

ARTICLE

The Monstrous in the Short Stories of Guillermo Martínez

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This article sets out to examine ideas of the monstrous in the tales which bookend the two collections of short stories published to date by contemporary Argentine writer Guillermo Martínez, *Infierno grande* (1989, 2009) and *Una felicidad repulsiva* (2013). The article draws on definitions of monstrosity as linked to moral values, rather than physical difference, to explore the political and literary monstrous in *Infierno grande*. It then goes on to examine how ideas of monstrous perfection, as revealed in *Una felicidad repulsiva*, reincorporate the dimension of physical difference as a factor in defining monstrosity. Physical difference, moral values and abnormal or obsessive behaviour are then combined into a more socially nuanced concept of the monstrous. Finally, it is argued that Martínez makes use of narrator/witness figures whose ethical dilemmas in engaging with the monstrous encourage a parallel activity on the part of the reader of these texts, making them thought-provokingly relevant to contemporary social anxieties surrounding the monstrous.

Introduction: Guillermo Martínez as short story writer

This article sets out to examine constructions of the monstrous which bookend the two collections of short stories published to date by contemporary Argentine author Guillermo Martínez (b. 1962), *Infierno grande* (1989, 2009) and *Una felicidad repulsiva* (2013). Martínez is widely respected for his novels, but these two less-studied works allow us also to locate him as a short story writer within a strong River Plate tradition in this genre. His clear affinity with Adolfo Bioy Casares, Julio Cortázar and Liliana Heker emerges from certain stories within these collections. Carlos Daniel Aletto also situates him in relation to other key nineteenth- and twentieth-century figures of the Argentine short story canon, such as Eduardo Holmberg, Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo, José Bianco and Abelardo Castillo (Aletto 2014: [n.p.]).

Infierno grande was initially published in 1989, and won the Premio del Fondo Nacional de las Artes. In 2006, a revised edition appeared, with two new stories added. It is this revised, expanded text that I will be analysing.¹ *Infierno grande* comprises twelve stories, the first of which lends its title to the collection. The historical context of the writing of the tale 'Infierno grande' is significant. It was begun in Bahía Blanca in 1982, during the repressive period of the

¹ Guillermo Martínez says that 'una multitud de detalles' were changed in the expanded edition, with the result that 'el libro, ahora, es sutilmente otro' (Martínez 2009: 188).

Guerra Sucia (1976–83), and sets a tone of small-town claustrophobia; ‘Pueblo chico, infierno grande’, as goes the saying on which the title is based. This town is violently disrupted by the unexpected discovery of a mass grave of *desaparecidos*, a monstrous occurrence which is instantly repressed by the enforced reburial of the bodies and by the subsequent censure of those who witnessed the scene: ‘[el comisario] nos ordenó que no hablásemos con nadie de aquello’ (Martínez 2009: 24). The rest of the collection moves away from this overt historical specificity through various modes: the absurd (conversations about nappies obscuring serious discussion of Witold Gombrowicz in ‘Brindis con Witold’), the grotesque (old crones dancing to *passé* tango in ‘Baile en el Marcone’), voyeurism (‘Esa cuestión de orificios’, ‘Un descenso al infinito’), Cortazarian humour in the style of his 1962 *Historias de cronopios y de famas* (‘Deleites y sobresaltos de la sombreridad’), metaliterary speculation on the potentially harmful influence of literature (‘La víctima’) and existential and emotional crises involving relationships between students and professors (‘El recuperatorio’, ‘Un examen muy difícil’). Recurrent themes are dreams and nightmares, the grotesque or absurd, chance, sentimental education and loss of innocence, power and paranoia. The final story, ‘Retrato de un piscicultor’, as we shall see, returns us full circle to the repressive political context of the opening story.

The more recent collection *Una felicidad repulsiva* dates from 2013. It won the newly inaugurated Premio Hispanoamericano de Cuento Gabriel García Márquez in 2014. Its eleven stories are bookended in a similar fashion by monstrosity. The opening, title story brings a fantastic dimension to the monstrous in the repulsive perfection of ‘la familia M.’; the closing narrative, ‘Una madre protectora’, again makes a family the focus of attention, with one particular figure – the mother – emerging as monstrous in her distortion of her maternal role. The intervening narratives range over questions of predestiny (‘El *I Ching* y el hombre de los papeles’), sexual discoveries (‘Lo que toda niña debe ver’, ‘*Déjà vu*, o los reinos de la posición horizontal’), futuristic organ trafficking and euthanasia (‘Unos ojos fatigados’), Freudian repressed violence (‘Un gato muerto’), the fatal attack on Trotsky in México (‘El peluquero vendrá’) and a Cortazarian sense of the uncanny (‘*Help me!*’). The bookending gesture here frames this second narrative collection in a much less political way, instead linking the monstrous to social anxieties of the twenty-first century. By contrasting monstrosity as presented in these two collections, we can chart the evolution of ideas of the monstrous, which ‘represent particular social and historical conditions and their cultural anxieties’ (Levina and Bui 2013: 4).

Monstrosity: critical approaches

This article examines how Martínez begins and ends both of his collections of short stories with a sense of the monstrous. In defining this term, I draw on various views from three key ‘state of the question’ volumes: *Monster Theory* (ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen 1996), *Monster Culture in the 21st Century* (eds Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui 2013), and *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (eds Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle 2012). Across these volumes, there is a broad consensus that defining monstrosity is a culturally specific exercise that requires acknowledgement of the shared anxieties of a given time and place. Whether one takes a psychological approach to monstrosity as a manifestation of what is abject and repressed, or a more representational or ontological approach, all of which are explored by Levina and Bui, it remains the case that the boundaries between what is considered normal human behaviour and what is monstrous shift with changes in what society most fears. Those fears themselves change with advances in technology and science, and as political circumstances evolve. Between Martínez’s first and second collections, we will note a shift from a political understanding of monstrosity to a sociocultural one. This is indicative of this fact that monster narratives ‘offer a space where society can safely represent and address anxieties of its time’ (Levina and Bui 2013: 1), and that from the period of

the Guerra Sucia to the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century those times and anxieties change radically. To characterize the first, I refer to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, who in his 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' draws on René Girard's connections between 'monsterizing depiction' and the notion of the scapegoat (Cohen 1996: 11). This association of monstrosity with a scapegoat figure fits the situation of the protagonists of Martínez's *Infierno grande* bookends. In contrast, Levina and Bui, in attempting to outline a comprehensive monster theory for the twenty-first century, claim that 'monstrous culture has become a lived experience of the past decade' (2013: 2); this all-pervasive cultural idea of monstrosity chimes with the move in Martínez's second collection from the political monstrous to the monstrosity of contemporary western cultural obsessions, notably with corporeal perfection, happiness and anxieties over gender roles in parenting.

'Infierno grande': scapegoat I

In analysing the opening title story 'Infierno grande', it is helpful to start from Jeffrey Weinstock's view of the monstrous as associated 'not with physical difference, but with antithetical moral values' (Weinstock 2012: 276). Martínez plays with reader expectations as to where we should see the antithetical, and therefore the monstrous. The story's title, alluding to the popular *dicho* 'pueblo chico, infierno grande', initially seems to chime with Weinstock's jocular maxim 'it takes a village to make a monster' (Weinstock 2012: 275). We witness the gradual demonization of an abandoned husband, Cervino the barber, at the hands of small-town gossips in Puente Viejo. They first imagine that Cervino's wife la Francesa was cheating on him with a recently arrived traveller, el muchacho, then – when la Francesa and el muchacho disappear – they presume that Cervino has killed them both: 'y así Cervino se iba convirtiendo en un ser cada vez más monstruoso' (Martínez 2009: 21). So far, so normal: a claustrophobic community eager to find and censure a scapegoat assigns monstrosity to a supposed cuckold, whom they assume has behaved in an inhuman way, by killing a fellow human out of jealousy. Cervino's morals are condemned by the supposedly righteous citizens. La viuda is most zealous in her pursuit of evidence to confirm this theory; indeed, it is she who first sets the rumours flying, and her discovery of a dog eating a human hand leads the whole town to jump to the conclusion that they have indeed found the bodies of the two missing (presumed) lovers. But in fact, what subsequently emerges is the far more horrendous scene of an entire mass grave of bodies, all of whom have been shot dead. Although few contextual details are given, it can reasonably be assumed that the passing reference to 'los militares' (Martínez 2009: 15), coupled with several references to 'el Mundial' (15, 17, 21) sets the story in the context of the 1978 world cup in Argentina, which took place in a climate of violent repression under the first junta militar as part of the infamous Proceso de Reorganización Nacional. These bodies are presumably, therefore, the bodies of desaparecidos. The monstrous moral values of which Cervino had been suspected – unjustly, as we later discover – thus immediately transfer themselves to the state apparatus, which covers up this terrible crime; the local policeman, acting under higher instruction, orders the townsfolk to rebury the bodies and to say nothing of the incident to anyone, taking a list of their names in order to guarantee their silence. The reader has rapidly to reassess the situation, accept Cervino back into the community of normality, and digest the far more bitter pill of a state that, while notionally engaged in a moral crusade to rid the Argentine nation of communist elements, seeks to impose by force values which, if moral logic were followed, the people of the town ought to consider monstrous.

In this story, then, the reader ultimately sees the monstrous as bred, not within individuals by the unhealthy claustrophobia of a small town (as we had been led to expect by the title and by the persecutory vigour of la viuda), but within society at large by the nefarious designs

of a repressive regime that seeks firstly to eliminate resistance and alternative points of view by violence and terror, and secondly to obliterate these from collective memory as if they had never existed. A sense of the monstrous is thus incarnated in this system of dictatorial repression.

'Retrato de un piscicultor': scapegoat II

Social intolerance and political repression similarly act as driving forces in 'Retrato de un piscicultor', the closing story of *Infierno grande*, which centres on an obsessive character whose behaviour is initially somewhat reminiscent of the protagonist of Cortázar's 'Axolotl' (1956).² The eponymous piscicultor's social abnormality acts as a kind of allegory for repressed political subversion. He spends '[t]odo el día [...] sentado delante de la pecera, mirando a su pececito' (Martínez 2009: 173) and part of his abnormality as perceived by his mother is that he does not change in the way that other people change: 'él, era distinto. [...] la gente cambia, cambia mucho. Y él no, se sabía que no iba a cambiar' (175). Later, other family members, like the censuring community of Puente Viejo in 'Infierno grande', identify other more socially unacceptable aspects of his ongoing obsession. He fills his flat with fishtanks. His wife could have put up with just one fishtank – that would have been acceptable; '[p]ero lo de él no era algo civilizado' (179), a choice of adjective which implicitly, in the Argentine literary context, places her husband in the opposite realm of *la barbarie*.³ The piscicultor, therefore, is again the kind of outsider who is easily turned into a proto-monster or – once again – scapegoat figure: not yet demonstrably monstrous but marked out as clearly abnormal by family and friends, who are all too ready to ascribe moral failings to him as a result. This may elicit a degree of sympathy in the reader, to the extent that, as Weinstock puts it, in contemporary culture there is a trend of 'aspir[ing] toward monstrosity as an escape from the stultification of hegemonic social forces of normalization' (Weinstock: 276); we might interpret the piscicultor's individuality as just such an escape.

The crunch point in the narrative is when the Triple A [Alianza Anticomunista Argentina] bombs the house of the piscicultor and his family, presumably because of his political views (which are alluded to several times but never explored in depth within the narrative). The incident is preceded by a warning graffiti: 'Unos días antes habían aparecido en el frente de nuestra casa las tres letras A pintadas en negro' (181). Thereafter, although he continues spending 'horas enteras mirando a sus peces' (184), 'ahora los mira distinto' (184), and paradoxically it is now this change in the way he looks at the fish which is seen as suspicious by his wife, whereas before it had been his unchanging obsession which marked him out as different. So Martínez plays with the concepts of change and lack of change as both being potentially representative of abnormal behaviour. Furthermore, this abnormality is connected in some way, not only with the political, but with another world, as revealed by the sister's reaction to the eerie noise produced by the piscicultor's fishtanks: 'como el rumor de otro mundo que se animaba' (178).

Then comes the shocking revelation that one day he has suddenly killed all his fish. The impact of this event may be enhanced for the reader already familiar with Cortázar's aforementioned 'Axolotl', since they may subconsciously expect a more fantastic or at least empathetic outcome to his fish-gazing activities. The shock is revealed to us through the eyes

² Cortázar's protagonist goes every day to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris to gaze at axolotls in an aquarium, until one day he somehow becomes an axolotl, staring from within an axolotl's body through the glass tank at the receding figure of his human self going away from the glass.

³ I refer, of course, to Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's landmark nineteenth-century text, *Civilización y barbarie: Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga* (first published 1845), whose Manichean mythologizing of the country continues to cast long literary shadows.

of his son, who reacts with horrified incomprehension, intensified by repetition: 'Esas cosas me preguntaba y *había matado a sus peces*. [...] Eso me dijo, y *había matado a todos sus peces*' (185, emphasis added). Although the word *monstruoso* is never spoken, there is a clear sense that a boundary has been crossed by this unexplained act of violence towards what were once his most treasured creatures. Readers may take their cue from the son's reaction, shifting their sympathies away from this being whose sudden violence against what he seemed to love has transformed him from merely abnormal to monstrous. Yet we can also interpret the moral of the tale in the opposite way. Perhaps it was the Triple A that drove the husband to fish murder; perhaps, as with 'Infierno grande', the initial impulse that leads to the monstrous, murderous action turns out to be located in a repressive political system, not in the morals of the scapegoated outsider.

'La víctima': monstrous literary perfection

Thus far, then, we have seen how Martínez locates the monstrous in relation to the specific political context in which these early stories were written or conceived. There is, however, one other significant consideration of the monstrous in this first collection which is worthy of mention, since in its dramatization of a reader's ethical dilemma in reacting to monstrosity portrayed in literature, it sets up a framework for interpretation that implicitly links it thematically to the second collection. 'La víctima' locates the concept of the monstrous within the reader of literature via the viewpoint of its protagonist Roberto, which is communicated to us by an omniscient third-person narrator. Literature becomes, in his assessment, the source at which the reader, also known as the monster, drinks: '*La fuente donde abrevaba el monstruo*' (Martínez 2009: 53, original emphasis). To put this phrase briefly in its narrative context, Roberto is travelling on a long-distance bus to win back his girlfriend, Susana, who has just tried (by letter) to end their relationship. On the journey, he is reading Patricia Highsmith's *La víctima*, and begins strongly to identify with its main character, Peter, and with the seductively teleological pull of its narrative in contrast to the gratuitousness of life: 'La realidad encañonada, eso era la literatura' (Martínez 2009: 55).⁴ As the plot of the Highsmith text develops, Roberto becomes more drawn in by 'la lógica malsana del relato' (Martínez 2009: 60), to the point where as Peter realizes some people are born to be killers, so Roberto logically infers (although he has not yet finished reading the Highsmith book) that some people are born to be victims, just at the point when he arrives at his destination and sees his girlfriend waiting. Like the conclusion of Cortázar's 'La continuidad de los parques' (1964), the conclusion of this plot is beyond the end of the narrative, but the implication is that Roberto will proceed to make Susana his victim. He has become the monster, contaminated by the forcefully unhealthy logic of literary perfection: 'el monstruo había sorbido demasiado, y ahora, ya era irremediable' (Martínez 2009: 61). In a reference back to the idea of literature as the fountain at which the monster quenches his thirst, Roberto is now, unequivocally, that monster. What is monstrous about this perfect literary logic is that it imposes an unchanging form through a fixed view of what human beings should be and how they should behave, not allowing for natural variability and change. Like the political monstrous explored above, this literary monstrous is associated with notions of imposition and inflexibility.

As part of this monstrous literary logic, it is suggested that all happiness in literature is fleeting, scorned, and immediately and permanently under suspicion: 'el mundo de la literatura [...], un mundo donde la felicidad pronto se desdeñaba, donde ninguna dicha podía durar demasiado y la alegría estaba de inmediato bajo sospecha' (Martínez 2009: 53).

⁴ In this text, *La víctima* is referred to as a novel, although I can only locate a short story by Highsmith entitled 'The Victim', within her 1977 collection *Little Tales of Misogyny*, and this does not feature any character named Peter. The plot details of the Highsmith intertext therefore seem plausible but are in fact invented.

Roberto, having drunk too deeply the ideas presented in Highsmith's text, and therefore seeing literature as some kind of superior version of reality because it has been channelled rather than left to chance, desires to model his behaviour on that version, imposing it on himself. He intends to make his girlfriend the victim because his seduction by literary logic has caused him to mistrust all possibilities of happiness with her.⁵

Roberto's metamorphosis tacitly invokes a whole literary genealogy, moving in modern times through Charles Baudelaire and the Comte de Lautréamont amongst others, in which the authorial voice associates the reader with monsters.⁶ Literature seems to construct the gullible reader as a monster, in part precisely because any such construct is in its rigidity opposed to the freedom that marks out the human. As we will see with the analysis of Martínez's later collection, this figure of the internal reader within the narrative evolves into that of a narrator/witness who is implicated in the events witnessed and described. The potential is thereby created for the narrator/witness to be contaminated by the monstrosity s/he observes, if s/he allows him/herself to be influenced by it, or if indeed s/he merely does nothing to prevent its unfolding.

'Una felicidad repulsiva': inhuman happiness

I move now to the second collection, *Una felicidad repulsiva*. The title story returns to the idea raised in 'La víctima' that happiness in literature is always immediately suspect. In 'La víctima', Roberto became monstrous after being seduced by a literary logic of killer and victim, and consequently imposing on his normal, contingent life a categorical fixed position of mistrusting any possible happiness. Here, in 'Una felicidad repulsiva', we see a different angle, where happiness is not only suspicious but now directly repulsive. The happiness presented (within the narrative plane of 'real life' rather than a literary work) is an inhumanly excessive happiness. In relation to Marina and Bui's observations on monster theory in the twenty-first century, this constitutes an example of 'monstrosity as a destabilizing change to the known regimes of truth' (Marina and Bui 2013: 7), since as flawed, contingent humans we 'know' that perfect happiness cannot exist in this world. This story, as well as continuing Martínez's ideas from *Inferno grande* of monstrous inflexibility and fixity, introduces a more physical dimension to the monstrous. The monstrous is manifested not only through this perfect, unchanging happiness, but also through unchanging physical perfection. These two elements are seen, in their rigidity, as deviations from normal, flawed humanity. So, in both instances, what is monstrous is that which is unchanging, as opposed to natural human mutability and variety; an inflexible attitude of utter suspicion towards happiness is monstrous, but so too is a perfect, unchanging happiness coupled with perfect physical bodies unchanged through time.

'Una felicidad repulsiva' revolves around the members of a glamorous, rich tennis-playing family, 'la familia M.', as perceived by the narrator/witness and his family, who are socially inferior to them. The narrative charts the increasingly uncanny unchanging physical perfection of this family, in marked contrast to the humorously grotesque physical decline

⁵ This monstrous imposition of an imagined world onto reality finds parallels in Martínez's novels *Crímenes imperceptibles* and *La muerte lenta de Luciana B.*; in the former, the mathematician Seldom confesses that 'Lo que más temo es lo que me ha pasado durante toda mi vida: que lo que pienso sea finalmente cierto, pero del modo más monstruoso' (Martínez 2003: 118–19); in the latter, what the sinister novelist Kloster writes appears to determine in a monstrous way what will then in reality take place.

⁶ For example, Baudelaire's famous opening poem 'Au lecteur' from *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) figures the many vices of the poetic self and of the reader – his hypocritical double and brother – as monsters (Baudelaire 1857: 6–7). Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1869), in its opening two sections, expects the reader to become 'féroce' like that which he is reading (Lautréamont 1990: 99), and addresses him directly with the words 'ô monstre' (100).

of the narrator's own family. So, as in 'Retrato de un piscicultor', lack of change becomes an indicator of abnormality. What will become the monstrous perfection of the M. family is very gradually constructed. We witness the narrator's parents secretly deliberating before deciding to pay for the narrator as a boy (aged about twelve) to join the 'club de ellos' (Martínez 2015: 12, original emphasis), which sets up a 'them and us' scenario. His first visit to the private tennis club with its 'arcada imponente' and 'mansión inglesa' (a sure sign of social snobbery) is like a kind of entry into a sacred space, almost a masonic lodge. First, he hears the increasing noise of tennis balls being hit, then he sees the stone slab path behind a (symbolic) wire fence, then finally sees the players themselves, 'nítidos, magníficos, reales' (12), 'real' implying both majesty and also the opposite of unreal or imaginary, thus introducing an element of unreality by its very negation. The threefold adjectival description gives rhetorical overtones of the sacred and perfect, and this rhetorical trinity is repeated in many subsequent descriptions of members of the family, thus underlining their perfection. Referring to the father and elder son, Freddy, the narrator observes that 'Eran altos, atléticos, iguales. De la misma especie' (12), the second comment implying that Freddy is very much a chip off the old block. The word 'especie', however, is carefully chosen by Martínez, as we shall see later – it is a Borgesian prophetic detail.⁷ The threefold perfection continues in the descriptions: 'Todo en él [Freddy] era de un ímpetu arrollador, vertiginoso, temerario' (13). That the father and two sons are then likened to Platonic archetypes (Sabiduría, Fuerza, Elegancia, pp. 13, 24) again links them to perfection but also to a certain unreality. Their perfection begins to acquire a somewhat creepy, unnerving quality. In the seemingly unremarkable phrase 'Eran, minuciosamente, perfectos' (12), the interruption of that adverb 'minuciosamente' disrupts what would otherwise be a casual, possibly hyperbolic comment, making their perfection disturbing, unnatural and therefore suspicious. This suspicion conforms to Persephone Braham's definition of the monstrous, in that the sensation of unreality linked to their perfection is received as implying simulation or imposture (Braham 2003).

The narrative then documents a constant and increasingly obsessive scrutiny of the M. family by the narrator, who looks at the family 'como si fuera una nueva especie, frágil y extraña, descubierta sólo por mí' (17). This repetition of the scientific term 'especie' is crucial, since – unwittingly perhaps, at this stage – the narrator sets them apart as something potentially not human. The term 'especie' will recur a third time in the closing paragraph of the story to great effect. But at this point in the narrative, the narrator's main desire is to see whether the family is really perfectly happy, or whether in private they have their disagreements and their failures like any other family. To begin with, the narrator's mother is certain that they are normal in this sense: 'los M. también tendrán sus cosas, como todas las familias' (16) and she sticks by this opinion: 'delante de los demás disimulan. Pero ya quisiera verlos a solas ... *algo* deben tener' (22, original emphasis). The narrator is determined to scrutinize them and spy on them. Initially he finds nothing, they appear relaxed and open 'como si no tuvieran nada que ocultar' (17), but the hypothetical mood of this phrase implies that they might, in fact, have something to hide. Their successive wins at tennis tournaments and smiling celebration of these triumphs seem 'como si fuera parte de un ritual sonriente que repetían, *ya sin tanta sorpresa ni efusión*, desde hacía años' (18, my emphasis), and in this lack of surprise or spontaneous joy there is a subtle underscoring of their unnatural longevity without apparent physical decline. By contrast, as the years pass, the narrator's family rapidly degenerates, both in terms of their individual health (psychiatric problems and suicidal tendencies of his elder brother, teenage pregnancy of his sister, emphysema of his father) and in economic terms (their house is ruined by ingress of water and dog urine from the flat above,

⁷ '[P]rofetizan los pormenores' (Borges 1932: 179).

and they lose what was in any case an unfertile piece of land). The contrast between the fortunes of the two families calls to mind not only Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), which is an explicit intertext used with morbid black humour by the narrator's sister to describe the advancing deterioration of their family and home (27), but also the hidden portrait in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), which ages while its subject does not. Here, however, rather than comparing the portrait with its subject, we compare a normal, natural subject, or control case (the narrator's family), with an unnatural subject (la familia M.). At this point, we are beginning to associate the unnatural with the monstrous, since – to take one aspect of Gabriel Giorgi's definition of the monstrous – it can be found in 'lo que en los cuerpos desafía la norma de lo "humano"' (Giorgi 2009: 323), here, the normal human process of aging.⁸

Suspicion is therefore attaching itself to the eternally perfect M. family. The narrator, meanwhile, becomes an academic, eventually securing a tenured post in Canada, and during his academic training his sister takes on the mantle of spy of the M. family. She finds their sudden departure from the town mysterious and frustrating, as she will never now see whether or not the narrator's theory about them not aging like other people is correct (Martínez 2015: 26). The ever-widening contrast between the fortunes of the two families is exaggerated by the description of the narrator's academic post as a kind of living death: his interviewers 'estaban encantados de que fuera a *puerirme* junto con ellos en esa ciudad *perdida, sepultada* por la nieve' (28, my emphasis). And indeed, his death will not be far off, as a few years later, he collapses while giving a talk in Florida, and is diagnosed with emphysema, just like his father. So ironically, he too, like Freddy M., is a chip off the old block, but inheriting disease rather than perfection. He walks alone back to his hotel and on the way hears the sound of a tennis match. What the alert reader has already suspected – that it is the M. family once again – is confirmed by the verbatim recurrence of the original sentence which heralded his first encounter with them, complete with its magisterial threefold adjectives: 'Cuando me asomé al final del camino de lasjas, detrás del alambrado, nítidos, magníficos, reales, allí estaban' (30, repeated from 12). Furthermore, the word 'especie' recurs with its full scientific force; the language they use to communicate amongst themselves is totally unknown to the narrator, who says it is 'quizá el verdadero idioma de la especie' (31). We are left, as is the dying narrator, with the possibility that they are another species altogether, not human beings as we know them. Yet it is their utter likeness to human beings, and their simulation of the perfect happy human family which makes them monstrous. Like the 'physical polysensory holograph[s]' (López-Pellisa 2015: 82) in Bioy Casares's *La invención de Morel* (1940), they will apparently be eternally happy and never decay, but paradoxically in that very immunity to unhappiness and death lies their monstrosity. This idea of a simulated human perfection connects Martínez with the monstrosity highlighted by Braham at the turn of the previous century, likewise revealed through simulation, but in that context seen as a 'social illness' which was used to explain 'modern phenomena such as class mobility' (Braham 2003: 108). Monstrosity demonstrably 'evoluciona con el correr de los tiempos' (Roas 2013: 8).

Returning to 'Una felicidad repulsiva', we can reinterpret with hindsight the narrator's opening statement, which had qualified the happiness of the M. family as 'serena, extendida, imperturbable, verdaderamente repulsiva' (11). As Roberto in 'La víctima' was taught by literature to mistrust happiness, so the narrator of 'Una felicidad repulsiva' finds this serene and impassive happiness repulsive; when linked with his suspicions about their 'especie', we find ourselves in the domain of the monstrous, that which appears human but is set

⁸ A possible antecedent is to be found in the Faustian character of Roderer from Martínez's first novel *Acerca de Roderer*: 'Había [...] algo en sus facciones que llamaba la atención [...]: en todos esos años su cara no había cambiado nada, no tenía una línea más, ni una señal, ni una marca' (Martínez 1996: 112).

apart by uncanny differences.⁹ It uncovers the lurking fear, pinpointed by Catherine Heard, 'that monsters might be among us, existing in cleverly disguised forms' (Heard 2007: 34). This monstrously excessive and unchanging physical perfection, coupled with the outward appearance of perfect happiness, seems to ironize media-driven social anxieties of the twenty-first century, where human beings are continually urged to try to realize a state of total self-fulfilment, happiness and physical perfection. In this respect, 'Una felicidad repulsiva' bears out Levina and Bui's assertion that monster theory in the twenty-first century represents 'collective social anxieties' (Levina and Bui 2013: 1).

'Una madre protectora': the monstrous mother

'Una madre protectora', the final and longest story in the collection, almost a *novella* in length and divided into chapters, maintains the idea of the monstrous as being barely distinguishable from the human, yet differing from human normality in certain significant – and repellent – ways. Here the monstrous is located within a human whose fulfilment of a role – in this case, that of motherhood – is so distorted as to make those around perceive her behaviour as monstrous. Once again, as in 'Infierno grande', Martínez plays with reader expectations as to whose behaviour should be regarded as monstrous. Jane M. Ussher discusses how the mother's body has always been viewed ambiguously as both monstrous and beneficent, potentially polluting and yet nourishing (Ussher 2006: 1–3). Likewise, but in a wider context, John Block Friedman notes that within the 'Western European monster tradition' (Friedman 2012: xxviii), which is based on 'an archetype of reason and beauty in eternal conflict with the irrational and the chaotic' (xxviii), chaos is not infrequently 'tied to the primal female nature' (xxviii). But traditionally, this monstrosity of the female has been channelled through physical characteristics, whereas Martínez's take on it prefers to address the mother's nurturing behaviour. As Cohen observes: 'The woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith, [...] Bertha Mason, or Gorgon' (Cohen 1996: 9). This approach to the monstrous once again taps into contemporary anxieties, where mothering debates and scandalous cases of monstrous mothers are not infrequently the stuff of sensational news (see Goc 2007).¹⁰ 'Una madre protectora' focuses on a mother whose protection and nourishing of her child by its obsessiveness and distortion becomes monstrous. Martínez enhances the narrative impact of this monstrous mother by adding in traditional folkloric motifs of the changeling and of the witches' cave, transposed into a twenty-first century urban context.

There is a clear parallel with 'Una felicidad repulsiva' in the way in which the narrator presents 'Una madre protectora', beginning from a kind of initiation into an inner circle or closed community; there the exclusive 'club de ellos', here 'lo más íntimo del círculo áulico', the court being a literary group which clusters around the 'pareja dorada', Renato and Moriana (Martínez 2015: 151). This group acts like a kind of Greek chorus, reacting and responding to the unfolding events. Martínez places the monstrous within a social context where identifying the monstrous is a game of shifting boundaries, depending on where you stand on what constitutes normal social behaviour. Thus, monstrosity is whatever 'amenaza las reglas por las que se rige la comunidad a la que pertenecemos' (Casas 2012: [n.p.]), and as Patricia

⁹ Interestingly, the word *especie* also features in *La muerte lenta de Luciana B.* The narrator vents the envy of his generation for their literary rival Kloster by saying that 'Nos consolábamos con la conclusión de que Kloster debía ser de otra especie, un engendro malévolo, repudiado por el género humano' (Martínez 2008: 12).

¹⁰ There are also contemporary literary parallels – for example, Uruguayan writer Andrea Blanqué's novel *Fragilidad*, whose first-person narrator is an alcoholic mother who considers abandoning her twins, and who confesses her sense of her own psychological monstrosity through conventional physically monstrous imagery: 'me convertiré en un monstruo. [...] ya lo soy. [...] Tengo garras, aliento fétido, largos colmillos y piel de reptil' (Blanqué 2008: 206).

MacCormack notes, 'it is the structure of relation with the monster that creates its meaning, rather than the quality or nature of the monster itself' (MacCormack 2012: 304). We have already seen this in *Infierno grande* in Puente Viejo's reaction, first to Cervino and subsequently to the mass grave, or in the family's reaction to el piscicultor; likewise, in 'Una felicidad repulsiva', it is only the narrator and his immediate family who perceive monstrousness in the M. family.

The characters of interest to this particular elite gathering are a late middle-aged visual artist, Lorenzo Roy, and his soon-to-be wife, a much younger Danish woman called Sigrir. Notably, the first element of her name, 'Sigr', is from the Old Norse, and signifies 'victory', symbolically giving us a foreshadowing of the narrative's outcome. Their first appearance as a couple at the group's regular gathering excites much comment; Sigrir's imperious gestures to get Lorenzo to leave not long after their arrival indicates her strong, dominant character. Furthermore, the fact that in choosing Lorenzo she has chosen 'un vikingo criollo' (154) implies that she is perhaps a kind of Valkyrie.¹¹ Her forceful character is subsequently confirmed with her behaviour at the opening of Lorenzo's art exhibition, when she appears to blame the narrator for the non-attendance of those in the literary circle (157). She has made extensive preparations for the show, single-handedly cooking lots of typical Danish food which no one eats. The tendency of her character towards extremes is suggested; not only is she dominant and vengeful, she is also – taking her manner of cooking as metonymically representative – 'demasiado obsesiva' (159). Furthermore, the food itself is perceived as faintly threatening in its abnormality, being either raw or in a state of decomposition, albeit controlled; the meatballs are 'demasiado rojas en el centro' (160), the smoked herring is topped with a raw egg, and the main dish is fermented trout (traditionally eaten raw, and noted for its pungent smell). The wedding feast, which she also prepares alone, produces a similarly threatening effect of excess on the guests, one of whom comments: 'no me gustan las mujeres que cocinan *tanto*' (162, original emphasis). In expressing his agreement with this sentiment, the narrator metonymically links Sigrir to a witch, equating these women who cook excessively with those who 'revuelven y revuelven el caldero' (162). This witch idea will be reinforced later with the related mythical space of the underground cavern.

Sigrir's anxiety to get pregnant, which is roundly essentialized and normalized by Renato's immediate mention of 'el reloj biológico [que] empezó a hacer tic tac' (162), and Lorenzo's joyous relief when she does get pregnant, are soon overshadowed by conflicts between the couple, the nature of which leads one of the literary group to comment that 'El bebé es muy normal, [...] la que no es normal es *ella*' (169, original emphasis). Adding this perceived abnormality to the earlier indications of Sigrir's forceful, obsessive character and her witchlike tendencies, which are compounded by association with her childhood nurse, the 'vieja bruja' (169) who she insisted on bringing from Denmark to be her midwife, we have the beginnings of a suggestion that there is already something monstrous about this new mother. Her behaviour is demonstrably obsessive in comparison with social norms, never taking the baby outdoors in his first three months of life, keeping him inside in the dark, staying by his cradle 'como si [ella] fuera un mastín vigilante' (169) (we note the animal simile) and bathing with him in a uterus-shaped bath for hours on end.

When the baby fails to thrive on her own milk, Sigrir uses her previous knowledge as a marine biologist specializing in 'la alimentación de mamíferos' (174) to prepare a concoction replicating what the foetus had in the womb. 'Era una pasta viscosa, entre marrón y sanguinolenta, con olor a hígado' (174), which – like her meatballs – has disturbing

¹¹ Valkyries are supernatural female figures in Norse mythology who choose which warriors will be slain in battle. Jorge Luis Borges notes that the word *valquiria* came to mean *bruja* (Borges 1980: 202–3).

associations with the raw and bloody. This detail, of the rational scientist who controls the situation in a logical manner, uses gender stereotyping of what could be considered typically masculine behaviour to further undermine the possibility of perceiving Sigrir as a 'normal' mother. To quote Cohen, we have here a vision of an 'aberrant' gender through 'violation of the cultural codes that valence gendered behaviours' (Cohen 1996: 11). In the ensuing argument between Lorenzo and Sigrir about their baby's nutritional needs, Lorenzo tries to walk to the door carrying the baby and we learn that Sigrir had set upon him 'como un animal enfurecido y le había arañado el cuello y la espalda' (174). These repeated associations with the animal world increase the monstrous nature of Sigrir but, lest we perceive the behaviour of the two main protagonists too reductively, there is a simultaneously unfolding subplot of a legal case against Lorenzo. He hits out at Sigrir in rage and self-defence, which gives Sigrir the legitimate grounds she clearly sought for waging a legal battle to try and prevent him having access to their son. To further complicate matters, the lawyer considering Lorenzo's position is the narrator's somewhat spiteful ex-girlfriend. So, we the readers – alongside the narrator, the lawyer and other members of the literary circle – are encouraged to decide for ourselves who precisely is the more monstrous parent in this relationship: the obsessive, masculine Sigrir or the paternally caring but impulsively violent Lorenzo.

The narrator becomes further implicated at the next stage, since Lorenzo asks that he accompany him to the 'casa de brujas' (186), which is how Lorenzo now refers to the matrimonial home after Sigrir has kicked him out. She has not left the house since the birth, and keeps the baby in the cellar, access to which is restricted by 'una tapa de dos semicírculos de hierro que sellaba la boca de la escalera' (190). This description invokes mythological precedents of the sealed cave or of the underworld, from which Lorenzo is desperate to rescue his child. Indeed, it could be read as a gendered inversion of the myth of Persephone; Demeter's daughter Persephone is taken down to the underworld by Hades, whence Demeter attempts to rescue her. Here, the genders are reversed; Lorenzo's son (unnamed) is taken down to the basement of the 'casa de brujas' by Sigrir, whence Lorenzo attempts to rescue him. The rapacious male god is replaced, in this twenty-first century version, by an animalistic, witchlike harpy of a mother. An interesting detail that links this monstrous underworld with Martínez's earlier collection, *Infierno grande*, is that the noise of the gas heating which keeps the basement excessively warm is described as 'como el respirador de una pecera' (190), precisely the kind of noise that in 'Retrato de un piscicultor' had frightened the narrator's sister with its intimations of 'otro mundo que se animaba' (Martínez 2009: 178). Here the other world is a monstrous underworld in which Lorenzo's child is imprisoned by its own mother like the piscicultor's fish in their tanks. This intratextual parallel can only increase the reader's sense of suspense and foreboding; might Sigrir turn on her child the way the piscicultor turned on his unsuspecting fish?

The changeling

Lorenzo's desperation is heightened by the fact that when he briefly gains access to the house to see his son, he is convinced that the baby he is shown is a changeling, not his son at all. This mytheme of the changeling or substitute child taps into a rich vein of folklore, but in an ironic reversal, it is not usually a parent who is guilty of swapping the child; rather, in folklore, the parents watch anxiously over the sleeping child to prevent other – usually supernatural – beings from replacing the child with a substitute. In this case, Sigrir and the old nurse have apparently acquired another baby who they are pretending is Lorenzo's son, and who they take out in the pushchair, feed with milk, and take for vaccinations. Meanwhile, the real baby is kept hidden from his father in the basement. As Lorenzo puts it, 'Esa criatura que consiguiéron no sé cómo, es la que van a mostrar al mundo' (Martínez 2015: 190), a phrase which is

echoed with hindsight by the narrator in the 'Epílogo' (204). This dramatic twist precipitates violent action on the part of Lorenzo, who attempts to seize his son by forcing his way into the basement; he is shot dead by the old nurse in the process.

The idea of *showing* this changeling creature to the world ('es la que van a *mostrar* al mundo', emphasis added) is apt, as it reminds us of the shared Latin root of the words 'monstruo' and 'mostrar', as noted by Oliva (2003: 32, 50–1, 81–2, 97) and by Cohen: 'the *monstrum* is etymologically "that which reveals", "that which warns"' (Cohen 1996: 4). Derrida too reminds us of this etymology: 'it shows itself [elle se montre] – that is what the word monster means' (quoted in Levina and Bui, 2013: 6). The monstrous mother shows the changeling child to the world, keeping the rightful child hidden, and by this deceitful showing, ironically reveals not the monstrosity of the shown creature but her own monstrosity as an excessively protective mother who has gone beyond the boundaries of the normal in her distorted desire to protect. Her accomplice in this deceitful show, the old crone of a nurse, provides a thematic and stylistic link between this, the last story of the collection, and the first one, 'Una felicidad repulsiva', as she – like the M. family – appears not to have aged (more) with the years. When, in the epilogue, the narrator sees the crone again several years later, parading the changeling at an Independence Day school procession, it seems to him that 'no hubiera logrado envejecer más en todos esos años' (204). She looked ancient when the narrator first encountered her and she remains unchanged. Stylistically, the same threefold repetition of adjectives is applied to her as was applied to the M. family, but here the trinitarian rhetorical perfection is rendered heavily ironic by contrast with the subject they describe: 'encorvada, horrorosa, milagrosamente intacta, como una reliquia fósil' (204). The religious tones of the words 'milagrosamente' and 'reliquia' only serve to highlight, by opposition with the divine, her monstrously repellent appearance and the fantastic nature of her unchanging appearance.

Monstrosity versus normalization

As previously quoted, Weinstock, in discussing monsters in contemporary culture, observes a trend of 'aspir[ing] toward monstrosity as an escape from the stultification of hegemonic social forces of normalization' (Weinstock 2012: 276). Returning briefly to 'Retrato de un piscicultor', these stultifying hegemonic forces might initially be the disapproving family and friends who find the protagonist's obsession with fish abnormal, but latterly, and more disturbingly, they are represented by the Triple A who try to normalize society by violently suppressing proto-communist opposition, as they do most dramatically in 'Infierno grande'. In both cases, we have a scapegoat figure, initially perceived in some way as monstrous, and a subsequent shift in which it is the values being forcibly imposed upon that individual by a wider, inflexible system that become associated with monstrosity. In *Una felicidad repulsiva*, we similarly start off with a family or an individual seen as monstrous, and although in the case of the M. family, the fantastic dimension of their monstrosity prevails, suggesting they might ultimately be some other *especie* altogether, nevertheless we are still encouraged to wonder about the future fate of a society that aspires to inhuman perfection, be that unchanging physical perfection or being the utterly protective parent. Surely such a society is a potentially monstrous one, since an essential defining feature of being human is to be imperfect, physically and behaviourally, and to escape definition by always changing over time. Our sympathies as readers are therefore drawn in 'Una madre protectora' to Lorenzo, who is a humanly imperfect parent; he has effectively lost touch with his first family, and his violent impulses (albeit springing from deeply felt paternal instincts to protect his son, ironically parallel to those of Sigrir) make him inadequate – although not out-and-out monstrous – in the eyes of normalizing society. This normalizing society is synecdochically represented by the lawyer, who views her potential client Lorenzo in a judgemental

and critical way, perhaps aggravated into female fellow-feeling with Sigrir by Lorenzo's friendship with the ex-boyfriend she now scorns. Likewise, in 'Una felicidad repulsiva', we align ourselves sympathetically with the relentless human decline of the narrator, in preference to the inhuman and uncanny perfection of the M. family. Even the monstrous Sigrir elicits some sympathy, since she is within a society always ready to comment on and judge women's reproductive and nurturing capacities (we recall Renato's tactless comment about her biological clock ticking). Thus, Martínez muddies the waters regarding what constitutes monstrous behaviour in contemporary society, choosing ultimately to highlight the shifting – and gendered – nature of those relationships between individual and community on which labelling of the monstrous always depends.

The role of the narrator

The role of the narrator in all of the stories analysed above is crucial, since the narrator/witness in these stories – like Roberto as reader in 'La víctima' – runs the risk of being contaminated by monstrosity depending on the (un)ethical choices he makes in reacting to events around him. The narrator of 'Una madre protectora', looking back with hindsight at the moment when Lorenzo's legal fight with Sigrir appeared hopeless, asks himself: '¿Por qué no lo llamé inmediatamente después? ¿Por qué no hice ese mínimo movimiento humano?' (Martínez 2015: 196). The implied question is, if the narrator could not make that tiniest human gesture, does that make him inhuman and – by extension – potentially monstrous? In the final lines of the book, in an involuntary, Proustian way, the narrator's memory connects the cosy, protected and isolated warmth of his heated car, in which he is carrying his own daughter home from an Independence Day parade, with the stifling warmth emanating from the closely guarded cellar where Sigrir was 'protecting' Lorenzo's child. The narrator is thus also shown by association to be a potentially monstrous parent, were his instincts to protect his daughter to become as abnormally strong and distorted as those of Sigrir.

Twenty-first century anxieties

In leaving the reader with this final image of a 'normal' parent and child, enclosed within a space which nevertheless bears some analogical resemblance to the abnormal and monstrous world of Sigrir – whose distortedly excessive maternal protectiveness has triumphed over Lorenzo and over the accepted boundaries of civilized society – Martínez encourages us to speculate on what separates the normal from the abnormal and potentially monstrous in our twenty-first century world of (over-)protective parenting.¹² In this way, Martínez's story chimes with Weinstock's assertion that 'monsters [...] give shape to culturally specific anxieties and desires' (Weinstock 2012: 282). The anxieties and desires experienced vicariously through such narratives may not leave readers unchanged. As MacCormack puts it, 'while readers are aware of the fictive form, the affects and intensities incited in the imagination are real and have direct effects on the subjectivity of the reader, just as all fictive art affects the self beyond the fiction' (MacCormack 2012: 305). Therefore, MacCormack argues, 'all encounters with alterity will create a choice – to turn away by knowing the other as abnormal and therefore affirming the self as normal, or to enter into a bordering [...] with the monstrous' (305).

¹² We might at this point revisit Patricia Highsmith's short story 'The Victim' (in Highsmith's original version rather than that sketched out by Martínez). A young girl, Cathy, is the eponymous victim, since she suffers repeated rapes, yet her habit of dressing provocatively in clothes which belie her young age is seen by her father as asking for trouble. When he tries to get her to dress less outrageously, his wife scolds him for being 'the over-protective father' (Highsmith 1977: 121), an ironic complaint since he has failed to protect her from these repeated rapes. The father is apparently powerless, and this raises the question of what leads Cathy inexorably and inevitably to be the victim: do hegemonic social pressures exerted both on girls and on their neurotic parents drive the 'lógica malsana del relato'? (Martínez 2009: 60).

Bordering the monstrous: 'El *I Ching* y el hombre de los papeles'

As readers, we may further see a parable for our human encounters with the monstrous in the second story of *Una felicidad repulsiva*, 'El *I Ching* y el hombre de los papeles', a narrative in which Martínez returns to more concretely physical definitions of the monstrous, but linking these to the ultimate human encounter: with death. The narrative centres around a couple who are anxiously awaiting the outcome of emergency surgery on their baby daughter; their anxiety is heightened by their earlier experience of losing their first child, and a sense of fatalism connected with this. The narrator initially presents us with a stereotypically gendered division between a woman who reacts to fear by seeking refuge and reassurance in consulting the *I Ching*, the classic Chinese manual of divination, whilst her husband – a university lecturer – uses statistics to try and control his fear through rational means. His lectures on statistics take as examples the statistical frequency of none other than 'patologías médicas, de enfermedades extrañas, de monstruosidades' (Martínez 2015: 42).¹³ His approach, that of trying to look for patterns in the occurrence of 'las aberraciones, [...] lo monstruoso' (42) in order to control them, and his wife's recourse to the complex predictions of the *I Ching*, present a gendered vision of twenty-first century discomfort at the lingering presence of the monstrous which exceeds our control. The husband's approach also typifies Martínez's own omnipresent interest (as befits a former professional mathematician) in the mathematics of chance and the relationship between probability and reality. As Joanna Page puts it, in reference to Martínez's novel *Crímenes imperceptibles*, such behaviour 'testifies to our propensity to search for patterns [...] and to use them, inaccurately and even dangerously, to shape our understanding of the world' (Page 2014: 71), usually motivated by 'superstition and self-protection' (Page 2014: 74).

The ending of the story leaves the reader on a cliff-hanger with both wife and husband fearfully awaiting the prediction of the *I Ching* as to whether their daughter will survive another surgical operation. And although the lecturer continues desperately to rationalize, saying to himself 'Pero su hijo y su hija [...] son sucesos independientes' (Martínez 2015: 48), nevertheless he is subconsciously drawn by the (irrational) hope that the copy of the *I Ching* which he borrowed for his wife from one of his students will happen to be the one infallible copy which – statistically – could exist in the population of a large city: 'en una ciudad grande es perfectamente posible que exista un ejemplar que nunca se equivoque' (45).¹⁴ In this way, the previously clearly demarcated gender division between their different reactions to the monstrous threat of death is blurred; the final line of the story sees husband and wife temporarily united in pinning their hopes on 'el libro infalible' (48), and as readers, we cannot know whether the tone of this closing description of the *I Ching* as infallible is mocking, reverent or fatalistic or indeed a mixture of all three. Through this parable-like story, then, Martínez seems to suggest on the one hand that we can try to contain and control the threat of the monstrous – either through comforting rational statistical normalization or through emotional recourse to books traditionally invested with divinatory authority – and yet, on the other hand, he also appears to acknowledge that ultimately this does not significantly reduce our primal human terror at having to confront the monstrous on each separate occasion that it – in due accordance with statistical probability – irrupts into our lives.

¹³ They remind us of Dr Rago's anatomy lessons on *teratomas* in *Acerca de Roderer*: 'Teratomas. Del griego *teratos*: monstruo. Un nombre bastante injusto, son tumoraciones de células embrionarias, no pueden ser más monstruosas que nosotros mismos' (Martínez 1996: 24) or of Durel's mathematics lectures, which logically generate 'verdaderos monstruos de abstracción' (Martínez 1996: 35).

¹⁴ I suspect there is an echo here of Borges's 'La biblioteca de Babel', in which potentially everyone can find their life's justification somewhere in a volume in the library, but they are unlikely ever to do so, given its vastness.

Conclusion

It appears significant that in both Martínez's short story collections, the opening and closing stories are those which most obviously thematize the emergence of the monstrous. It is as though each collection represents a varied world over which arches the potential for monstrosity. The effect of this bookending on readers (presuming they read the stories in order) is to introduce them into Martínez's narrative world – which, in the other stories not discussed here, ranges over the (neo)fantastic, the absurd and the comically grotesque – via the monstrous, and to release them from that world once again via the monstrous. Often, Martínez's monstrosity initially manifests itself within a closed space or system of some kind, be it a gossipy village, a family flat, an underground cave or an inflexibly logical literary order; but that closed space is always contested by others, and the site of monstrosity shifts with that contestation. In this way, the monstrous emerges on borders between worlds, including the border between the worlds within and without literature. As readers, we are encouraged, in MacCormack's terms, to enter into a bordering with the monstrous, rather than simply to affirm ourselves as normal. Martínez does not present us with the clearly identifiable and therefore reassuringly different monstrosity of sci-fi type aliens; rather, he leads us to rub shoulders with the far more disturbing monstrosity of those who at first sight are extremely, indeed *minuciosamente*, human.

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