

The Idea of Place in *The Contractor*

Geoff Pywell

Borges writes,

We have dreamed the world. We have dreamed it strong, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and secure in time; but we have allowed tenuous, eternal interstices of injustice in its structure so we may know it is false.¹

The theatre is a locality of one such injustice; a place where the dialectical opposition between the dream and the real is illuminated; a site of their collision and embrace. The impact such meetings generates may reverberate or gently resound but some vibration is inevitable when worlds which pose as secure and real are placed in proximity to worlds which serve to question that security. Any play is, to some extent, a playing with this relationship, a dreaming whilst we dream, and thus functions as an undermining of the uninterrupted dreaming reality, bringing us sharply to the edge of our fictions and asking us to dwell there awhile.

Howard D. Pearce, in speaking of the elaborate and insistent theatre-dream metaphor, pinpoints this relationship,

The privileged reality that we accept as certain, substantial, and enduring is converted by the protracted metaphorical relation(s). It . . . places the actual world and assumptions about it in that dialectic of similarity and difference, mutual reflection, that opens rather than resolves the question of reality.²

Geoff Pywell is a post-doctoral fellow at U. C. Berkeley.

If Borges is correct, our 'reality' is as fictional as any aesthetic contrivance but its fictionality, its dreaming quality, is made apparent most truly in a place of true dream. The theatre experience itself perceptually undermines secure reality by placing forth an opposition to it and much of its value resides in an insistence on opening, re-awakening, the possibilities of renewal our own fictions tend to deny. "These opposed dimensions," as Pearce says, "are not only theatres of action but also dreams of reality."³

Under these conditions the theatre event becomes an acknowledgement of a spiralling uncertainty that we translate as recognition, as "sudden conscious appreciation of something you 'knew' at a more intuitive level."⁴ In other words, the effect of certain plays imitates the rising into apprehension, from a deeper level of knowing, of certain dream-like information which is sensed as crucial but remains ambiguous. It co-exists in our space and time, appears in a guise we accept, but seems not quite to belong.

May we say the theatre is always a gathering of such power, however? Is its capacity to astonish guaranteed merely by virtue of its existence? Doesn't the 'metaphorical relation' of which Pearce speaks oftentimes translate as a signal for contemptible familiarity on the part of the audience?

Usually attempts to disrupt the perceptions take the form of constructing a work that refutes the supposed rationality of our own; it denies our senses the comfort of themselves through linguistic or scenic manipulation. Today's disruption, however, is tomorrow's respectability. Though the task of unsettling remains valid, its fashioning is always a precarious business. The history of theatre in this century is, to some extent, the pursuit of audience disturbance but successes quickly atrophy into aesthetic conventions. How may an audience truly be shaken loose from its firm grip on delusions in an arena so determined to embrace them? Perhaps one answer may be found in David Storey's *The Contractor* which refuses participation in the race to perceptual renewal through excess and bombardment. Instead it engages its audience insidiously by masquerading as the most commonplace naturalism, denying that it has any such aggressive agenda at all.

In performance, however, the play lives on the edges of a Borgesian injustice. My concern is not so much with the static or poetic nature of the plot or the lives framed therein, as described by previous critics:⁵ rather I am interested in the tent, the actors who construct it, and the way these create both a possible theatre of action and a dream of reality. Implicit within the dynamic is a suggestion of a communion of awareness, of consciousness conscious of itself in the newness of recognition and this reflection is situated both in actor and audience and thus the play transcends the normal naturalist paradigm to which it has so far been consigned.

Part of the fascination of this play is witnessing the tent's slow emergence and recognizing something of its potential disruption, its jeopardizing of our dreaming reality, as it works on the audience below the intellectual level to finally, and strangely, be perceived as an image of almost 'cruel' intensity,

existing within that interstice of real and unreal and making us collaborators in their subversion. To label so gentle, so subtle a piece of 'naturalism' as 'cruel' may appear perverse but there is an implacability and rigor found beyond spectacle, noise and violence. The tent as stage image exists alongside these definitions quite happily as a forceful interruption of dreaming reality. There its power resides and the tension thus created is held so exquisitely by Storey that the image is rendered 'cruel.' This has nothing to do with overt confrontation. It is the movement of the mind to a difficult place where a recognition of tenuousness, of falsity, occurs. The idea of place in this play is our willingness to follow such a movement until it strands us at the boundary of perceptual safety.

The main physical action of the play is, of course, the creation of a place. On stage, workmen systematically erect a large marquee to be used for a wedding. Gradually, as the tent rises, we are lulled by the seeming unified surface of the naturalistic action, the aimless bantering, into unwariness. The distinction between fiction and actuality seems firm. By the end of Act II, however, the tent is completed and fills the stage space. An entirely real place now crowds to the edges of a space manufactured to contain the approximation of such reality rather than the reality itself. This cannot help but blur the distinction we protect in our substantial existence between the apparent reality which constitutes the stage and the intrusive and undeniable real world of the tent which threatens to overwhelm it through such confrontation.

In naturalism the scenic illusion is engineered to provide an approximation to truth which draws us, as audience, into the reality of the fiction. Storey complicates this equation by providing a scenic reality which, by virtue of its very concreteness, distances us. The size, the material, the being of the tent must distance an audience when placed within the context of the stage. A tent is a thing of the open air. Its nature and function are to enclose, to make enclosure where none before was available. In the context of the stage space it is itself enclosed and the nearer the action brings it to completion, the greater the tension it supports and the more we experience an unnaturalness which extends our distance from the event. It is part of Storey's ironic sensibility that the moment of greatest harmony in the fictional context coincides with the most jarring disharmony in the theatre context. This is at the end of Act II. The characters enjoy a brief interlude of acceptance and pleasure because of the special feeling which this creation of place has aroused in the fictional space of Ewbank's tent. The audience, at precisely the same moment, is most crushingly aware of the incongruity before them. The tent strains against the confines of the theatre space and where, in actuality, we would expect boundlessness (an absence which the very present and enclosing tent accentuates by affirmative contrast), we are all too aware of the proscenium arch. The fictional world and our own, which naturalism seeks to make disappear, is here made unmistakable. Both places are, in our perceptions, violated by this tension. Neither can remain distinct, secure. The

gross reality before us presses against the flimsy reality inside us. Storey has managed to circumvent the normal assimilation of all things real into the aesthetic by insisting, through the process of raising the tent, on its remaining 'real.' The result is the reinforcement of its inappropriateness. It will not accommodate unthinking acceptance, will not timidly disappear beneath the polished surface of the fiction, but creates an 'aesthetic space' where a demand for its recognition asserts itself.

Storey, therefore, escapes the confines of a strict naturalism by bringing reality up to its very skin. The tension of this closeness infects the event with anxiety and substantially destroys the impression usually left by the naturalistic scene wherein there is a world rendered whole and static, fully capable of resisting change. In witnessing the making of the tent we are accomplices to a world being made. In essence we see the theatre making itself. Such a world is capable of imminent collapse or deflation and it requires balance. The raising of the tent suggests a place newly made and, by extension, demands of us similar process. It is purposefully and satisfyingly unsettling.

This process seems almost Brechtian in the fundamental intention to dislocate the audience. In terms of the tent as a scenic component, however, the result is quite different. The scenic element of estrangement is employed to make any 'place' deliberately 'un-place-like,' to rob it of its reality and reinforce its apparent fictionality. In so doing the audience would be unable to perceive the fictional lives unfolding before them as anything other than fictitious. In the scientific theatre of Brecht, however, there is an intellectual balance undermined by actual experience. The equation fails to agree. In effect Brecht poses the impossibility of an 'unreality' housing a reality. Yet we, as audience, accept the 'un-place-like-ness' of intended illusory scenic components and incorporate them into the total reality of the theatrical package. We are simply used to accepting one thing standing for another more complex thing. The scenic component as a sign containing both signifier and signified is absorbed effortlessly; red ribbons are blood, etc. This is not to deny their theatrical effectiveness as image, merely to suggest that they are ultimately conciliatory rather than confrontational; the self-consciously unreal is perceptually equivalent to the theatricalized 'real.' Both are accomplices in an aestheticizing that grounds and guides the perceptions into a kind of neutrality of consciousness.

Storey has entered the scenic illusion from the obverse side. Rather than neutrality, the scenic component here hovers closer to perceptual anarchy. The very reality of the tent in *The Contractor*, in some measure, succeeds by its very obtrusiveness, its 'tentness,' in achieving the effect Brecht desired. Through the concrete enter the abstract. We experience the artfulness of the tent, its potential existence as symbol and inherent connection to the dream, whilst faced with the tent itself insistently before us, fracturing the dream. Theatre is usually able to consume all reality into theatricality by widening the

frame but here there is weight upon the aesthetic that threatens it with collapse.

The tent, as a familiar thing, is usually seen without being seen; it is a tent providing us with a completely understandable version of itself. The detail of its placing within the theatre, however, and its methodical erection moves it simultaneously toward its own annihilation as tent into a representation which is entirely conventional, but also toward an engulfment of the representative arena. It almost wraps the theatrical in its own reality. The real used aesthetically is the province of conventionality, but when it breaks through the skin of the aesthetic and is perceived as once again real then both frames are rendered insecure. The tent is not finally, literally, what it claims to be in either the real or the theatrical worlds; a fictional tent upon a pretend lawn, securely folded in a warm blanket of illusion. It is witnessed as an artifact carrying equal weight in both reality and fiction, existing fully in both; a fundamentally truthful self-portrayal and because of this it threatens the theatre which gives it life. Few other creations have managed to confront the two worlds with quite this sustained power and the sense of dislocation is remarkably keen and refreshing.

This disorientation resonates throughout the remainder of the event. Just as the reality of the tent interrupts our dreaming reality, the real actions of the actors as they perform dislocate our normal acceptance of character 'illusion.' The process of scenic disruption provided by the physical reality of the tent is mirrored, imitated, within the 'acting' as inescapably real tasks are rendered with meticulous skill. Performance in the normative sense is compromised by the completion of these tasks.

The actor is a shadow figure, his performance real but geared to the enhancement of a fiction. A simplified action on the naturalistic stage, such as the drinking of a glass of water, exists in both actual and fictional worlds but the latter takes precedence in the consciousness for actor and audience as the place of the action. Though the actor 'really' drinks the water he drinks it primarily in the closed world of the fiction; it refreshes the character rather than the actor. The preservation of the fiction through concrete action, however, seems to decrease in facility in direct proportion to the amount of 'real' interest we take in watching the completion of a strenuous and all too palpable actual process. A delay is apparent in the settlement of the action into the fiction. It remains suspended in the interstice, oscillating between the real and not-real. We are always aware of an unexpressed, half-hidden tension between actor and character revealed in the very actions we normally accept without question. Robbed in the process of the certainty of any role, the actor engages in a 'mutual reflection' with himself. This apprehension of similarity and difference is at work here *inside* the actor in the spaces between the selves. It has become

a superconsciousness that could be nothing other than the actor's awareness of his own self-sufficiency as he moves between the contradictory zones of the illusory and the real, vraisemblance and vrai, seeming and being.⁶

Seeming has been brought to the edge of being. 'Self-sufficiency,' though, sounds like the seamlessness of naturalism and the friction felt here is more abrasive. The consequences are experienced primarily in an actor restrained from a disappearance into character in much the same way that the audience is denied the capacity to see the tent as an element entirely contained by the powerful artifice. The actor becomes, in effect, a theatrical stage to himself, conscious of both similarity and difference in the instant of performance.

As the tent is raised the place of the actor's work, the stage and the pretence which defines it, must be married to a place of real work, the tent. The real event and the fictional event are identical in space and time but divorced perceptually for the audience in the collision between the place of each. The task of erecting the tent is simultaneous in both actor and character, in the space of the real and the seeming self, but divorced internally within the actor as he maintains the seemingness of character whilst abruptly brought to a recognition of self for which he is refused expression. This again denies any similarity to a Brechtian mode of collaboration with the audience. The actor, in some measure, is of course always present. It is his lack of absence to himself which is intriguing here. The actors are required to act a pleasure not theirs at the same time as they feel their own; the one germinating the other but unreconciled in any naturalistic sense. The tent is theirs, the actors as worker, actual and aesthetic, a testament to not-acting. Yet it must be acted. In Schechner's terms it becomes one of those events (though less conspicuously so) which is not theatre but not not theatre.

The concept of people as 'misfits,'⁷ stressed by previous critics, becomes an apt term at a level other than the fictional. The term 'misfit' is dependent on the idea of place. In order to not be a misfit one must be in a place which one fits. The actor belongs on a stage but not as an erector of actual tents. The worker should properly erect tents, if such is his business, but not actually within the fictional world which defines the stage. In each capacity, though they be joined within him, though they collect around this thing called character, he senses himself as something of a misfit. The actor cannot perform his work as character without recourse to knowledge beyond his work as actor and the character cannot enhance the fiction without recourse beyond his fictional world into real world knowledge and energy. That which naturalism conflates, Storey forces open.

The tent, therefore, in a very real sense, belongs to the actors. The unspoken communication and teamwork needed by the characters was not a manufactured pretence on their part, but an urgent need. The actor therefore exists paradoxically to himself; as an actor responsible to the truth of character

irrespective of style or performance philosophy and yet also as a human unfeigning, robbed of the 'excuse' of simulation. He is unshadowed and uncontained, living in a perceptual limbo. The "delicate psychological interstices where being is contingent upon the establishing of communicative ties with fellow humans"⁸ that others have attributed to character is here more appropriate to the actor. The action of the play, as the tent is painstakingly raised, is fueled by this sense of doubleness, of existencies not completely present to themselves in any secure world, of people uncontained by the designation actor, worker, character. The very 'reality' of the character definitions accentuates this. All three existencies have been brought to the edge of their possibilities where seeming and being intermingle and the tent serves as frame, as the place of exposure. Here contingency is erased because of the performance, in all spheres of being, of actions which are the exact opposite of contingent and yet sharpened because the spheres of being are denied harmony. The performer achieves a state of "armed neutrality"⁹ which Ralph Yarrow interprets as a readiness to be anything.

The dislocation found in the audience finds company in the actor. In each there is a strain of consciousness forced into an uncomfortable position. Yarrow writes, "art is what happens to our bodies as well as our minds," and defines consciousness as a "development, and certainly for individuals this means that it occurs *physiologically* . . . as a process or event with a sense of extended or 'stratified' possibilities of being, of the capacity for access to a kind of wholeness which stretches individuality towards universality of awareness."¹⁰

There is a sense here of a direct influence on the physical which alters the sensibilities. Yarrow sees in this suspension of normal perception the possibility of truly transforming consciousness on an interactional and individual basis. This suspension, however, also implies an emptying, not only of character, but also of the actor self. His existence enters a non-place, literally neither here nor there, and his consciousness could be in either a liberating state of readiness or a universe of unfixed choices.

Place is our definition of present reality. I fill space and am indistinguishable from the place I occupy. Except in moments of madness and lucidity, I experience myself in the present, in the here and the now. This is the self as representation. I do not exist purely, innocently, in an aboriginal dreaming state where the 'now' is the presence of truth felt uniquely. The consciousness that I have of myself represents me to myself. This is the burden of 'Being' which Artaud wished to circumvent, but am I not always dependent on the very difference between seeming and being which distinguishes and 'secures' the self? In a very subtle way the position of the actor in *The Contractor* imitates this burden of consciousness, this state of inner reflection intensified by the 'reality' of his actions.

The concrete fact of the tent threatens to engulf the theatrical. The concrete fact of work threatens to engulf the mimetic. Rather than a

Stanislavskian emotional memory, the equivalence of experience, the actor is working with emotional actuality, the experience itself. With the completion of the tent at the end of Act II, as they are dismissed as both character and actor, the path of pretence is looped around itself, made false. A true pleasure and regret masquerades as acting. Legitimate experience, placed definitely in the self, is given to the dreaming reality. This injustice (looping back to Borges) becomes knowledge that all places, including the place reserved for the self, are false and fictional, only seemingly secure. The acting of Fitzgerald is rendered the same as the acting of the actor playing Fitzgerald to himself. As with the tent, it is completely truthful self-portrayal whose truth is ultimately unlocateable, neither seeming nor being, but a separation that allows existence of both in the recognition of each.

This 'uneasiness,' this space for reflection, cannot fail but be communicated from performer to an audience already unsettled by the scenic disruption. The actor and the audience share an analagous position in their consciousness of being conscious, simultaneously involved and distanced, able to both fully inhabit the reality and continuously reconstruct the perception of the reality. Both are drawn into that state of mutual reflection the dialectic creates. It is this heightened awareness that grounds the interaction rather than the surface assimilation of the naturalistic. The actor then is not embedded in character but, through the agency of real work, is transported to a state of charged neutrality in which perception and action are interpenetrated. As Yarrow says, "Neutrality or witnessing is, as it were, potentially anticipatory or excited: it looks forward to displaying its own capacity in an extended range of action."¹¹

The bonding is thus collected around the emergence into consciousness, the recognizing in relationship, of a space of attentiveness wherein some deep knowledge takes a cleansing gulp of air.

Such bonding is, for Storey, nearly always temporary and uncertain. Its defeat by illusion, by the terrible power of our fictions, is imitated by the actions of the characters, noticeably exclusive of the workers, in the small celebration which closes Act II. The ambivalence of the entire event is played out by the characters. The tent offers them a place to share a spontaneous moment of meeting which quickly peters out. The tent and the moments it offers are only ever temporary. It is the perfect dream place because it will be known tomorrow only within the colored remembrances of the imagination and the touching scene between the Ewbank family may not be resurrected by association to a permanent place. A tent can carry no history. As Ewbank says constantly throughout this epiphanic moment, 'It's not straight even now . . . I don't know. All that damn care and trouble . . .', 'Too bloody old to start again . . .', 'Come today. Gone tomorrow.'¹² His final word in the Act could serve as a summation (though characteristically cryptic) of the process completed by the actor, character and worker. It is said to the self, overhead by many listeners, shared. 'Aye. We'll make a damn good job of it. (Half-

laughs.) . . . We will.¹³ The final truth, the real marriage in this play, is a tent serving the characters in exactly the same way and at exactly the same time the stage serves the actors; as a place of recognition, of acute de-stabilization felt acutely.¹⁴

Indeed this process of recognizing the transient nature of all things is enacted in the ensuing scenes as the tent is systematically lowered until no evidence remains of labor, or of celebration, but the bare stage which awaits another semblance to begin. The tent, fully raised, was a representation of process and order which fades into flimsy recollection. Our idea of order, of place, of perfection and control, may only ever cloak true nature for a limited period. Our dream of order is a play in a theatre of our own design, an acting of the imagination, and the 'real' state of being mocks its architecture.

If place is a kind of order, it would appear that by the end of the play there is no place to rest. The aesthetic consummation of the tent, its 'fittedness' in the world both real and apparent, cannot last because there is no such place. The beauty of it, its hint of sacredness, exists in a region beyond articulation. With its systematic dismantling the world of differentiation and separateness reasserts itself; both Bennett and Kay are verbally attacked, Fitzgerald is fired for a brief period. The consciousness of wholeness, communion and meaningful engagement is lost. In a typical section of dialogue we may listen to character and actor struggling with the situation in which the play has placed them.

FITZPATRICK: I was merely ascertainin' the truth of the matter,
Kay.

MARSHALL (to Fitzpatrick): What's a man's life worth if it's
comprised of nothing but untruths and lies?

FITZPATRICK: What is it now, indeed?¹⁵

Pearce sees the traditional view of the vibration between the fictional and real frames as, "ontologically . . . a quest for authenticity, for a condition of reality, for stability. Epistemologically, that movement is a search for genuine knowledge, certainty, fuller apprehension of reality."¹⁶ In other words, it is a desire for a truth not found in the certainty of the seeming. There is, however, always the possibility of return to the former condition, of a resumption of closure. It is his contention that the confrontation becomes incapable of rest, of a reversion to certainty.

The actors in *The Contractor*, and the play itself, enter a condition of true dream, a state of flux, which is by no means resolved at its close. Reality has truly come to be experienced in the act of experiencing for the actor who is subject and object to himself, in a problematical relationship to himself and the play. Like the dream, theatre here has become an arena of open

dimensions and the people in it; actor, audience and character enter into a contract (ostensibly the matter of the play anyway) with instability whose recompense is a possible movement toward knowledge which is itself completely unstable.

This condition is articulated most elegantly by Borges to whom we may allow the final word.

The story goes that, before or after he died, he found himself before God and he said: "I, who have been so many men in vain, want to be one man: myself." The voice of God replied from a whirlwind: "Neither am I one self; I dreamed the world as you dreamed your work, my Shakespeare, and among the shapes of my dream are you, who, like me, are many persons--and none."¹⁷

Berkeley, California

Notes

1. Jorge Luis Borges, "Avatars of the Tortoise" *Other Inquisitions* (1937-52). Translated by Ruth L. Simms. (Austin: U of Texas P, 1964) 115.

2. Howard D. Pearce, "A Phenomenological Approach to the Theatrum Mundi Metaphor" *PMLA* 95 (1980): 44.

3. Pearce 46.

4. Ralph Yarrow, "'Neutral' Consciousness in the Experience of Theater," *Mosaic* XIX No. 3 (1980): 6.

5. Many critics seem to dwell purely on the subtextual nature of the action and read the play as an endlessly evolving metaphor. The tent then becomes 'renewal and decay' [Albert Kalson, "Insanity and the Rational Man in the Plays of David Storey," *Modern Drama* 19 (1976): 127.] The sense of place as a landscape of sensibilities allows critics to settle on emotional underpinnings. The action is static but poetic, 'the imagining of large, beautifully unobtrusive metaphors of almost infinite suggestiveness' [John Stinson, "Dualism and Paradox in the 'Puritan' Plays of David Storey," *Modern Drama* 20 (1977): 141.] Stinson also sees this finally as allowing a transcendence of divided nature through work. This seems to deny the bleakness of the ending. Others have seen the play as unfulfilling because of its very lack of emotion accumulation. 'There is relatively no dramatic tension or conflict, and the conflict that does appear is never developed or completed.' [William J. Free, "The Ironic Anger of David Storey," *Modern Drama* 16 (1973): 311.] The plot as either an opening into a 'Chekhovian' sensibility or closure into dramatic inadequacy fails to see the theatrical negotiation upon which the play is insisting. Stasis then becomes a collaboration with a limited naturalistic reading of the play.

6. Bert States, *Great reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of the Theater* (U of California P: Berkeley, 1985) 125.

7. Again, the focus of the majority of critics is on character only; the actor is seldom mentioned. They are divided, however, between readings which confirm a utopian harmony, a final dignity through labor and its opposite; alienation invariably linked to autobiographical explanations from Storey's own background. The former viewpoint reads as such, 'The unique ability of physical labor and play to allow man to come close for a time to transcending the burdensome limitations on his own divided nature . . . an inevitable mood of satisfaction, completion, reconciliation, and acceptance of things as they are settles.' [Stinson 141.]

Sometimes the conflicting views are articulated within the same article. James E. Porter, "The Contractor: David Storey's Static Drama" *University of Windsor Review* 15 (1979-80), can begin by asserting that the play 'celebrates . . . the new privileges attained by the British working class. . . . The labour society of Storey's play is never disunited . . . from the very beginning of the play, the society is already stable and harmonious' (66). Later, however, the work on the tent is seen as eliminating 'any possibility for growth or development' (73). Porter is not alone in sensing an ambiguity but, like others, fails to look beyond the given naturalistic structure to see the ambivalence in the theatrical event itself. The titles of many of the articles about Storey display this sense of a dialectic at work which intuition is then wasted by placing it solely in character. For example, Phyllis Randall, "Division and Unity in David Storey," *Essays in Contemporary British Drama*, H. Bock and A. Wertheim, eds. (Munich 1981).

8. Steven Joyce, "A Study in Dramatic Dialogue: A Structural Approach to David Storey's *Home*," *Theatre Annual* 1983, No. 38, 67.

9. Yarrow 5. There is a pleasing maintenance of the sense of the double nature of all existence throughout this article. This phrase is a neat summation of the state of 'organic condition-for-acting.'

10. Yarrow 2.

11. Yarrow 7.

12. David Storey, *The Contractor* 78-80.

13. Storey 85.

14. The only critics who come close to this connection between the fictional space and the stage are William J. Free and Lynn Whittaker, "The Intrusion Plot in David Storey's Plays," *Papers in Language and Literature* 38 (1982): 44-61.

15. Storey 100.

16. Pearce 45.

17. Borges, "Everything and Nothing," *Dreamtigers* (New York: Dutton, 1970) 47.

CUADERNOS DE INVESTIGACION FILOLOGICA

*Publicación dirigida por los Departamentos de Filología del
Colegio Universitario de La Rioja, avalada por un
Consejo Científico formado por especialistas en todas las áreas de
investigación que componen la revista y dedicada a estudios de
Lingüística General, Teoría de la
Literatura y Filología Clásica, Francesa, Inglesa e Hispánica.*

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Suscripción España: 1.500 pesetas. Extranjero: 1.800 pesetas

Volúmenes atrasados: España: 1.300 pesetas. Extranjero: 1.600 pesetas.