inimaginable lo bien que me sentía allí* (G, p. 25). The Jews of "El shojjet" represent a materially comfortable world balanced by deep spirituality as well as human warmth, magic and moral rectitude. These qualities are highly prized by the narrator.

A different kind of Jew is the protagonist of "Historia de una radio."¹⁶ José Niño is not a Yiddish-speaking native of Russia; he is a Spanish-speaking native of Turkey, a descendant of the Jews expelled from Spain in Columbus' time. This Sephardi is neither mysterious nor particularly spiritual; in fact, Niño differs very little from the ordinary Uruguayans who populate the short stories of Ricci, except that he, unlike the native-born Uruguayans, lives miserably in the present in order to safeguard his old age.¹⁷

José Niño is a good man, but an ordinary man. The reason he possesses none of the mystery or spirituality found in the Jews of "El shojjet" must lie precisely in his ordinariness, in his lack of exoticism. His speaking a dialect of Spanish even before settling in Uruguay allows him to blend into local life much more readily than the Jew who speaks an outlandish Germanic tongue. Furthermore, Niño is from Izmir, a city on the Aegean (Mediterranean) coast of Turkey with a climate similar to that of Montevideo or, for that matter, to the Mediterranean ports of Spain and Italy, countries from which the ancestors of the average Uruguayan have come. It is only the Ashkenazic Jew, proceeding from villages like those of Marc Chagall's luminous fantasies, villages situated on the frozen, wind-swept steppes of Poland and Russia, whom Ricci views as fascinatingly different, as mysterious and spiritual.

In "El shojjet," the ancient Hebrew language was, for the narrator, the key to the unknown. Significantly, the single point at which the mundane story of José Niño and the coveted shortwave radio takes on some of the mysticism that pervades "El shojjet" is at the very end, during the funeral services for the protagonist, and in close relationship with the Hebrew language and religion. The officiating rabbi chants prayers in the Holy Tongue, and then speaks of Niño's life, of friendship, the mysteries of human existence and the hereafter. Then, as Niño's friends — Christians

and Jews alike — participate in filling the grave with earth, the Uruguayan narrator is inspired to compose several lines of poetry regarding the brevity of human life (O, p. 82). The rabbi speaks once more, and the cemetery takes on a dream-like quality for the narrator. At this point, precisely as happened to the narrator of "El shojjet" while peering into the Jewish shop windows, the narrator feels as though he were transported in time and in space, to *la antigüedad* and to *el Asia Menor* (Ibid.). The rabbi then intones Hebrew prayers which, for the narrator, are deeply moving, are *palabras mágicas* even though — or perhaps *because* — he does not understand them.

The visions of the people who originate in Eastern Europe and in the Middle East afforded by Ricci's short stories are at times contradictory. There is opulence and there is squalor. There is physical comfort and there is material discomfort. There are delightful fragrances and foul odors. Nevertheless, there are also qualities held in common. The characters emanating from these eastern lands are invariably associated in some way with what is *old*, whether ancient or merely old-fashioned. The values of this world are also ancient or old-fashioned: moral rectitude, spirituality, human warmth, intimate friendship and love. Around this core of values Ricci casts a numinous glow of mystery.

Exoticism in fiction tends to be the expression of a writer's dissatisfaction with the world in which he lives. The writer finds his surroundings too painful to bear, and seeks escape in dreaming of other times or of other climes. Ricci's narrators try to escape the mechanized, computerized, dehumanized Western world of today by entering an older, more human world. Because Pivoski's apartment and Iwona's Warsaw are uncomfortable and malodorous — the way the West was a century ago — Ricci feels it retains the human spiritual qualities he believes were once found in the West. At the same time, the Jewish Religion and the Hebrew language, associated with the Bible, suggest to Ricci the mysteries of the origin of life and the ancient moral values which he feels are fast disappearing.

While Ricci's dissatisfaction with the modern West can be deduced from the reading of his works of fiction, these deductions are supported in speaking directly with him. Answering a query which bore no obvious relation to his fiction, Ricci said:

En la gran época del tango (los años 40 y 50, años de mi juventud) ... [e]l hombre estaba más apegado a la familia, había menos facilidades materiales, menos movilidad social, menos máquinas.... Estaba [el hombre] más arraigado al barrio.... Estaba incluso más ligado sentimentalmente a los amigos....¹⁸

Whereas the past represents a period in which the absence of social mobility and of a high degree of mechanization is equated with greater social cohesion and deeper friendship, life in the modern world is *como una eterna partida de ajedrez de un nivel de stress incalculable* (DL, p. 82). Merely surviving in any of the large cities requires *una salud mental enorme*, because *[t]odo es lucha por la vida. Todo es ajustarse a nuevas situaciones, y eso coloca al hombre en un estado de inquietud y de desequilibrio* (Ibid., p. 83). That he refers specifically to the Western world is explicit: *El avance cada vez mayor del psicólogo en Occidente muestra la situación de inseguridad y caos de las masas* (Ibid.) ... *en este inexplicable Occidente de hoy* (Ibid., p. 84).

For many, poetry is an escape from the rigors of the workaday world. Ricci's definition of poetry is revealing; it is, he says,

una esencia, un algo misterioso e indefinible que produce un estado muy especial o un rapto inexplicable en el alma y que tal vez corresponde a la captación de algo inefable, de algo que no podemos explicitar claramente, pero que nos acerca de algún modo a lo que sería el secreto de la vida, de la creación, del tiempo (Ibid.).

The elements of this Riccian definition of poetry are those sought by the narrators of the stories dealing with the regions and characters of a swath of territory extending from Russia and Poland through the Balkans to Turkey and the Middle East. This magical region is Ricci's refuge from the dystopia of the impersonal, technologically advanced modern world — Ricci's West — into the poetry of a world which is still as human, and as magical, as he imagines the West of his youth was. Unable to travel in time, Ricci's narrators travel in space and transmute time — the golden age of his youth — into space: a utopian geographical region to the East and Southeast of Europe.

NOTES

1 Giovanni Meo Zilio, "El neorrealismo de Julio Ricci, entre onirismo y gestualidad: Apuntes estilísticos," en *Revista Iberoamericana*, 49, 123-124 (abril-setiembre 1983), 550.

2 Cf. the vision which is *empapada de poesía y magia*. Fernando Ainsa, *Tiempo reconquistado* (Montevideo: Ediciones Géminis, 1978), p. 185.

3 Note, however, the naive summary on the back cover of Julio Ricci, *Ocho modelos de felicidad* (Buenos Aires: Macondo Ediciones, 1980): *También aquí aparecen algunas figuras de la Europa Oriental con sus caídas en un raro tipo de absurdismo y de grotesco, desconocido entre los latinos del Río de la Plata.*

4 Julio Ricci, *Los maniáticos* (Montevideo: Editorial Alfa, 1970), p. 11. Subsequent references to this collection will appear in the text with the page number, preceded by the letter M, in parenthesis.

5 "La carta" has been published, in English translation, as "The Letter," in *Webster Review*, 10, 2 (Fall 1985), 40-46.

6 *Además, una polaca era para mí una gran mujer. No era como una alemana o una francesa o una italiana.* Julio Ricci, *Cuentos civilizados* (Montevideo: Ediciones Géminis, 1985), p. 128. Subsequent references to this collection will appear in the text with the page number, preceded by the letter C, in parenthesis.

7 Contrary to popular stereotypes, González adds that the greys of Poland conceal a great human warmth, while the shamelessness of the bright and ardent sun and of the immodest light of the Mediterranean lands mask a fundamental coldness (C, p. 130). This idea bears a startling resemblance to that expressed by the protagonist of Thomas Mann's "Tonio Kroger." Cf. *I'm fed up with Italy ... The whole belleza business makes me nervous. All those frightfully animated people down there with their black animal-like eyes; I don't like them either. These Romance peoples have no soul in their eyes. No, I'm going to take a trip to Denmark.* Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories*, trans. by H. T. Lowe-Porter, Vintage Books, a Division of Random House (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), pp. 106-107.

8 "El shojjet," translated into English by Miriam Varon as "The Shoyhet," has the distinction of being the only piece written by a non-Jew in an anthology of Latin American writings of Jewish theme. See Robert and Roberta Kalechofsky, general editors, *Echad: An Anthology of Latin American Jewish Writings* (Marblehead: Micah Publications, 1980), pp. 113-21.

9 Julio Ricci, *El Grongo* (Montevideo: Ediciones Géminis, 1976), p. 22. Subsequent references to this collection will appear in the text with the page number, preceded by the letter G, in parenthesis.

10 *[I]nexplicable; secretos* (G, p. 22); *raro; lo desconocido; secreta* (G, p. 23); *mágico; inasible* (G, p. 24); *impenetrables* (G, p. 26).

11 For accusations of ritual murder through the ages, see, e.g. Max L. Margolis and Alexander Marx, *A History of the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1927), pp. 367-68, 380-82, 384-85, 389-90, 375, 376, 417-18, 541, 542-44, 579-81, 651-53, 674, 685, 693, 700, 716-17. The

blood accusations which occurred in the nineteenth century are referred to between pages 651 and 700, while the infamous Beilis trial of the twentieth century is covered on pp. 716-17. See also Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, 6 Vols. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1898), Vol III, pp. 378-81, 402, 499, 564, 583-85, 591, 635-37, 643; Vol. IV, pp. 223-24, 227, 246-47, 261-64, 298-307, 545-50; Vol. V, pp. 45-49, 174-77, 185-88, 279-87, 633-42, 650, 654-55, 661-62, 669. Twentieth century cases do not appear in Graetz because it was published before those cases took place. The most recent book to speak of the blood libel is Paul Johnson's *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 310, 322, 357, 571, 577. For an entire book dealing exclusively with the infamous blood libel trial of twentieth-century Russia, see Maurice Samuel, *Blood Accusation: The Strange History of the Beilis Case* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964).

12 Lázaro's mother is *muy simpática* (G, p. 23), and later his daughter is *muy simpática* too (G, p. 28). Lázaro, after death, is *el querido shoijet* (G, p. 33).

13 In general terms, Ricci has said: *Yo diría que lo autobiográfico está en casi todos los autores. Algunos se alejan mucho de lo que parece ser autobiográfico.... Pero yo no tengo ningún prejuicio en utilizar elementos autobiográficos.* (See "Entrevista con Julio Ricci," in *Discurso Literario*, 5, 1 [1987], 85.) More to the point: *Cuando tenía catorce años me reunía con un amigo judío ruso, Lázaro Jalfin o Halfin, gran amigo con quien pasábamos horas jugando. Y él estudiaba hebreo y yo estudiaba con él* (Ibid., p. 79. All subsequent references to this interview will appear in the text with the page number preceded by the initials DL in parenthesis). Even more specifically, with respect to the plot of "El shoijet," Ricci writes: *Era por el año 32, la época de la Depresión. Luego no lo vi más [a Lázaro Halfin]. Pero un día, cuando [yo] andaba por el Centro, lo reconocí, ya un hombre de casi sesenta años, parado en la puerta de un negocio de platería. Quise hablarle, pero no me atreví. Me faltó fuerza, y no lo vi más en la platería.* From Julio Ricci letter to me of July 6, 1985.

14 The counting of money (and, therefore, the stereotype) were eliminated in Varon's English version where, instead, one reads: *I imagined the Jewish proprietor combining, with old knowledgeability, business and religion, traits from the east joined without friction.* See *Echad...*, note 8 above, p. 117.

15 Lázaro's grandfather, a rabbi, appears to have come from some kind of temple or *lugar sagrado* in which there reigns serenity, respect and austerity, as well as *grandeza de espíritu y el amor por todo lo desconocido* (G, p. 23). The synagogues contain an impressive austerity and seriousness, and the ark holding the Torah possesses a simple nobility and grandeur which López finds indescribable (G, p. 25).

16 Julio Ricci, *Ocho modelos de felicidad* (Buenos Aires: Macondo Ediciones, 1980). Subsequent references to this collection will appear in the text with the page number, preceded by the letter O, in parenthesis.

17 Uruguayans and Argentines seem to think of Europeans as parsimonious. The Hungarian of Ricci's "Las ideas parsimoniosas del Señor F. Szomogy" is an extreme example (O, pp. 11-39). Cf. the Argentine satirist, Fernando Sorrentino, in the short story "En defensa propia": the Hofers, Europeans (vaguely, either German, Austrian or Swiss) living in Argentina, have exchanged extravagantly costly gifts with the narrator's native born Argentine family, yet the narrator's wife, displeased because her latest gift is not as expensive as those received by her husband and son, says:

Estos Hofer, como buenos europeos, son unos tacaños (My emphasis). Sorrentino, *En defensa propia* (Buenos Aires: Belgrano, 1982), p. 123. For the English version of this story, see "In Self Defense," in *Webster Review* 9, 1 (Spring 1984), 87-93.

18 In my unpublished interview with Julio Ricci.