

The Establishment of Minifiction As Literary Canon in Mexico

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There are many definitions of minifiction. For the purposes of this article, I consider minifiction literary narrative texts, one printed page in length or less. I will point to some of the indications of the increas-

ing interest in this genre in recent years in four different areas in which it is simultaneously canonized: publishing, literary anthologies, the formation of readers and specialized research.

PUBLISHING

The first measure of whether a literary genre has become a canon is the publication of books made up partially or wholly of that genre.

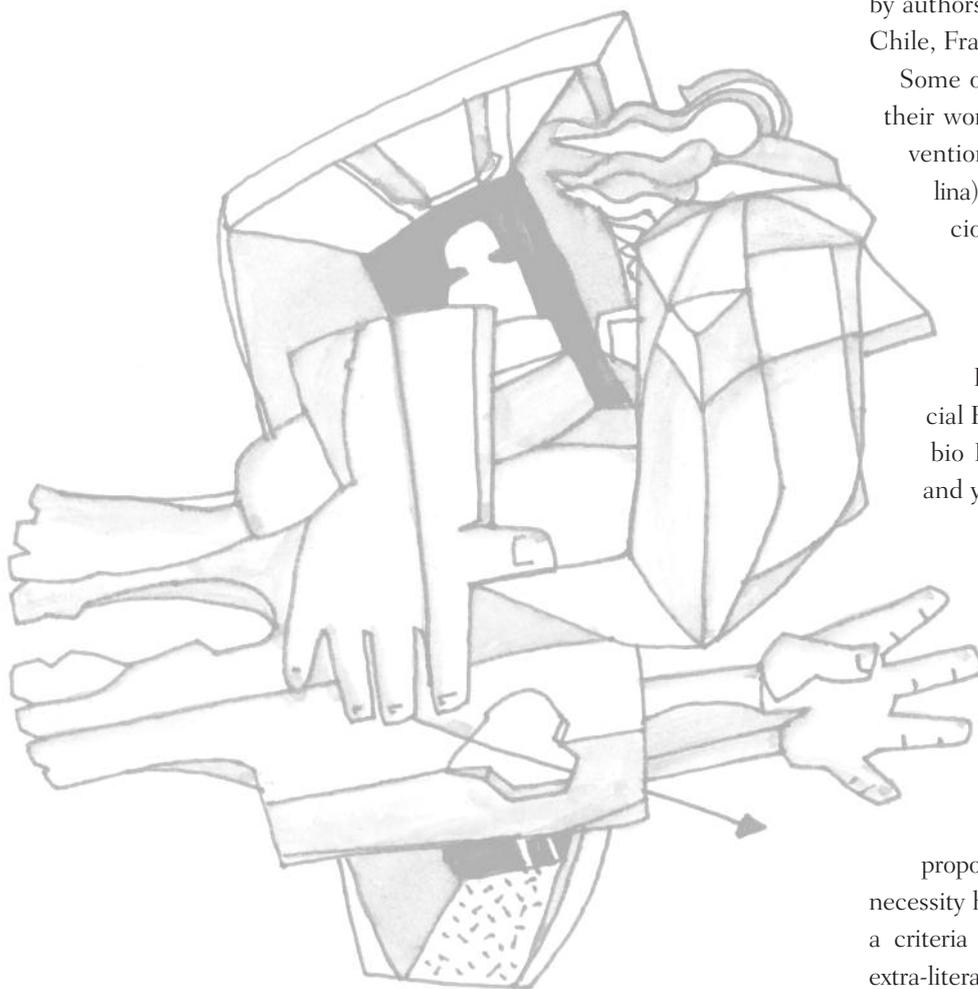
In the first half of the twentieth century, very few books were published containing minifiction, and none at all completely devoted to it. Narrative was mixed with poetry and essays, oral narrative with literature and very brief texts with longer works of conventional length.

An archeological study of Mexican short stories in those first 50 years of the century yields four titles: *Ensayos y poemas* (Essays and Poems) (1917), by Julio Torri; *El plano oblicuo* (The Oblique Plane) (1920), by Alfonso Reyes; *Los hombres que sembró la lluvia* (The Men the Rain Planted) (1929), by Andrés Henestrosa; and *Varia invención* (Other Inventions) (1949) by Juan José Arreola. Some of these books are now required reading for any history of Mexican literature.

In the following decades, from 1950 to 1990, four books were published entirely dedicated to minifiction: *Bestiario* (Bestiary) (1959), by Juan José Arreola; *La oveja negra y*



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demás fábulas (The Black Sheep and Other Fables) (1969), by Augusto Monterroso; *Textos extraños* (Strange Writings) (1981), by Guillermo Samperio; and *Los oficios perdidos* (Lost Trades) (1983), by René Avilés Fabila.

In those first 90 years of the twentieth century, the literary value of other narrators' minifiction earned them a place in its history even though they mainly wrote in other genres. Among them are Inés Arredondo, Francisco Tario, Octavio Paz, Salvador Elizondo, José Agustín, Elena Poniatowska, Efrén Hernández, Sergio Golwarz, José Joaquín Blanco and José Emilio Pacheco.

However, from 1995 to 1999 alone, at least 25 books of minifiction were published in Mexico City, of which one-third were written

by authors born abroad (in Spain, Guatemala, Chile, France, Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina).

Some of the authors are already known for their work in other genres, such as the conventional-length short story (José de la Colina), poetry (Ethel Krauze), the essay (Ignacio Trejo Fuentes), the novel (Martha Cerda), cultural journalism (Víctor Roura), literary criticism (Adolfo Castañón), art criticism (André de Luna), bullfight commentary (Marcial Fernández), literary biography (Eusebio Ruvalcaba) or narrative for children and young people (Mónica Lavín).

ANTHOLOGIES

Anthologies are the medium par excellence wherein literary canons are created, both in the realm of university research and outside it. Each anthology not only proposes a strategy for reading what of necessity has been left out, but also establishes a criteria for placing aesthetic value or even extra-literary value on the authors and work included in the anthology.

The process of making the modern ministory a literary canon in Latin America began with the publication in Argentina of Jorge Luis Borges' and Adolfo Bioy Casares' anthology *Cuentos breves y extraordinarios* (Brief and Extraordinary Stories) in 1953,¹ and Edmundo Valadés' anthology *El libro de la imaginación* (The Book of the Imagination) in Mexico in 1976.² In both volumes, the compilers selected many fragments taken from texts that were originally longer. So, *Cuentos breves y extraordinarios* offers the reader 110 texts, the majority of which are taken from memoirs, travel chronicles, fantasy novels, philosophical essays, religious treatises, compendia of fables, poetry anthologies, historical reconstructions, financial reports...and books of short stories.

El libro de la imaginación follows a similar logic, but is three times as long, with 362 frag-

ments from the most diverse sources, many of them outside the realm of literature. These anthologies established a tradition of reading very brief fragments as autonomous literature. Actually, it is a very contemporary gesture in which reading itself establishes the text's literary value.

A few years after the publication of these anthologies, the first prize for minifiction was established, in 1980, by the magazine *El Cuento* (The Short Story), founded by Edmundo Valadés in June 1939 (the magazine initiated its second stage in 1984). Over the last 20 years, this quarterly has published almost 5,000 pieces of minifiction in all the different literary traditions.

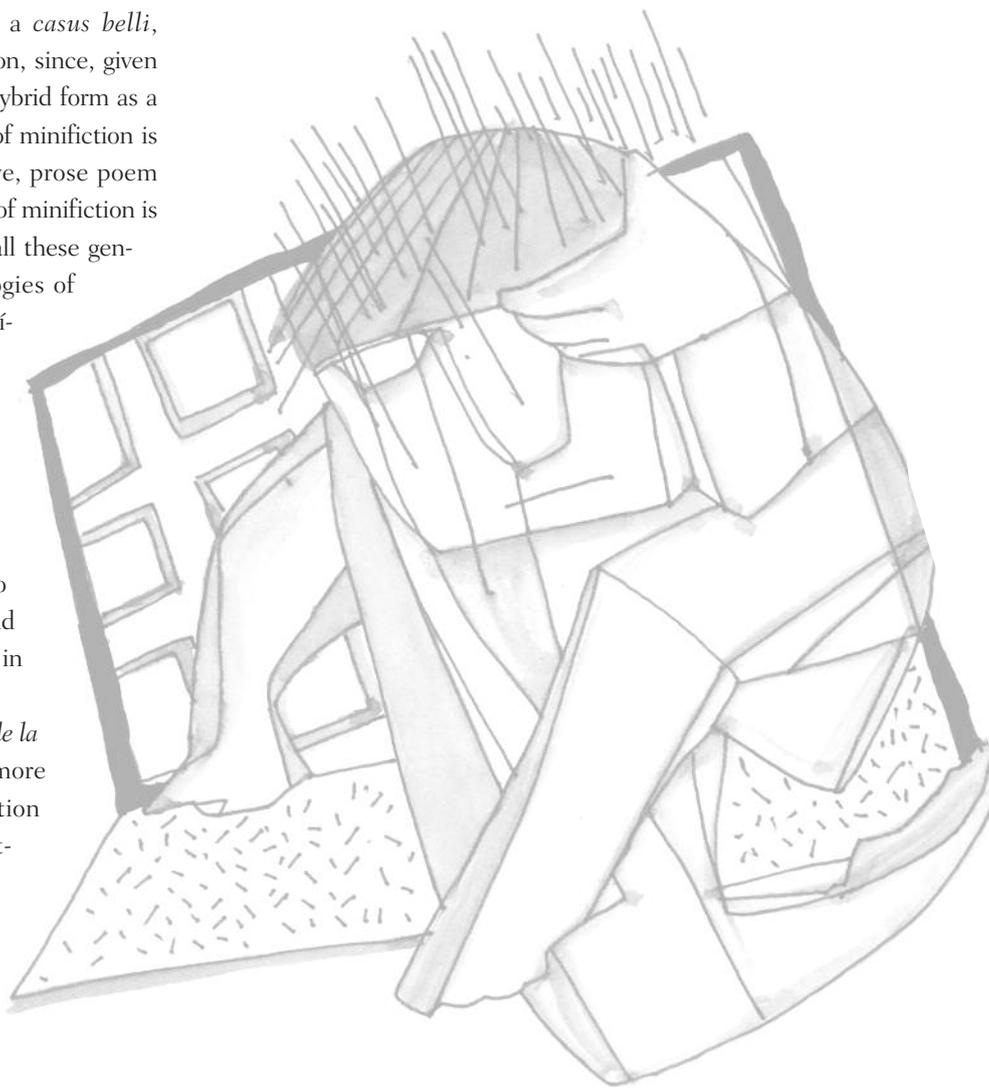
There is one very specific element of the genre that makes anthologies a *casus belli*, the object of continual contention, since, given its protean nature—that is, its hybrid form as a genre—frequently a single text of minifiction is legitimately considered narrative, prose poem or essay. That is why a great deal of minifiction is published in the anthologies of all these genres. This is the case of anthologies of essays (such as José Luis Martínez's canon-making anthology³ or that of brief essays entitled *Desocupado lector* [Unoccupied Reader],⁴ anthologies of short stories (from those of Emmanuel Carballo⁵ and Luis Leal⁶ published in the 1950s to the most recent of the 1990s) and the anthologies of prose poems in Mexico.⁷

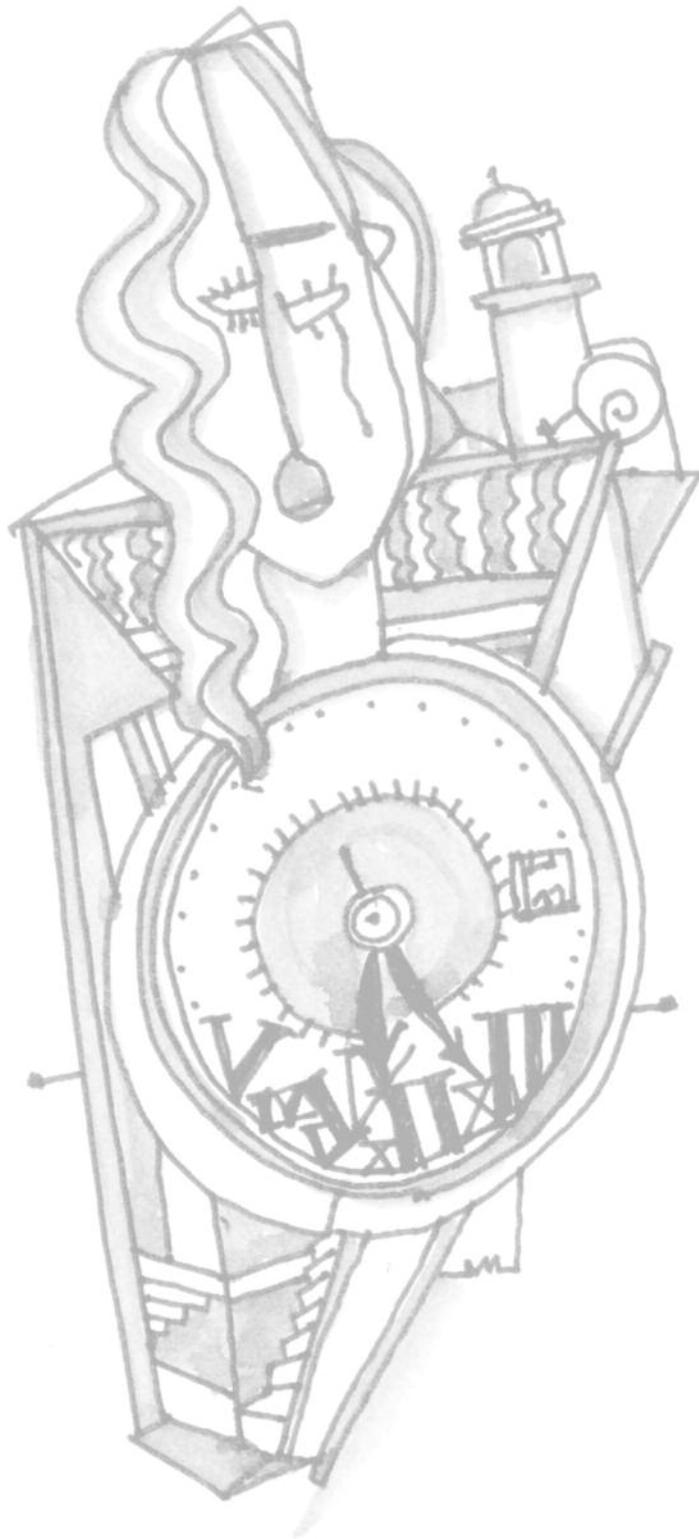
In the 25 years since *El libro de la imaginación* was published, more than 15 anthologies of minifiction have come out, each with outstanding works from Argentina, Mexico, Venezuela, Chile, Colombia and Uruguay.⁸ However, we still do not have one dedicated exclusively to this rich tradition in

our country, except for a very brief anthology edited by René Avilés Fabila in 1970 which includes 20 stories by 8 Mexican authors.⁹

SCHOOLS

The presence and study of a genre of writing in textbooks and teachers' manuals for courses are also mechanisms for creating a literary canon. And when this happens in elementary and secondary school textbooks, the phenomenon goes far beyond the strictly literary milieu because it directly affects the education of the country's future readers. In particular, free textbooks distributed by the federal govern-





ment nationwide are printed by the million every year, making them a necessary reference point for understanding this phenomenon deserving of careful study.

In addition to ministories by authors like Julio Cortázar, Alfonso Reyes and Julio Torri, among others, in primary school textbooks, very brief fragments from conventional-length narratives by authors like Martín Luis Guzmán, Juan Rulfo and Carlos Fuentes are also included. This is all part of a tradition legitimized by literary criticism.

ACADEMIA

The most elaborate strategy for the creation of literary canons is found in specialized research, that is, the attention that a particular piece of literature is given by researchers dedicated to the study of written texts.

For minifiction, this history is still very brief: the first doctoral thesis on this topic, “El micro-relato en México: Julio Torri, Juan José Arreola y Augusto Monterroso” by Dolores M. Koch, was presented in the City University of New York in 1987. It has been an obligatory point of reference for later research, mostly still unpublished, in Argentina, Mexico, Venezuela, Spain and the United States, all done in the 1990s.

Outstanding among this work is Concepción del Valle Pedrosa’s doctoral thesis, more than 500 pages on different literary aspects of Latin American microfiction.¹⁰ Also worthy of mention are the theses written by Andrea Bell at Stanford University, in the United States; Laura Pollastri, at the University of Comahue, in Argentina; and Karla Seidy Rojas at the Autonomous Metropolitan University, in Mexico.¹¹ Two theses have also been written for bachelor’s degrees in literature at the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico dealing with Julio Cortázar’s “Continuidad de los parques” (The Continuity of Parks) and Oscar de la Borbolla’s “El hereje rebelde” (The Rebellious Heretic).¹²

In addition, during the Tenth International Conference of Researchers on the Mexican Short Story organized by the University of Tlaxcala in Mexico, José Luis Martínez, director of the Institute of Semiolinguistic and Literary Research of the University of Veracruz, made a presentation about Augusto Monterroso's "El dinosaurio" (The Dinosaur), in which he pointed out the possibility of someone developing a critical edition of the story. This is more possible than it seems at first glance: there are already more than 35 strictly literary variations, parodies, sequels and pastiches, as well as a dozen essays, studies and analyses of this seven-word text, which has been included in at least a dozen anthologies published in Mexico, Italy, Argentina, Chile, Venezuela and Spain.¹³ This prolific body of work is not without humor, given the nature of Monterroso's narrative itself; for example, Juan Villoro's article proposes what an adaptation of this text to the opera would be like.

We can also point to the publication of numerous books and monographic issues of specialized magazines dedicated to the study of minifiction since 1993 published in Argentina, Chile, the United States, France, Mexico and Venezuela by scholars like Violeta Rojo, Ángela Pérez, Nana Rodríguez, Juan Armando Epple and David Lagmanovich, among others.¹⁴

Given the playful, experimental nature of minifiction, some of these volumes are dedicated to the study of pedagogical strategies for using its literary wealth in teaching language and literature at the bachelor's and graduate levels.

Lastly, we should also mention the beginning of another mechanism for the canonization of the genre: the first congresses of researchers and writers dedicated to its study and public readings. In August 1998, the First International Minifiction Conference took place in Mexico City with the participation of writers and researchers from Colombia, Chile, Spain, the United States, Mexico and Venezuela. Their presentations have been published in the specialized magazine *El Cuento en Red: Estu-*

dios sobre la Ficción Breve (The Short Story on the Net: Studies on Brief Fiction).

BRIEF CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, in recent years in Mexico we have witnessed an increase in publishing, academic and literary interest in minifiction as part of its rise in the rest of Latin America.

One of the reasons that helps explain that rise is readers' sensibilities. In recent years, readers have shown greater interest in elliptical, demanding reading, with a degree of interest and complexity similar to those of any other literary genre, but with the advantages of extreme brevity, which, in Julio Torri's words, is an extreme form of courtesy to the reader. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, eds., *Cuentos breves y extraordinarios. Antología* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1997 [1953]).

² Edmundo Valadés, ed., *El libro de la imaginación*, Biblioteca Joven Collection (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1984 [1976]).

³ José Luis Martínez, ed., *El ensayo moderno en México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1971).

⁴ Genaro González Henríquez, ed., *Desocupado lector. El ensayo breve en México (1954-1989)* (Mexico City: Verdehalago, 1998).

⁵ Emmanuel Carballo, ed., *Cuentistas mexicanos modernos* (Mexico City: Libro-Mex, 1956).

⁶ Luis Leal, ed., *Antología del cuento mexicano* (Mexico City: De Andrea, 1957).

⁷ Luis Ignacio Helguera, ed., *Antología del poema en prosa en México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993).

⁸ Edna Brandenberger, ed., *Cuentos brevísimos/ Spanische Kürzest-geschichten* (Munich: Deutscher Tschenbuch Verlag, 1994); Raúl Brasca, ed., *Dos veces bueno. Cuentos brevísimos latinoamericanos* (Buenos Aires: Instituto

Movilizador de Fondos Cooperativos, 1996); R. Brasca, ed., *2 veces bueno 2. Más cuentos brevísimos latinoamericanos* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Movilizador de Fondos Cooperativos, 1997); Juan Armando Epple, ed., *Brevísima relación. Nueva antología del micro-cuento hispanoamericano* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Mosquito Comunicaciones, 1999); Antonio Fernández Ferrer, ed., *La mano de la hormiga. Los cuentos más breves del mundo y de las literaturas hispánicas* (Alcalá: Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, Fugaz Ediciones, 1988); José Luis González, ed., *Dos veces cuento. Antología de microrrelatos* (Madrid: Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias, 1998); Gabriel Jiménez Emán, ed., *Ficción mínima. Muestra del cuento breve en América* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Fundarte, 1996); Alejandra Torres, ed., *Cuentos breves latinoamericanos* (Buenos Aires: Coedición Latinoamericana, 1998); Lauro Zavala, ed., *Relatos vertiginosos. Antología de cuentos mínimos*, Juvenil Collection (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 2000).

⁹ René Avilés Fabila, ed., "Antología del cuento breve del siglo XX en México," *Comunidad Latinoamericana de Escritores*, *Bulletin* 7 (Mexico City) 1970, pp. 1-22.

¹⁰ Concepción del Valle Pedrosa, "Como mínimo. Un acercamiento a la microficción hispanoamericana" (Ph.D. dissertation, Complutense University of Madrid, 1987).

¹¹ Andrea Bell, "The *cuento breve* in modern Latin American literature" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1991); Laura Pollastri, "Hacia una poética de las formas breves en la actual narrativa hispanoamericana: Julio Cortázar, Juan José Arreola y Augusto Monterroso," (master's thesis, National University of Comahue, Argentina, 1989); Karla Seidy Rojas González, "Estrategias de lectura en el minicuento hispanoamericano," (master's thesis, Autonomous Metropolitan University, Mexico, 2000).

¹² Antonio Cajero Vázquez, "El lector en 'Continuidad de los parques'. Un cuento de Julio Cortázar," (bachelor's thesis, Autonomous University of the State of Mexico, 1992); Carmina Angélica Quiroz Velázquez and Verónica Vargas Esquivel, "Una propuesta para desmitificar el *Génesis 3*," (bachelor's thesis, Autonomous University of the State of Mexico, 1994).

¹³ Currently at the printer's is the collective volume this author edited called *El dinosaurio anotado. Edición crítica de "El dinosaurio" de Augusto Monterroso* (The Annotated Dinosaur. A critique of Augusto Monterroso's "The Dinosaur"), to be published by Ediciones El Ermitaño.

¹⁴ R. Díaz and Carlos Parra, *Breve teoría y antología sobre el minicuento latinoamericano* (Neiva, Colombia: Neiva, Samán Editores, 1993); Juan Armando Epple, "Brevisima relación sobre el cuento brevísimo," in the *Revista Interamericana de Bibliografía* (Washington, D.C.) (1996), a quadruple issue of the Organization of American States' magazine containing 12 studies on the genre and an anthology of 100 Latin American ministories; Nana Rodríguez Romero, *Elementos para una teoría del minicuento* (Tunja, Colombia: Colibrí Ediciones, 1996); Violeta Rojo, *Breve manual para reconocer minicuentos* (Mexico City: UAM Azcapotzalco, 1997), pp. 135-191; Angela María Pérez Beltrán, *Cuento y minicuento* (Bogotá: Página Maestra Editores, 1997), with a study of the genre and an anthology; Graciela Tomassini and Stella Maris Colombo, *Comprensión lectora y producción textual. Minificción hispanoamericana* (Rosario, Argentina: Editorial Fundación Ross, 1998), complete with a brief didactic anthology; Lauro Zavala, comp., *Lecturas simultáneas. La enseñanza de lengua y literatura con especial atención al cuento ultracorto* (Mexico City: UAM Xochimilco, 1999), with eight studies and essays from Peru, Chile, the United States, Mexico, Canada and Brazil.

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