

UC Berkeley

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal

Title

Magical Realism and Truth-Telling in Ernesto Sabato's The Angel of Darkness

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1ff6s2nq>

Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 40(1)

Author

Barragan, Crystal Chavez

Publication Date

2026-08-02

DOI

10.5070/B3.67903

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

MAGICAL REALISM AND TRUTH-TELLING IN ERNESTO SABATO'S *THE ANGEL OF DARKNESS*

By Crystal Chavez Barragan

This project examines Argentine novelist Ernesto Sábato's "The Angel of Darkness" (1974) through the lens of literary magical realism. It seeks to expand the current definition of magical realism by building upon the specific parameters defined by prominent critics of the mode—namely, Louis Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris's "Five Characteristics." In reconsidering the nature of "magic" within these texts, "magical" instances can encompass a broader variety of phenomena. This research focuses on the normalization of violence, the omniscience and invisibility of the police state, and the metafiction present and abundant within "The Angel of Darkness" to establish Sábato within the magical realist mode.

And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name is Abaddon.
(Revelation 9:11)

I. Introduction

To Ernesto Sábato (1911–2011), the Argentina of the twentieth century, marred by divisive dictators and strong-arm military men, was a deep chasm—a tear in the earth, red-lit by the embers of WWII. The sunlight that had "enlightened" the rest of the world had not reached her, nor the relief of Ally victory, and what was left was a darkness that was, all at once, freezing and blisteringly hot; all-consuming, yet invisible; swampily stagnant, but ready to burst. Pulled in every direction, both by Argentina's paradoxical condition and by the New Rational Order of the world, which now celebrated nations capable of remote mass destruction, man—Sábato—was "sundered." His soul and spirit, "guillotined (frequently in the public square and in fact) in the name of Objectivity, Universality, Truth, and, what is more tragicomic, in that of Humanity."¹ This spiritual crisis is where Sábato's novelistic career begins: in 1948, with *The Tunnel*. However, it is far from where it ends, and what has come to define and plague Sábato's fiction is a distinct confusion of categorization and meaning.

Critical consensus has named this novel—Sabato's first work of fiction—existentialist and psychological. Within it, the tortured painter, Juan Pablo Castel, icily describes the thought process and exact, sequential events that led him to murder his lover, María Iribarne—an act which is primarily wrought by feelings of jealousy,

1 Ernesto Sabato, *The Writer in the Catastrophe of Our Time*, trans. Asa Zatz (Council Oaks Distribution, 1990), 50.

obsession, “rationality,” and a deeply ingrained loneliness: “. . . after all, there was only one tunnel, dark and solitary: mine, the tunnel in which I had spent my childhood, my youth, my entire life.”² Moving forward, however, the rest of Sabato's novels become difficult to place. *On Heroes and Tombs* (1961) has many of the same details and themes as *The Tunnel* (a blind rival, ageless women, obsessive and self-destructive love, paranoia . . .), but it refuses the same IDs.

Whereas *The Tunnel* largely centers on Castel's demented psychological state—a story told through the bars of a jail cell—*On Heroes and Tombs* provides a more expansive perspective, playing out across bloody Argentinian history and the darkening modern-day streets of Buenos Aires under Juan Perón. Its labels are various: *Tombs* is regarded as “philosophical,” because of its examination and criticism of a wide array of political ideologies and perceived notions of good and evil, and “Epic,” in its broad articulation of the political and historical realities of Argentina in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The novel also contains aspects that do not neatly fall within these categories but are often ignored in critical discourse—the most prominent being its metafictional breaks and its narrative voice, which shifts constantly as the past, present, and future are conflated. Along with *Tombs*'s startling inclusion of and Sabato himself as a character named Sabato (no accent mark) or S., its status as a work of literary “fiction” may be challenged as well.

This confusion of content is, at last, exploded in Sabato's final piece of fiction, the tour de force *The Angel of Darkness* (1974), or *Abaddon the Exterminator*. Published the same year Juan Perón died and Isabel Perón assumed her dubiously stable position, *Abaddon* is often touted as a prophetic foretelling of the coup that brought Argentina under the heel of Jorge Rafael Videla's National Reorganization Process (NRP). Like any Fates verbiage, the novel is nearly impossible to decipher, let alone categorize. “Containing elements of fiction, memoir, literary theory, and Socratic dialogue, *The Angel of Darkness* resists categories with almost as much verve as it resists linear narrative.”³ Paradoxically, however, it is only with the conclusion of *Abaddon* that the rest of Sabato's novels finally begin to coalesce into one, definable narrative: the author and his struggle, in a politically and socially fractured reality, to reform; to make his voice and his being known and real.

It is necessary, then, to find the critical category that encompasses the full breadth of Sabato's fictional works. They all contain elements of one or the other, but each is expanded beyond what its predecessor achieved. Sabato acknowledges this himself in *The Angel of Darkness*, when he cites *The Tunnel* as his beloved but “naïve” first venture into fiction writing, which, “because [his] instinct for self-preservation was not intense enough . . .” or because he “still hadn't penetrated to the heart of that ‘forbidden’ continent,” barely touched upon the “absolutely essential” subjects he wanted to put on paper.⁴ Despite their diversity and ambiguity, however, there is one characteristic that I believe helps define the connections and final realizations of all three novels: the presence of Sabato himself, or S., in each. In the latter two, Sabato or S. is a character in the story, and in *The Tunnel* he presents himself more discreetly as its author—Sabato is separate from Sabato. His self-insertion is blatant and emphasizes the metafictionality of all his works (it is a novel about a novelist writing a novel), a structure not meant to detract from the realities they portray but rather to push forward the notion that fiction is a method of reality-building.

Sabato's series, however, distinguishes itself from other works of metafiction by including fantastical events in very realistic environments—some of the most striking being his moments of metamorphosis and journeys through purgatory-like realms across all three of his novels. Beyond addressing its own narrative position, *The Angel of Darkness* gives credence to the supernatural (telepathy and clairvoyance, for example). Natalicio Barragán's visitations by God and visions of calamity have real-world consequences. Bruno, the primary narrator of *On Heroes and Tombs* and the secondary narrator of *The Angel of Darkness*, is omniscient and can see and tell stories no one should be able to, like Marcelo Carranza's kidnapping, torture, and eventual murder in the sordid basement of a police station on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.

2 Ernesto Sabato, *The Tunnel*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Ballantine Books, 1991), 124.

3 James Polk, “The Author in His Labyrinth: THE ANGEL OF DARKNESS, by Ernesto Sabato, translated by Andrew Hurley (Ballantine Books: \$25; 448 pp.),” *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1991, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-12-22-bk-1627-story.html>.

4 Ernesto Sabato, *The Angel of Darkness*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Ballantine Books, 1991), 14.

One mode that has the potential to describe this blending of metafiction and the fantastic, which gives more material meaning to fantastical events in Sabato's novels rather than rendering them purely psychological, as has been done before, is magical realism. Magical realism is a literary mode that became popular in the Latin American literary tradition in the 1960s with Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). In their book *Magical Realism: Theory, History, and Community*, Wendy B. Faris and Louis Parkinson Zamora wrote that magical realist texts "consciously depart from the conventions of narrative realism" in an attempt to subvert realism's universal "version of the world." Magical realism functions outside of the hegemonic natural and social realities that realist texts impose, offering "cultural correctives" for "accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, and motivation,"⁵ and is often used in and in the aftermath of colonial violence to revitalize "occulted or supplanted" practices and communities. In Sabato's work, the mode would create a space for the magical occurrences in his novels to be understood in relation to the political violence that deformed them. Through his rhetorical manipulations of reality, which naturally bend to accommodate subterranean societies of blind tyrants, men turning into bats, and fire-breathing dragons, dipping into the Riachuelo, Sabato defines the act of writing as a radical superposition of autonomy over collective, hegemonic notions of reality, which may disvalue or even attempt to destroy the creative individual. However, magical realism is a literary term that has only really been attached to Sabato's name in denial.

Erwin Carter's 1966 paper "Magical Realism in Contemporary Argentine Fiction" approached *The Tunnel* because of its brief mention in Angel Flores' seminal article on the mode's presence within contemporary Argentine fiction. However, Carter felt Sabato's elements of magical realism were too "scattered" to include in his paper.⁶ Sabato's works have not been re-examined through this lens since, although the definition of magical realism has changed, escaping being confined to Latin America. However, although the mode has widened in this sense, the characteristics that have come to define it have narrowed, focusing mainly on aspects of "canonical" works, such as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. While I agree with Carter's initial statement about *The Tunnel* and would even extend it to *On Heroes and Tombs*, I believe that, together with their final counterpart, *The Angel of Darkness*, they may be examined through this lens. Moreover, as novels that came before the Latin American Boom popularized the mode, they may also provide more insight into a kind of magic that resists the typical labels of "wonder" and "enchantment," and which relies mainly on the reassertion of the power of storytelling and its ability to disrupt depictions of reality that erase the perspectives of oppressed peoples. By inserting his fictional works into the mode, we not only find a method for expressly connecting all three novels, but also a means to expand the current characteristics of magical realism, in which the nature of "magic" itself can be refigured to encompass a broader vision of the human experience.

II. Background

By far, the most widely accepted and utilized contemporary definition of magical realism and its primary characteristics comes from Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora's anthology *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995). According to Faris and Zamora, magical realist literature contains five usual characteristics:

1. The "irreducible" element of magic in a phenomenological world: magic which cannot be explained by the "laws of the universe" and which must be, irrevocably and unquestionably, supernatural. This stipulates that the narrator must also be aware of and accepting of fantastic happenings and narrate them as naturally as the rest of the world.
2. Reference to historical realities: parodies of real-world events, seen from an alternative viewpoint. Magical realist texts often seek to destabilize notions of "monolithic" history and identify "truth" in spaces outside of the regime.

5 Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds., *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Duke University Press, 1995), 3.

6 Angel Flores, "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction (1955)," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Duke University Press, 1995), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822397212-007>.

3. Defamiliarization/unsettling of the reader: the reader's initial movement away from true "belief"—initial doubts that the magic is a hallucinatory or dream experience, settled or constantly addressed by the novel, by continuously placing magic in the real world.
4. "Merging realms": the existence of various realms within magical realist literature that the reader is consistently placed at the precipice/border of (in limbo, a yo-yo). We often see the narrative from the perspective of someone at an "outpost" of this border. Throughout the work, we are gently led away from Western, empirical notions of reality and are encouraged to interrogate "the validity of what is real."⁷
5. Disruption of time, space, and identity: an invasion, or encroachment of something "wrong" or unexplainable into these "concrete" spaces.

While these rules serve to cement magical realism as a legitimate mode and combat past criticism that it is too ambiguous to be considered separate from postcolonialism or postmodernism, they deny the diversity of magical occurrences that may occur. Sabato's fictional novels fit into all of these categories except for two—the irreducible element of magic and the defamiliarization/unsettling of the reader. However, by necessitating that magical occurrences be, for example, "accepted" by their narrator, we leave no room for magical events that may be horrifying and unexpected in themselves. If these experiences derive from diverse historical and cultural sources, then we also need to take into account the "magic" born from the aftermath of violence. As reality bends itself into pleasant shapes that are disingenuous to its horrors, it becomes necessary to find other means of expression. How do these real-world events shape or deform the magical occurrences we see in fictional postcolonial or dictatorial spaces?

III. Where it works

The Angel of Darkness, as well as *The Tunnel* and *On Heroes and Tombs*, succeed in a few magical realist categories. In the first, it is necessary for the author to portray magic in what is familiarly and unmistakably our phenomenological world (this is half of what makes up the "irreducible element of magic"). In all three novels, Sabato's rendering of Buenos Aires is so accurate that one might be able to trace the exact paths of his characters on a real map of the city. This establishes the "phenomenological world" condition and renders later distortions epistemic shocks rather than pure fantasy. *On Heroes and Tombs*, for example, begins with Martín sitting at the foot of the statue of Ceres in the Parque Lezama, waiting for his friend Bruno. While he waits, he reads a paper. The headline, half-covered in mud from where it had previously lain in the grass, states: "PERON VISITS THE TEATRO DISCEPOLO." The statue is real. In fact, there are two statues of the Goddess: the original, which was given to Sabato as a gift a few years after *On Heroes and Tombs* was released, and its restored copy, which stands in its place along the path to Parque Lezama's Greek amphitheater. The park, just off the shore of the Rio de la Plata, is a site of historical importance in Argentina, where Pedro de Mendoza established the first settlement of Buenos Aires in 1536. Even the title of the paper is realistic—Alberto Discépolo was a well-renowned playwright and supporter of Juan Perón's regime. Before she became his right hand, Eva Perón worked as an actress in Discépolo's theatre company. Even within *The Tunnel*, where the world is confined to a nondescript prison cell, Sabato's ability to capture both the geographic space and the political and cultural moment in Argentina is nearly scientific.

These accuracies create the hyperreal in Sabato's literature, a phenomenon which is most embodied in a 1946 short story by Jorge Luis Borges:

. . . In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a

7 Zeynep İnanç, "The Function of Magical Realism in Contemporary Women's Fiction: Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* and Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*" (MS thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2020), 38, <https://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12625243/index.pdf>.

Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitiableness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.⁸

While many of Borges' stories have been excluded from the mode, considered now under the umbrella of fantastic literature ("In the stories of Borges himself . . . the principal trait is the creation of infinite hierarchies . . . of imaginary beings or worlds"), his short story "On the Exactitude of Science" is still used to encapsulate an essential aspect of magical realist narratives: the creation of a hyperreality.⁹ The term, first used and defined by Jean Baudrillard as the condition where the real and unreal become indistinguishable, so much so that the real deteriorates as a result ("the generation by models of a real without origin or reality"), is most often used to refer to the co-mingling of virtual and physical reality, as well as to the integration of human intelligence with artificial intelligence.¹⁰ For Baudrillard, the hyperreal condition is a direct result of consumer culture. It is a means of social alienation from emotional engagement; a Spectacle in which representation is done solely "for the sake of disguise and manipulation," and the "show" becomes more "real" than reality.¹¹

The hyperreal is not often regarded as a medium of the traumatic imagination. Many critics consider its encroachment on media to be a paralyzing force in historical and cultural memory. The term is renewed, however, by Eugene Arva, in his article "Writing the Vanishing Real," where he reorients hyperreality as a distinct tool used by magical realist authors to create a "felt reality," or a reality in which "magical realist writing . . . attempt[s] to reconstruct violent events . . . by simulating the overwhelming affects that prevented their narrativization in the first place."¹² In narrative spaces, the re-representation of reality is not meant to replace it but to signify it, thereby creating a clear line of responsibility for interpretation in the reader. Signification, or reconstruction, is especially useful in instances where the extreme or traumatic nature of an event has prevented its representation in the first place. The scrubbing, irreality of censored information is less valuable than the admittedly illusory reality of literary images, which choose to emphasize and illustrate, as best they can, the "black holes" in our understanding by means that force the reader to alter their own perceptions of causality and absurdity. "By projecting chimeras in order to make those experiences erased by trauma visible again, magical realism writes the hyperreal, the constantly vanishing real . . ." but "unlike Baudrillard's depthless hyperreal," this one represents those events missed or silenced by mainstream historical narratives.¹³ Like Borges and other magical realist authors, Sabato recreates the city to perfection. This Buenos Aires may very well be the Buenos Aires of 1946 (*The Tunnel*), 1953–1955 (*On Heroes and Tombs*), and 1973 (*The Angel of Darkness*), down to the very streets his characters stood on. It is the destabilization of this perfect image by the supernatural and improbable, however, that makes the renderings of these spaces truly accurate and distinguishes the hyperreality of Sabato's novels as projections that seek to further ground the reader in the real world. The reader is asked to assimilate the picture-perfect image of Buenos Aires with the underground labyrinths that hide the amorphous, maybe reptilian entities that govern all evil in the world, the statue in the Parque Lezama with the house with the endless river beneath it, which Fernando Vidal Olmos crosses in *On Heroes and Tombs*, and the sky above the Rio de la Plata with mythical dragons of apocalypse. Why are these images connected, and why, in their own ways, do they all contain truth?

8 Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science," in *Collected Fictions*, by Jorge Luis Borges, trans. Andrew Hurley (KWARC, 2020), <https://kwarc.info/teaching/TDM/Borges.pdf>.

9 Zamora and Faris, *Magical Realism*, 122.

10 Douglas Kellner, "Jean Baudrillard," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2020 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/ baudrillard/>.

11 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 13, <https://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/>.

12 Eugene L. Arva, "Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38, no. 1 (2008): 61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.0.0002>.

13 Arva, "Writing the Vanishing Real," 81.

On Heroes and Tombs and *The Angel of Darkness* also do well in their references to historical realities from viewpoints that give readers more empathetic and, perhaps, more accurate renditions of history. The former accomplishes this through an Epic retelling of the nineteenth-century Argentinian civil wars from the perspectives of those more peripherally affected by them, like Escolástica, Major Bonifacio Acevedo's elderly daughter. Her father left before Escolástica was born to fight alongside General Lavalle against federalist dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas, and she grew up with only his portrait and the stories her mother, Encarnación, would tell about him. The trauma of his return—when his head was thrown through their window by the Mazorca, shocked her mother to death, and turned Escolástica mad. She would spend the next eighty years locked away in the attic, hiding her father's head away from any who searched, vehemently denying his death, and ignoring the passage of time.

While Acevedo is not an actual historical figure, and the events that Alejandra describes feel cartoonishly spooky at times, they do contain some truth about the brutalities of the Mazorca, Rosas' paramilitary force, which deliberately targeted Buenos Aires' urban elite. Assassinations, torture, forced disappearances—nothing was out of the rule book as long as it punished Rosas's left-wing political opponents. The beheading of Escolástica's father may stand for the elimination of the intellectual leaders of the community. Escolástica herself, with a name that means "scholastic," has a more contemporary impact, representing the ivory tower that scholars and intellectuals reserve themselves, in ignorance of anything beyond abstract theory. Right off the banks of World War II, and as an ex-nuclear physicist himself, Sábato saw the issue of scientific apathy (the rationality of The Holocaust and Hiroshima and Nagasaki) as a crisis that would only grow more pertinent with time. Interestingly, the last name Acevedo may also refer to Jorge Luis Borges, as it is an alternative spelling of his mother's family surname. The name's Sephardic associations suggest that Borges may have Jewish ancestry. This is something he has "ambiguously both 'regretfully denied' and acknowledged."¹⁴

In *The Angel of Darkness*, this historical refiguration is presented through a first-person account of Che Guevara's revolutionary endeavors, told from the perspective of a boy known as Scarecrow, or Nepomuceno. Nepomuceno was one of the lucky few who escaped that fateful day Guevara was captured and murdered by Bolivian soldiers (October 9, 1967). Although he mentions Inti Peredo, who was, verifiably, one of Guevara's actual contemporaries, Nepomuceno's name is nowhere to be found in historical accounts of the revolutionaries who fought by Guevara's side, so it is safe to assume that he, like Escolástica, is another one of Sabato's constructions. This does not mean, however, that Nepomuceno's descriptions of Guevara or his revolutionary actions were any less "real." This is emphasized by the imposition of Guevara's voice within Nepomuceno's narrative, a voice that is taken directly from his actual letters of correspondence.

"I was there, I was there through the whole campaign. I managed to escape with Inti, but I was luckier than he was."

Then he stopped, and that afternoon they didn't talk any more.

*Other places in the world call for the aid of my modest efforts. I can do things which are denied to you, which your responsibility at the head of Cuba will not allow you, and so the hour has come for us to be separated.*¹⁵

These refigurations satisfy the necessary correspondence to historical realities and the presentation of alternative histories that magical realist narratives offer. The quote above is Guevara's farewell to Fidel Castro. The first correspondence that Sabato shares. It is highlighted in the text through italics—a device that has denoted an omniscient narrator in Sabato's other novels. The rest are a mixture of Guevara's personal letters to his friends and family, and real military reports from Bolivian soldiers and other authorities as they closed in on his location. These reports are jarring next to Nepomuceno's easy recountings, which make Guevara heartbreakingly human. In one, he recounts a moment when Guevara could not bring himself to fire on two sleeping soldiers. In another, he describes Guevara aiding hostiles who had just tried to kill them, using up his own medical supplies to do so. Nepomuceno even recounts Guevara's almost banal difficulty in living without asthma medication. This depiction,

14 Emir R. Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (Paragon House Publishers, 1988), 12–13.

15 Sabato, *The Angel of Darkness*, 211–212.

so different from the overwhelming criminal framing that Guevara was subject to when he was alive, makes the final note, an account of Mario Teras's killing of Guevara, deeply upsetting. Here, Sabato juxtaposes two historical accounts, allowing the reader to make the final decision about how to interpret the outcome. Although his position on the matter is clear, made so by the poem he left Guevara between the pages (Sábato had kept a correspondence with the revolutionary before his death), the information outside Nepomuceno's story is unbiased and drawn directly from journalistic articles and military reports. What we do with it and whose narrative we adopt are entirely our own choices.

Lastly, the merging of realms and the disruption of time and space go hand-in-hand in Sabato's fictional works. Bruno, again, is an omniscient narrator who knows what is happening in places he cannot see, but is not markedly different from any of the other characters. He does not have a connection to God, as Natalacio does, nor does he entangle himself in the subterranean criminal realm, as Sabato does. Bruno is, first and foremost, a writer. Perhaps that is why he can see the world in its entirety—and make out its narrative structure. The feeling of being at the precipice of something is the uncanny premonition that accompanies all of Sabato's characters. In *The Tunnel*, Castel constantly feels as if he were walking along the edge of a cage—both psychic and physical (“Through the small window of my jail cell I watched the birth of a new day with a cloudless sky . . . I felt that a black chasm was yawning inside me.”¹⁶ In *On Heroes and Tombs*, from the moment he meets her, Martín senses that Alejandra is on the brink of collapse. One day, sometime soon, her body would fail to hold the overwhelming pressure behind her eyes (it is necessary that the reader understand that Alejandra is both The Dragon and The Princess, a “prodigious creature”) and he would surely be the person to pick up the pieces.¹⁷ In *The Angel of Darkness*, S. literally walks through a door that seems to take him into another world: the House on Arcos.

“I will tell you that this is also one of the navels of the universe of the Blind.”

After a silence, he added: “And this will be the center of your life, from this moment on. Everything you do or fail to do will lead you to this spot. And when you do not return of your own will, we will see to it that you remember your obligation.”¹⁸

Here, Sabato enters a cellar that appears to be a site for the Sect of the Blind, an evil, secret society he has followed throughout each of his novels. In *The Tunnel*, Castel only speculates on its existence, but exhibits a healthy fear of “the blind” anyway: “Now I must confess that I do not like blind people at all, and in their presence I have the same feeling I get when I see certain cold, clammy, voiceless creatures like snakes.”¹⁹ In *On Heroes and Tombs*, an entire act of the novel is dedicated to Fernando Vidal Olmos's Report on the Blind (a novel within a novel), which corroborates Castel's initial suspicions and illuminates the inner workings of the secret organization that commits all evil under the heavy hand of the Prince of Darkness. His “infiltration” of that “universe” followed the same path as S.'s in *The Angel of Darkness*—through a labyrinth of dark cellars and basements, which eventually led to a room. For Fernando, that room was one where the ground consumed his body, and his eyes were plucked out of his head by a vulture. For S., it was the site of the ritual that would tie him to the Sect forever, when he plunged himself into the grey-green (interestingly, the same color as Olmos') eye between Soledad's legs. This would herald S.'s later transformation into a bat. For both of them, this journey would lead to their death.

These mergings serve to speak to two antithetical social realities Sábato was faced with at the time of his writing *The Angel of Darkness*: “omniscience” and blindness. The former, most embodied by the writer Bruno, who was witness to not only Carranza's death at the beginning of *The Angel of Darkness*, but was also aware of Castel (*The Tunnel*) and Olmos, Alejandra, and Martín (*On Heroes and Tombs*), speaks to the omniscience of the average person—or the average writer—and the moral obligation one has to speak these stories into existence. Blindness, or speechlessness, was the result of this non-action. To “turn a blind eye” to these events was, in a way, to be acquiescent to them. But the Argentina of the 1970s was marked by secrecy and instability. Juan Perón had just passed, and the regime his wife inherited was on the verge of collapse. Its inevitable fall would be the

16 Sabato, *The Tunnel*, 128.

17 Ernesto Sabato, *On Heroes and Tombs*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Penguin Classics, 2017), 15.

18 Sabato, *The Angel of Darkness*, 340.

19 Sabato, *The Tunnel*, 48.

fifth coup the country had undergone in the last forty years, perpetuating a gross tradition of military control and violence. Killings of “subversive” entities under Perón’s government went uninvestigated and generally unregarded by the public. Both foreign and domestic media outlets were punished for, or even outright prevented from, addressing controversial issues associated with the regime. The censorship had reached a point such that, in the 1970s, when Perón reassumed power for a short period before his death, media outlets were described as having “developed a finely honed sense of self-censorship.”²⁰ The only space one was truly safe was within one’s mind, but this seclusion had its own consequences: an overwhelming paranoia about the world, a lack of connection to both other people and oneself, and the eventual materiality of that seclusion. Castel’s loneliness evolves from an opaque labyrinth inside his mind to Olmos’ foggy underground purgatory to Sabato’s basement of metamorphosis.

IV. Where it fails

The Angel of Darkness arguably fails to fit within two categories of magical realism: the “irreducible” element of magic and the initial defamiliarization or unsettling of the reader, followed by their resettlement as magical occurrences continue to propagate the natural world. While Sabato’s fictional work did meet half of the first characteristic, occurring, as it does, concretely in reality, it fails to make the magic “irreducible.” Importantly, much of the “magic” in *The Angel of Darkness* can be read as psychological, happening only in the mind of individual characters. The first magical instance to materialize in the novel, for example, is a vision only Natalacio Barragán can see: above the masts of boats floating along the Riochuelo, “a fiery monster spread[s] out all across the sky . . . a furious serpent glowing hot and blood red against the abyss of India ink.”²¹ When he tries to pull someone else’s attention to it, a sailor passing by, the man sees nothing and attributes Natalacio’s vision to his late-night drinking at the old Chichin. Here, the magic we are presented is immediately dissolved by the sailor as nothing more than the drunken ramblings of a madman. Natalacio’s name is even inexplicably changed to Loco as the conversation continues, and he is constantly rebutted. This petrification of trust is at odds with what other magical realist texts aim to do. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Márquez consistently reaffirms the rational, tangible presence of magic in the phenomenological world. While we might doubt José Arcadio Buendía’s initial visions of Prudencio Aguilar’s ghost (perhaps a psychological guilt response?), it is Úrsula’s secondary confirmation that makes us a little more sure of his sanity. The deal is sealed when the entire town of Macondo falls under a sleep spell and is aware of and affected by the same magical phenomenon as the Buendía family. Here, the reader is consistently reassured that the magic in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is real, witnessed by people outside the Buendía family and beyond Macondo, too. In Sabato’s work, however, we have only one character experiencing these disruptions at a time, so we cannot be absolutely sure that what we are witnessing is real. This makes the reader’s settlement within the magical world especially difficult. How are you meant to trust something that is unverifiable from reliable sources?

Moreover, the “irreducible” characteristic stipulates that a character must not be surprised or alarmed by magic or the supernatural. They must accept it, as naturally as breathing. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the Buendía family does not blink at Aureliano Buendía’s ability to see the future, nor does Úrsula question the line of blood that streams directly to her when José Arcadio is murdered. It simply is. In Sabato’s novels, however, the magic takes on a sort of malevolence. S.’s transformation into a bat is a perverted experience, and the Sect of the Blind is an innately evil force, headed by the worst villains imaginable. Sabato’s magic seems born of the systematic defects of intolerable situations, and therefore cannot be naturally accepted by his characters.

In considering these categories, however, it is essential to remember the social context in which Sabato is writing and the nature of magic/supernatural in magical realist texts. By forcing our characters to accept the magic as it occurs, we leave no room for politically traumatizing contexts. As an epigenetic mode, the magic in these narratives is highly varied, derived from the cultural and societal experiences of their authors. This ambiguity is what makes the magical realist mode a mode and not a genre. These texts make no promises. There is no

20 Jonathan Kandell, “Argentine Press in a Crisis Period,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/06/24/archives/argentine-press-in-a-crisis-period-freedom-seems-imperiled-by.html>.

21 Sabato, *The Angel of Darkness*, 4.

structural order in which things are expected to behave, and causal mechanisms are reorganized to accommodate the specific situation. We may find a perfect example of this in Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), a text which is considered African magical realism, but which ultimately falls under the umbrella of fantastic literature because of its failure to fit precisely into the characteristics that Zamora and Faris provide for much of the same reasons Sábato's cannot. Tutuola's character must enter the magical world within the text, thereby clearly demarcating the real from the unreal, and, most importantly, he also presents reactions that don't denote natural acceptance of magical phenomena (the young boy's constant fear and surprise in the Bush as he witnesses grotesque scenes and undergoes various metamorphoses).²²

However, one may argue that these texts are magical realist and that the magical phenomena within them simply respond to the cultural and political landscape of the period. At the time he was writing *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, for example, Nigeria, Tutuola's home country and the setting of the novel, was undergoing a cultural upheaval in the light of an increasing movement towards independence. A debate between tradition and modernity was at the forefront of Nigerian society. Was the traditional tribal basis of African life a handicap to progress? What could be kept, and what must become lost? *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* expresses the difficulties of that debate, especially in the ghostly aftermath of slavery, the violence of which had been permanently engraved into the body and soul of Africa. The Bush Tutuola invokes in his novel is an essential right in Yoruba culture, where warrior men would go to prove their strength and personhood against the spiritual beings that inhabited it. His overturning of this tradition through forcing an inexperienced youth to undergo the Bush's trials expresses the dissolution of Yoruba culture that occurred with the onset of slavery and following notions of modernity. The young boy has been thrust preemptively into an unfamiliar and strange world. The ancestors and elders who should have guided him along his journey are, for various reasons, absent, and consequently, the magic phenomena that should be natural become alien. The Bush has, moreover, been irrevocably altered by Western modernity and would be almost unrecognizable anyway (the inorganic TV ghost, for example). The purpose of the Bush has been perverted in the sense that it is no longer a place for self-solidification and improvement. It is a traumatized space.

In *The Angel of Darkness*, too, the magic present within Argentina is hopelessly and irrevocably affected by the darkness its politics have brought. Sabato's uncomfortable transformation into a bat is the result of years of silence, and the magic that was familiar to Natalicio before (he does not react to God, who enters his bedroom one day to reprimand his cowardice) has become terrifying to him, taking on a form he no longer recognizes and one he no longer trusts. Perón and his government are never explicitly mentioned in relation to the violence that occurs in *The Angel of Darkness*, but when Sabato turns into a bat—blind, unable to see the city or people around him, caught in an echo chamber of screams he cannot hear (bat “screams” are ultrasonic)—it is not difficult to comprehend the sentiment he is attempting to convey. Argentina is a space that punishes those who “see.” Its population has become nocturnal, afraid of the exposure that comes with self-advocation or of going against the state's wishes. Efforts to yell out or to speak about its atrocities are ultimately silenced. Perhaps they are not even heard at all. To survive in the city, one cannot remain human, and that transformation in itself is a horrifying experience—perhaps not because it is unexpected, but because it is a sign of the ultimate acceptance of evil.

V. Conclusion

I was initially interested in Sábato's work because I found that his name was constantly misspelled across the internet (even in his obituary). It has an accent mark above the first a. It is Sábato, not Sabato. As I looked more closely, however, I found that these “mistakes” were often deliberate and that the two different S.'s were very different people. It made me wonder who Sábato and Sabato were. Oftentimes, when people cite Ernesto Sábato's life and work, they begin with his non-fictional endeavors: his time as an essayist and journalist for Sur and his position as chair of the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP). The report issued by CONADEP, *Nunca Más*, or the Sábato Report, is considered the first successful truth commission in the world. The truth commission provided a template for the “Justice Cascade” that followed in the '80s-'90s, a

trend of transitional justice norms and practices that held governmental bodies more accountable for human rights violations.²³ However, to understand what the act of writing meant to Sábato and how works of fiction may also aid efforts of remembrance and transitional justice, we cannot begin and end with *Nunca Más*, nor can we isolate any of his other works.

His fiction is often considered to be psychological, and that holds true for his first novel, *The Tunnel*, but falters at every other. While *On Heroes and Tombs* contains deeply cerebral elements, it is also very grounded in the contemporary Argentine moment. Unlike Castel's icy, difficult-to-grasp, very psychotic mindset, *On Heroes and Tombs* presents a wide array of ideologies and people that the reader can relate to. *The Angel of Darkness* does the same, but its focus on Sabato as a writer makes reading the novel a profoundly personal experience. Putting Sabato into the magical realist mode is an attempt to strip away the labels his fiction currently operates under and place him in a position where his work can metamorphose into what it needs to be in the moment. Truthfully, *The Angel of Darkness* makes no narrative sense. Characters come in and out with no explanation, events happen with no apparent causes, and the end, where Bruno walks by S.'s grave, leaves the reader with a strange sense of bereftness. The story did not finish. But maybe it was never meant to.

The novelty of Sabato's novels lies in the liminal space they make for themselves as pieces of work. Magical realist narratives are free in this way—sensitive to the subjectivity of existence and the necessity of preserving diverse perspectives to create a more cosmopolitan world. Not quite autobiographical, but too real to be anything else. Not quite psychological, but deeply ingrained in the study of human frailty. Not quite existential, but innately concerned with the absolute. Leaving space within the mode for works like Sabato's removes the tendency of the term magic to be associated with wonder and enchantment. These are not bulwarks of the mode, nor should they be. Instead, we should defend a reading of the characteristics of magical realism that upholds the strength of magical diversity and does not impose rules that constrain such occurrences. The magic that appears in *The Angel of Darkness* and Sabato's other novels is born primarily of concern over trauma, censorship, and political violence, and takes the form that most embodies these experiences. Its failure to reassure its readers of the reality of the novel's magical events, for example, is a result of the silence that deafened Argentina in the 1970s. Perhaps the sailor did see Natalacio Barragán's apocalyptic dragon, but would he say even if he did? The opacity born from his period grew dark enough to obscure one's own being. It is telling that the only person Bruno could not openly read was Sabato himself. In an effort to preserve his soul, Ernesto Sábato wrote himself into existence, over and over again, until the truth could finally be brought to light.

VI. Bibliography

- Arva, Eugene L. "Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism." *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38, no. 1 (2008): 60–85. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.0.0002>.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "On Exactitude in Science." In *Collected Fictions*, by Jorge Luis Borges. Translated by Andrew Hurley. KWARC, 2020. <https://kwarc.info/teaching/TDM/Borges.pdf>.
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Ken Knabb. Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014. <https://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/>.
- Erben, Jiří. "Kathryn Sikkink: The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions Are Changing World Politics." *Czech Journal of International Relations* 47, no. 3 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.32422/cjir.353>.
- Flores, Angel. "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction (1955)." In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Duke University Press, 1995. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822397212-007>.

23 Kathryn Sikkink and Carrie Booth Walling, "The Impact of Human Rights Trials in Latin America," *Journal of Peace and Research* 44, no. 4 (2007), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27640539>.

- İnanç, Zeynep. "The Function of Magical Realism in Contemporary Women's Fiction: Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* and Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*." MS thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2020. <https://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12625243/index.pdf>.
- Kandell, Jonathan. "Argentine Press in a Crisis Period." *The New York Times*, June 24, 1974. <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/06/24/archives/argentine-press-in-a-crisis-period-freedom-seems-imperiled-by.html>.
- Kellner, Douglas. "Jean Baudrillard." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2020 edition, edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/ baudrillard/>.
- Márquez, Gabriel García. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa. Harper & Row, 1970.
- Monegal, Emir R. *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography*. Paragon House Publishers, 1988.
- Polk, James. "The Author in His Labyrinth: THE ANGEL OF DARKNESS, by Ernesto Sabato, translated by Andrew Hurley (Ballantine Books: \$25; 448 pp.)." *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1991. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-12-22-bk-1627-story.html>.
- Sabato, Ernesto. *On Heroes and Tombs*. Translated by Helen R. Lane. Penguin Classics, 2017.
- Sabato, Ernesto. *The Angel of Darkness*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. Ballantine Books, 1991.
- Sabato, Ernesto. *The Writer in the Catastrophe of Our Time*. Translated by Asa Zatz. Council Oaks Distribution, 1990.
- Sabato, Ernesto. *The Tunnel*. Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden. Ballantine Books, 1991.
- Sikkink, Kathryn, and Carrie Booth Walling. "The Impact of Human Rights Trials in Latin America." *Journal of Peace and Research* 44, no. 4 (2007): 427–445. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27640539>.
- Tutuola, Amos. *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. Grove Press, 2025.
- Warnes, Christopher, and Kim Anderson Sasser, eds. *Magical Realism and Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson, and Wendy B. Faris, eds. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Duke University Press, 1995.