

# Playful Ecphrasis: María Elena Walsh and Children's Literature in Argentina

Although a considerable amount of translated American children's literature is available in Argentina (both Spanish publications and Argentine imprints), there exists an abundant production of books and magazines written by national authors. There is also a fairly respectable quantity of critical material on Argentine works, but it is focused more on pedagogical than literary aspects of the works.<sup>1</sup> Material that is available reflects a predictable mixture of the traditional and the folkloric (both general Hispanic and specifically Argentine),<sup>2</sup> adaptations of national and international classics (*Martín Fierro*, *Don Quixote*), imitations of American or British models (children's magazines like *Billiken*), "uplifting" poetry for memorization and declamation,<sup>3</sup> and finally, a minuscule nucleus of truly creative and imaginative works that challenge both accepted norms and young readers' imaginations.<sup>4</sup>

María Elena Walsh (1930) is one of the most notable successes in Latin American children's literature.<sup>5</sup> She attracted early attention as a poet, publishing her first book of poetry at the age of sixteen. Her work has been included in mainline anthologies and has been both reviewed and studied by critics along with that of major poetic figures.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is unquestionable that Walsh's stature derives from her writing for children. Some critics may prefer to see her interest in poetry for children as a guage of her inability to fulfill the promise of her first writings that she would become a major poet, but it should be stressed that the fact that a writer of her talent has devoted extensive attention to literature for children is indicative of the seriousness with which such writings are taken in Argentina. Walsh's books have been published by Editorial Sudamericana, one of the leading publishers in the Spanish-speaking world, and they have enjoyed enormous circulation. She has made phonograph records of her poetry, which she sings to her own guitar accompaniment (she has a very fine Joan Baez-like voice), and I know of at least one stage production of her work for children which was an enormous success in the Teatro Municipal San Martín in Buenos Aires in the late seventies.

Generally speaking, one may note two dominant attitudes concerning priorities for children's literature among those for whom such writing is an artistic rather than a commercial undertaking: the belief that there needs to be a special mode of children's literature essentially removed from the rhetorical and stylistic domains of high literature for adults, and the belief that there is a fundamental continuity between literary works directed at different age groups, with the implication that the youngest readers are able to handle sophisticated literary processes.<sup>7</sup> We may roughly call the

first position that of the elementary education establishment, with its emphasis on the evolution of beginners' skills and the perceived need not to overwhelm the young learner. The second position is more indicative of the general historical pattern in Western culture—treat the child as an adult as quickly as possible—and we see it best manifested in Victorian reading for children, which for us today means many of the classics for children.

A paradigmatic work like *Told Under the Magic Umbrella: Modern Fantastic Stories for Young Children*, selected by the Literature Committee of the Association for Childhood Education,<sup>8</sup> is indicative of the first position. Materials like *Umbrella* are meant to counter the commercial culture industry for children exemplified by Golden Books, Walt Disney Productions, and cheap adaptations of the classics—cf. the contrast between Joel Chandler Harris' original texts of the Uncle Remus stories, and Disney's volume of mass-English adaptations. By contrast the second position is maintained by works like William S. Baring-Gould and Ceil Baring-Gould's *The Annotated Mother Goose; Nursery Rhymes Old and New, Arranged and Explained*<sup>9</sup> and by parents who still read to their children the original versions of works written with adult standards of literary composition, like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Wind in the Willows*, or even the *Winnie the Pooh* materials.

Perhaps the best materials for children being published today bridge the two positions, works like the Dr. Seuss writings. *Cat in the Hat*, originally published in 1957, was first and foremost a burlesque of the insipid children's literature produced by professional educators with no sense of literary creativity or language dynamics. In the same vein are to be found Richard A. Gardner's *Dr. Gardner's Fairy Tales for Today's Children*,<sup>10</sup> and some of the better work of the Children's Television Workshop. Indeed, one could undertake a bibliographic study of contemporary American children's writings that define themselves by opposition to three previously dominant modes: elementary education literature, mass-culture children's books (e.g., the Golden Books), and the Victorian classics. María Elena Walsh's writings are excellent examples in Latin America of children's books bespeaking a creative mode that subscribes to the belief that children can handle material using "advanced" literary processes.

Walsh's poems represent the intersection of traditional "readerly" poetic features with overtly "modernistic" or "vanguardistic" tendencies. By "readerly" features, one means those aspects of literary discourse that by long tradition we have come to associate with any text identified as literary.<sup>11</sup> In the case of poetry this means above all clear rhyme—usually consonantal in English, consonantal or assonantal (the latter being historically more traditional) in Spanish—and an overt strophic format.<sup>12</sup> We may also look for a pronounced rhythmic pattern in the verses, although Spanish does not have as clear a tradition of metric patterns as does English. But if the poetry is meant to be recited orally or sung to musical accompaniment, as in the case of the traditional ballad, some sort of metric pattern is customary. These characteristics are readerly in the sense that they

facilitate the reader's recognition of literary, or in this case, poetic, discourse: their presence says in effect "This is poetry"; they do not disappoint reader expectations and they contribute to the overall sense of the reader's assimilation of what is happening in the text.

Rhyme in readerly poetry is like "Once upon a time" in traditional narratives, closing couplets stating the "moral of the story" in fables, and the opening and closing of the curtain in theatrical works framed by the proscenium arch. Perhaps the best examples of readerly conventions are to be found in television soap operas and sitcoms, where predictable patterns of social reality and commonplace narrative conventions combine to produce interchangeable works and episodes that can be followed with a minimum of audience attention. Originality customarily means only the slightest variation of these patterns and schemes, and truly audacious violations of conventions are confined to public television. When only these readerly conventions are present in children's literature, the result is at best insipid material and at worst appallingly bad versifying (e.g., the attempts at poetry by Walt Disney Productions; cf. "Pigs is Pigs" in *Walt Disney's Story Land*<sup>13</sup>).

Such conventions enjoy prominence in the poetry of María Elena Walsh. However, these conventions are intersected by procedures that we may generally identify with the experimental goals of contemporary poetry. Many of these experimental procedures have solidified—fossilized, some would say—into trivialized avant-garde conventions as trite as those used in a mass-culture children's magazine. Yet, in the hands of a writer like María Elena Walsh, they represent the attempt to produce poetry for children that accepts as a matter of course the reader's ability to assimilate a literary language that is more than just rhythmic and rhymed everyday speech. We may identify at least four dominant "modernist" procedures in Walsh's poetry: 1) language play, 2) "surrealistic" images, 3) the fanciful rupture of real-world conventions, 4) objective correlatives of moral or ethical postures.

Language play is perhaps one of the most characteristic aspects of contemporary literary discourse, one that, rather than seeing itself as especially literary, attempts to restore to everyday language the sense of dynamic creativity underlying all language.<sup>14</sup> Conventional usage may congeal language into predictable patterns, but language is essentially revolutionary in the ease to which it lends itself to deviant, agrammatical combinations. This impulse to language-play in human speech that large segments of modern poetry attempts to capture and restore to everyday language is directly related to a "surrealistic" conception of the world. But, it is more a question of restoring a sense of the marvelous, the illogical, the uncanny to socialized man than it is of juxtaposing to the real world one of unreal fantasy. Perhaps it would be better in the case of María Elena Walsh's poetry to speak of "creative fancifulness" rather than the surrealist; certainly we cannot really find in her work varieties of the surrealist movement, but rather, only an ingenious *amplificatio* of otherworldly possibilities:

Me dijeron que en el Reino del Revés  
nada el pájaro y vuela el pez  
que los gatos no hacen miao y dicen yes,  
porque estudian mucho inglés. (p. 62)<sup>15</sup>

This is hardly surrealistic, and the element of play is based on the anthropomorphism of the animals, the departure from accepted knowledge concerning typical behavior of certain animals, the outrageous rhyming of *pez* and *yes* (pronounced in Argentine Spanish as *ÿes*; cf. standard English *yes*, where the vowel is also noticeably shorter in the English realization than in the Spanish one), and the implicit contrast between our world and the Reino del Revés, introduced by the phatic "Me dijeron."

Standard literary fare for children, in the best tradition of Mother Goose, usually makes heavy use of animal anthropomorphism—indeed, Ariel Dorfman and others have denounced the routine humanizing of animals as a form of escapism from the real world. But it is clear that Walsh's goal is not simply to sanitize the real world by translating it into the terms of an idealized animal world. The purpose would seem more to be the stretching of the limits of our imagination in order that we consider how confining are our conventional accounts of how things are. Alternatively, we may speak of the need to see our perception of an ordered world as less stable than it really is. While for some readers Walsh's fanciful otherworldliness is more cute than it is challenging to stifling conventions (a charge often made against Dr. Seuss as well), it is nevertheless true that her poetry is much more creative than standard commercial fare.

The practice of introducing ruptures in the accepted patterns of the real world is essentially the basis of text production in Walsh's poetry. Such a practice, typified by the opening stanza from the title poem of her collection *El Reino del Revés*, involves an implied juxtaposition between a generally recognized real world and the pattern of ruptures produced with it by the references to an otherworldliness. If we did not know that "normally" fishes swim and birds fly, the verse "nada el pájaro y vuela el pez" would evoke a reaction of "So what": the poem would not comply with a discourse convention requiring a statement to furnish essentially new information. That the bird swims and the fish flies is, in fact, new information and, moreover, it is new to the extent that it does not add to our previous knowledge, but contradicts and modifies it in such a way as to validate the epithet "el Reino del Revés."

The poem consists of six stanzas, each introduced by the phatic formula "Me dijeron que en el Reino del Revés," and each of the stanzas is punctuated by the *estibillo* "Vamos a ver cómo es / el Reino del Revés." Such a hortatory command establishes a sort of reader contract between narrator and audience, and the contrast is reinforced between the latter's familiar world and the other world. Information about the Reino is available to the narrator, and she is in turn sharing it with her readers by inviting them to go and see (i.e., learn about via the experience of the poem) that world with her. Each subsequent stanza includes some form

of rupture with convention in the same vein as the first stanza. For example, the third stanza violates accepted knowledge concerning relative size, concerning the distinguishing features of age groups, and concerning proportionate distribution of periods of time:

Me dijeron que en el Reino del Revés  
cabe un oso en una nuez,  
que usan barbas y bigotes los bebés,  
y que un año dura un mes. (p. 62)

Finally, Walsh's poetry makes use of objective correlatives of moral and ethical issues as one of the dominant thematic orientations of her writing. Unlike facile anthropomorphizations, which essentially allegorize human behavior in the guise of stereotyped animals (e.g., the bad wolf, the shy bunny, the aggressive rooster; *Wind in the Willows* is really one particularly illustrative example of such a practice), and unlike the protocol of telling things as they are (much "realistic" literature for children), Walsh's poetry addresses questions of value and conduct by correlating the latter with a pattern of fanciful images. For example, in "Canción del estornudo" (pp. 55-57), a variation on the rhyme "Mambrú se fue a la guerra," el rey Pepín cancels a war because mambrú catches a cold; both his soldiers and the enemy are happy because of his sneezing:

A encontrarse con su esposa  
don Mambrú volvió a  
París.  
Le dio un beso y ella dijo  
Atchís.  
Es mejor la paz resfriada  
que la guerra con salud.  
Los dos bailan la gavota.  
Atchús. (p. 57)

The discomfitures of a cold evolve into the reason for an armistice, and the *pseudo-adnominatio* of the locution for "sneeze," *atchís/atchús* becomes part of the rhyming pattern of the poem's moral declaration. Most children's literature "teaches by pleasing" the pleasure of the text being a vehicle for a pronounced pedagogical or didactic intent. What is significant here is that, in addition to intertextuality with the folkloristic rhyme "Mambrú se fue a la guerra," the patterns of fanciful rupture ("Como estaba tan resfriado / dispara su arcabuz / y salían estornudos" p. 55, serve as a form of objective correlative for the "message of the poet." In *Tutú Marambá*,<sup>16</sup> Walsh has a poem about "La vaca estudiosa," in which a grandmotherly, half-deaf cow goes to school. Because all the human students are so diffident in their studies, she is the star of the class; as a result of their laziness, the human students all become donkeys:

Y como el bochinche aumentaba  
en la escuela nadie estudiaba.

La vaca, de pie en un rincón,  
rumiaba sola la lección.

Un día toditos los chicos  
se convirtieron en borricos.

Y en ese lugar de Humahuaca  
la única sabia fue la vaca. (p. 30)

In general, therefore, we see that the controlling strategy of María Elena Walsh's texts involves the inversion of the familiar. By contrast to so much children's literature, where there is a blending of categories of the familiar on the basis of metonymy—animals assume salient features of human beings, dreams become reality within a restricted confine like the child's bedroom—the poems of a collection like *El Reino del Revés* defamiliarize by reversing roles: the *vaca estudiosa* becomes a bright student, while the children become *borricos*, the bird swims and the fish flies. Like all processes of defamiliarization, such an inversion implies the need to re-examine our stereotypic and rigidified ways of understanding the flux of events and phenomena.

Toward this end, there is a strong element of "reader complicity" in Walsh's texts: the reader is asked to participate with the narrator in entering the Reino del Revés and to accept the unconventional categories that define it. Of course, the strong image of the narrator is reinforced by the identification of her voice with the real person of María Elena Walsh through her name recognition, her public performances, and the wide distribution of records in which she sings her compositions to her own accompaniments: the result is that the ideal narrator competes with the real person of the author, who in turn reinforces the privileged status required by the former to promote the special dimensions of reality created by the poems.

In one of the opening texts of *El Reino del Revés*, the narrator engages in a playful withholding of information. If in exchange for paying heed to narrative we demand it fulfill our desire for revelation, a text that frustrates that desire becomes in reality metapoetic: by implication it treats not the information that it has pretended to convey, but rather our frustrated desire for access to the privileged news the narrator purports to report. Such an ironic offering and withholding of information increases the specific interest of a text because of the patterns used first to offer a "story" and then to cancel that offer. "Voy a contar un cuento" is an example of such a text:

Voy a contar un cuento.  
A la una, a las dos, y a las tres:  
Había una vez.

¿Cómo sigue después?

Ya sé, ya sé.  
Había una casita,  
una casita que.  
Me olvidé.

Una casita blanca,  
eso es,  
donde vivía uno  
que creo era el Marqués.

El Marqués era malo,  
le pegó con un palo  
a . . . No, el Marqués no fue.  
Me equivoqué.

No importa. Sigo. Un día  
llegó la policía.  
No, porque no había.  
Llegó nada más que él,  
montado en un corcel  
que andaba muy ligero.  
Y había un jardinero  
que era muy bueno pero.

Después pasaba algo  
que no recuerdo bien.  
Quizás pasaba el tren.

Pero lejos de allí,  
la Reina en el Palacio  
jugaba al ta te tí,  
y dijo varias cosas  
que no las entendí.  
Y entonces.

Me perdí.

Ah, vino la Princesa  
vestida de organdí.  
Sí.  
Vino la Princesa.  
Seguro que era así.

La Reina preguntóle,  
no sé qué preguntó,

y la Princesa, triste,  
le contestó que no.

Porque la Princesita  
quería que el Marqués  
se casara con ella  
de una buena vez.  
No, no, así no era,  
era al revés.

La cuestión es que un día,  
la Reina que venía  
dio un paso para atrás.  
No me acuerdo más.

Ah, sí, la Reina dijo:  
—Hijita, ven acá.  
Y entonces no sé quién.

Mejor que acabe ya.  
Creo que a mí también  
me llama mi mamá. (pp. 10-12)

The play involved here hinges on the promise to tell a tale. Yet, although each stanza begins with the suggestion of an item of information concerning a vaguely defined event, the poem is punctuated by a series of tag phrases confessing lack of information, distraction, forgetfulness. The event is identified by a series of commonplaces from the literature of "Once upon a time." There is a *marqués*, a house, a palace and a queen, a princess, somebody getting hurt, the police—a mixed bag of fairytale themes and adventure stories. Yet the *cuento* that has been promised never emerges, and for every specific piece of information there are two retractions: phatic phrases like "A la una, a las dos, y a las tres" or "Ya sé, ya sé" alternate with confessions of narrative incompetence like "¿Cómo sigue después?" (we need the narrator to find this out ourselves, and our role is not to supply her with the information), "Me equivoqué" and "Me perdí" (if the narrator doesn't have the story straight in her own mind, she has no right to request our attention in the first place with the promise of a story to tell).

"Después pasaba algo / que no recuerdo bien": in the end the inversion involved here is the rupture in the contract of reader complicity. Rather than dealing with an example of reversal from the Reino del Revés, the poem implicitly mocks the reader who heeds the text in the hopes of finding out what the story is all about. It is in this sense of dealing more with the question of storytelling competence than with any identifiable story that "Voy a contar un cuento" is metapoetic. By the same token, the narrator pokes fun at all of the commonplaces of such stories: allusion to them is often enough to engage reader attention and we expect them to be

developed in accord with certain narrative formulas characteristic of the popular folktale and its modern derivatives. The "charm" of Walsh's text and its specific verbal texture derives from overwhelming those commonplaces with a demonstration of narrator incompetence that also bespeaks the audience's own mistake in paying heed to the narrator's false promise.

The text closes with the narrator excusing herself because her mother is calling her—the narrator is also a child—like the implied listener of children's literature and therefore no more privileged with superior information than we are. The rupture with the hoary conventions of children's literature—the adult narrator (Uncle Remus, Mother Goose), a meaningful story, the logical signposts ("Once upon a time," "and then," "and that's how it happened," "the moral of the story is"), the promise of a good tale in return for close attention—is one of the significant ways in which Walsh defines her own literature as simply not another example of conventional and commercialized poetastery.

Let us now examine in greater detail some of the verbal strategies used by María Elena Walsh in portraying an example of how things are in the Reino del Revés:

Estamos invitados  
a tomar el té.  
La tetera es de porcelana  
pero no se ve.

La leche tiene frío  
y la abrigaré:  
le pondré un sobretodo mío  
largo hasta los pies.

Cuidado cuando beban,  
se les va a caer  
la nariz dentro de la taza,  
y eso no está bien.

Aquí las servilletas  
hacen buen papel:  
se convierten en conejitos  
y echan a correr.

Detrás de una tostada  
se escondió la miel.  
La manteca, muy enojada,  
la retó en inglés.

Mañana se lo llevan  
preso a un coronel  
por pinchar a la mermelada  
con un alfiler.

Parece que el azúcar  
siempre negra fue,  
y de un susto se puso blanca  
tal como la ven.

Un plato timorato  
se casó anteayer.  
A su esposa la cafetera  
la trata de usted.

Los pobres coladores  
tienen mucha sed  
porque el agua se les escapa  
cada dos por tres.

Yo no sé por qué. (pp. 71-73)

"Canción de tomar el té" is an excellent example of inversion and rupture for purpose of defamiliarizing everyday phenomena. The taking of tea as a late afternoon social ceremony continues to enjoy considerable prominence in many sectors of Argentine society, and Walsh's poem is structured in terms of an inventory of the utensils of such a ceremony: the tea pot, the milk, cups, napkins, pieces of toast, marmalade, sugar, the strainer for the tea, and so on. In general terms, each stanza focuses synecdochically on one of the major ingredients of a properly laid out tea service, and the interest of the text becomes how these identifiable objects are defamiliarized and integrated into a text with some justifiable interest as poetic discourse.

There is an intersection of two patterns of deviance from the norms of the social ritual. On the one hand, the objects become anthropomorphized and conduct themselves in a manner unbecoming their participation in such a serious ceremony. The teapot becomes invisible (the construction "no se ve" implies either that it is hidden from view or that it has hidden itself from view), the milk has a cold (an unappetizing variant of the hostess's horror at simply finding that the milk has been served cold), the napkins become origami-like rabbits who run off, the honey hides behind the toast, and the butter scolds it in English (of course—such a social function is eminently English), and so on. On the other hand, the guest behaves in an improper and complicitous fashion, disrupting the still life of the tea tray by covering the milk with her overcoat and by alluding to a clumsy handling of the tea cup. By the same token, reporting such outrageous behavior (the phrase in the fourth stanza "hacen un buen papel" refers both literally to the quality of the napkins and metaphorically to the farce the articles are acting out) is equally an unseemly dignification of the articles' improper conduct, rounded off by the disclaimer of any answer for why all this has taken place.

The disruption of rigidified social behavior is one of the perennial sources of humor and, as a consequence, of social criticism. Highly

creative television programs like *The Muppet Show* and *Saturday Night Live* are both eloquent examples in American culture of how very routine material can be made "poetically" interesting through a patterned deviation from the established norms of the trite and banal. Much of the material in María Elena Walsh's writings is based on reference to established social norms and patterns of conduct. In some cases, the process of defamiliarization may serve to reinforce values that any society would prize, like the need to study hard in school. But more often than not, the text will offer the reader the perception of the essentially absurd or nonsensical force of social convention. The goal is not to ridicule social ritual, but rather to aid the reader, in the best modernist spirit of contemporary poetry, in seeing the interplay between the creative quality of words and dynamic quality of human imagination:

Una vez estudié  
en un librito de yuyo  
cosas que sólo yo sé  
y que nunca olvidaré.  
("Canción del jardinero," p. 45)

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#### NOTES

1. See Dora Pastoriza de Etchebarne, *El cuento en la literatura infantil* (Buenos Aires: Kapelusz, 1962).

2. The most important collection of this nature is the two-volume compendium by Carmen Bravo-Villasante, *Historia y antología de la literature infantil iberoamericana* (Madrid: Doncel, 1961). María Elena Walsh is included in the material for Argentina (I, 11-126). See also María Elena Walsh's anthology, *Versos tradicionales para las cebollitas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1974).

3. See a collection like Lilia Morbelli, *Poesías para mis niños: poesía infantil para jardines de infantes y grados inferiores del Ciclo Primario; temas del programa escolar, calendario escolar, fechas históricas—conmemoraciones, cuentos clásicos, rondas y marchas* (Buenos Aires: Victor Lerú, 1964).

4. Pastoriza de Etchebarne's study contains a valuable appendix, "Cronología de cuentos infantiles argentinos" (pp. 229-232), which lists works by some of Argentina's most important writers; the first title dates from 1880.

5. See the critical articles on her by Pedro Orgambide in his and Roberto Yahni's *Enciclopedia de la literatura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1970), pp. 627-628, and by Katharine K. Phillips in David William Foster, *A Dictionary of Contemporary Latin American Authors* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University, Center for Latin American Studies, 1975), p. 108.

6. Her work is included, for example, in Juan Carlos Martini Real, *Los mejores poemas de la poesía argentina*; 3<sup>a</sup> ed. rev. y aum. (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1977), and César Fernández Moreno, and Horacio Jorge Becco, *Antología lineal de la poesía argentina* (Madrid: Gredos, 1968). The latter includes references to some of the reviews Walsh has received. See in particular the article by Oscar Hermes Villordo, "María Elena Walsh y la poesía infantil," *La nación*, 11-IX-1960, 3<sup>a</sup> sección, suplemento literario.

7. The standard study on children's literature in the United States is Zena Sutherland, and May Hill Arbuthnot, *Children and Books*; 5th ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1977).

This study was originally authored by Arbuthnot, whose name appears first in the first four editions.

8. New York: Macmillan, 1939.
9. New York: Bramhall House, 1962.
10. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974.
11. For a survey of issues in contemporary literary theory like "readerly texts," see Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).
12. One example of the "literary analysis" of children's literature is Rebecca J. Lukens, *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1976). The *Handbook* contains chapters on such standard literary topics as "Character," "Point of View," "Tone," and so on.
13. New York: Golden Press, 1962; pp. 206-209.
14. One of the best treatments of language in literature is Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
15. María Elena Walsh, *El Reino del Revés*; 5<sup>a</sup> ed. (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1969).
16. 10<sup>a</sup> ed.; Buenos Aires: Luis Fariña, 1969.