

Shamanic Imagination in Daína Chaviano's *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre* by Robin McAllister

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Although originally I had planned to speak today about Daína Chaviano's novel, *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*, I have found myself returning to some themes and problems I first discovered in her 1988 science fiction novel, *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre*. *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* is a brilliant political and erotic Gothic Romance in which Havana itself becomes both the gloomy old mansion in which the damsel in distress, Claudia, is menaced and the monster who menaces her. Whether Claudia succeeds in escaping or not in a kind of Mariel boat lift is left unresolved, perhaps until a later novel in **The Occult Side of Havana** series the author is writing.

Daína Chaviano's protagonists are often deeply alienated, displaced, conflicted women living in an oppressive Havana that menaces them like the monster in a Gothic romance. Surrounded by other planets, other worlds, other pasts, they find special powers to make contact with those hidden and forgotten memories, special power to cross boundaries between parallel universes, to find the forgotten points of contact preserved only in genetic memory, often through ghosts and spirit messengers from a lost past.

Ana, the protagonist of Chaviano's novel, is an adolescent girl discovering her latent powers as a writer while she quarrels with her boyfriends and retreats into her bedroom from her mother. For Ana, writing does not engage reality or imitate it, writing creates an imaginary world, a microcosm containing many worlds, that has an autonomy, a life of its own: "Her book is a world of night and snow where the most extraordinary creatures are encountered or avoided, obeying unpredictable laws, even for her, sinking her into an almost orgasmic mental trance



in which-- like a small god or an omniscient mother—she is able to give release to beings of another universe, whose happiness seems to manifest itself in the act of existing” (Chaviano 25; my translation). Writing for her is a form of possession that withdraws her from her immediate reality into a visionary state of consciousness that resembles that of a shaman. The shaman is a religious practitioner who temporarily leaves this world in a state of trance and flies to the world of the ancestors or spirits to return with knowledge and power that will heal and liberate (Eliade). The shaman is a shape-changer, able to assume bird form or other shapes, to negotiate the boundaries between this world and another in spirit flights which begin with a withdrawal from waking consciousness.

Like a shaman, Ana uses all her techniques of mental exercises—automatic writing, memory games, yogic meditation, to detach herself from ordinary reality and temporarily regress (or fly) to a pre-rational, pre-literate state of consciousness. Here she uses Yogic meditation, not to fly to the Ancestor, but to make contact with Arlena, the fictional character she is in the act of writing about: “It is not the first time she’s had recourse to this method to escape daily tensions. Following the instructions in the manual it is easy to arrive at this absolute-forgetfulness-of-self...She submerges herself in a suspended state of almost voluptuous emotions. Her attention concentrates itself in a zone near her diaphragm and travels over her solar plexus until a hint of temperature occupies the area. A certain light flowers in her interior. She feels a sudden mixture of fear and well-being, an ecstasy that prevents her thinking of any other thing than the eternity of that instant. Then she goes sinking into the dark atmosphere of a new dimension. She wants to cry out and cannot. She tries to move, but her body is now a subtly dense organism. She realizes that her normal senses have changed: now unknown perceptions surge forth. Ana does not understand that certain mental exercises bring extraordinary faculties into play...It is as if she were dreaming. ‘If I cry out, I’ll awake...’ It produces an interior dispersal, as if something or someone is attempting to snatch her out of her own body. She has transformed herself into a fragile bud whose unknown forces rise up toward the light. She floats. Or, at least, believes she floats. Now she is someone sharing the body of another person...Perhaps her fear—or perhaps some other impulse—drags her out of that body. She closes her eyes while she is hoisted anew. An alien will overcome her without compassion” (126). The mental exercises that Ana uses to renew contact with the subconscious and make contact with lost or inaccessible dimensions of reality—automatic writing, memory games, yogic meditation—resemble shamanic trance and spirit flight.

Automatic writing represents her writing in its purest form: “During various minutes she writes without stopping. Her mind receives a flood of images that are



translated into words and immediately transcribed on paper. Now she opens her eyes because in that way she can better control her writing—strangely deformed, as if that of an unknown writer. Then she blinks in a stupor. She knows the fleeting connection established between her and some point of time or space has ended, but she cannot avoid the anxiety that ends each session” (Chaviano 40).

Where are these images, these memories appearing during her automatic writing, coming from? Is she making them up? Or is she reliving someone else’s actual memories from past existences accidentally converging in her receptive subconscious? Here Ana has recourse to a “memory game” based on a theory of “genetic memory”: “It’s the game of memories, it’s playing to recover lost images, the molecules of love and danger that remain imprinted in the temporal space of some past, the actions and verses that everyone—except the blind memory of the genes—forgets” (86).

The images and words that have surfaced from Ana’s subconscious during automatic writing are the first fragmentary vision of the various worlds Ana will be writing about in the three or four interconnected plots of Fables—the Neolithic Celtic world of Merlin and Stonehenge; Faidir, the planet of Ijje and the winged psyches with three eyes; and Rybel, the world of Arlena, the “jumen” on the run in an alien planet after being wrecked in a space ship. Significantly, Arlena is Ana’s fantasy counterpart of herself, a woman with extraordinary mental powers, in exile on a planet that is not her own, bringing with her memories of her former existence as an astronaut flying from one planet to another, a woman constantly on the run with her Stone of the Past. She is escaping from vengeful priests of a patriarchal tyranny that have imprisoned her as a slave in the Royal Kitchens before she escapes into the jungle in search of the Sylphs, pure psyches who guard the Mirror of the Future. Priests have perverted the liberating, benevolent doctrines of Merlin, the Celtic magician and converted them into a tool of tyranny.

Initially Ana had begun the stories of Ijje and Arlena as one story, then continued them as two separate ones; on the planet of Faidir, Ijje’s grandmother is also in the process of telling him a story, which turns out to be precisely the story Ana is writing of Arlena. In the meantime Merlin, using the name Soio from his exile on the planet of Rybel, is watching all of this unfold as a vision in his Crystal Ball, even the image of Ana at her desk writing, as appears to Ana in a dream. Now in her automatic writing trances and dreams, incidents from one story are appearing in the other, as if these apparently separate imaginary realities will not obey the dictates of their writer to remain apart in separate works and worlds, but are interpenetrating and crossing in the locus of her subconscious.



Although Ana is in the process of writing Arlena's story, we find she is not inventing fantasies as a normal science fiction writer might. She is merely the locus of visions, not the creator, as she tries to explain to her friend, Rita that the dreams are as clear as if she had lived them, but have nothing to do with what appears in the automatic writing: `What sort of things do you dream?'—Rita continues asking. `Last night I dreamed of a magician...Most extravagant of all, I existed in the dream like one more character. The magician caressed the ball with his hands. In the opaque sphere that began to illumine itself from within, I appeared...Or at least I believe it was I, only I found myself in the same situation as Arlena.' `Who is Arlena?'...`Arlena is a character in the novel I am writing. At this stage of the book, she is fleeing through the woods...In the dream Arlena had my face, or perhaps it was the reverse; I, Ana, was Arlena...I'm unable to know with certainty because my real "I" saw it all as if it were a film in the cinema. That is, my eyes saw the scene: the magician with his magic ball and a woman who resembled me (or was I) fleeing through the forest. She (or I) seemed to have much fear...In a while that image was erased from the crystal, but the magician continued, come what may, caressing the ball until I appeared. And here, yes, I am sure, because I saw myself writing in my room'" (37-38). Ana is a writer being invented and written by her own characters. The stories she thinks she is inventing are not fictions but already existing realities making their existence actual through her act of writing. These worlds exist already as parallel universes in different dimensions of time and space, and she is a medium or channel by which they are suddenly able to manifest their existence first through her subconscious, then her writing.

A Celtic shaman, like Merlin, is a winged birdman, a merlin or small falcon. The other imaginary world in this novel, the imaginary planet of Faidir with Ijje and the other winged "psyches," is a world of shamans in trance flight, birdmen and women, symbols of shamanic flight. Except for their wings and third eye, the "zhife" resemble humans. Their third eye suggests the Yogic chakra, the third eye of meditation. In Ana's novel Merlin is another exiled, alienated wanderer in a planet that is not his home, but Ana's writings will open the borders of space and time to allow Merlin to renew contact with this cosmos. He is the symbol of the shamanic consciousness that sustains the world of the novel in his role as Soio, or "Soy yo," (in English, "I am") the consciousness of the solitary writer, Ana, as she seeks to renew contact with cosmic energies through writing. The mantra Arlena/Ana chants throughout the novel expands her identity by merging it with the Cosmos: "I am alone; I and the universe. The universe is a cosmos that contains other lands, but I am alone in my universe, and all its energy is mine because I AM THE UNIVERSE" (17).



We need a name for the kind of science fiction Chaviano is writing here, a vision of worlds within worlds in which the Mirror of the Future is discovered by spirit flight to the past. This shamanic science fiction combines the most sophisticated philosophical or religious speculation with a temporary return in the act of writing to prerational, preliterate modes of consciousness and myth. In Chaviano's novel this composition takes a form analogous to practice of a shaman, a religious practitioner, who brings healing and knowledge to a disharmonious tribal society by temporarily withdrawing from waking consciousness through trance, "flying" to the land of the spirits and ancestors, and returning with knowledge and healing. Ana, the shamanic writer, is the medium through which already existing characters can return from exile and perilous situations bringing lost knowledge of the future and the present.

Gothic romance—or pure quest romance, as in *Fables of an Extraterrestrial Grandmother*—is not the only genre I encounter in Chaviano's novel that suggests ancient origins for what we call science fiction. In making her young protagonist, Ana, a writer of the very novel we are reading, Chaviano also makes a statement about her own poetics of science fiction, her concept of what a science fiction writer is doing or creating. Although I agree with Brian Aldiss about the source of the genre in Gothic romance and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, I am also going to risk what he calls "the illusion of false continuity" to suggest once again a remote source in the Menippean satire of *Lucian and Apuleius* (Aldiss 68). The concept of the novel as a miniature universe that contains other worlds as well, the idea of parallel universes, separated but capable of contact over space and time, if one knows where and how to make that contact, suggests for me an ancient tradition of story telling using fantasy for philosophical and religious speculation often in the form of stories within stories called Menippean satire.

Menippean satire has its origin among urbanized, cosmopolitan writers and readers during the Hellenistic period and uses myth and earlier oral forms of narrative as its content. Menippean satire appeals to writers and readers who are alienated, displaced, and cosmopolitan—exile and wanderers in a world not their own—who seek to renew contact with the sources of consciousness from which too much change, social and technological, has alienated them. Often this fiction seeks to recapture the voices of gods once heard in the past but silent in the present, traces of our lost bicameral consciousness, as Julian Jaynes suggests (Jaynes). Such writers and readers have learned to live a spiritually amphibious existence with one foot in a former world of language, culture, and place, and another in alien lands and languages, but they have learned to cross these borders of language, time, and place almost at will and sometimes in play. The work of fiction as a



cosmos, the use of fantasy for philosophical speculation, and the combination of contemporary, popular genres with myth and oral tale, create a mode of fiction that appeals to all of us who try to renew contact with the sources of consciousness from which contemporary social and technological change have alienated us, sources of consciousness in myth, magic, and childhood memory. Thus, not just the writer, but the reader of Chaviano's *Fables* must learn to play the role of a shaman.

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