

The Dog's Growl: Narration in *Las novelas ejemplares*

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CIPIÓN.—Quiero decir que la sigas de golpe,
sin que la hagas que parezca pulpo, según la vas añadiendo colas.

CERVANTES, "El coloquio de los perros"

CERVANTES' NOVELLAS, "EL COLOQUIO de los perros" and "El casamiento engañoso," are much like the head of the bizarre octopus mentioned by Cipión, because both represent the problematic nature of narration (319).¹ This octopus is simultaneously exemplary of narration as an idea/practice and Cervantes' *Las novelas ejemplares*. These two novellas that end the collection make up the central point or knot that joins together various narrative strings, but also creates a problematic nexus that complicates and perhaps confounds all that has been read previously.

The problem does not solely lie in the fact that a nexus exists which connects the stories to one another but rather that these final two stories call into question the nature and function of language/narration in a very palpable manner. These unifying stories which provide a base level of narration do not speak of pilgrims gathered in an inn who tell their

1 Reference to "El coloquio de los perros" come from two sources. Those that range in page number from 281-359 come from the Spanish Catedra edition while the others come from an English translation I find to be particularly good in its style if not in its academic usefulness.

stories as in *The Canterbury Tales*, nor do they speak of an estate where young refugees fleeing the bubonic plague recount their individual tales as in *The Decameron*. As readers, our anchor is the world of a picaresque syphilitic soldier that overheard and recorded a conversation between two dogs.

Therefore, everything that has come before must establish itself within a perhaps “imaginary” world of talking dogs, possibly the effect of the 40 nights of syphilitic fevers, or within the framework of a deceptive tale designed to entertain a friend. Either way it is safe to say in an extraordinary world, but moreover what is at stake is the nature of verisimilitude and the systems that dictate what is appropriate to be narrated (the who, what, where, when, and how).

In the essay “Cervantes and the Dialogic World”, Nicholas Spadaccini and Jenaro Talens suggest that *Las novelas ejemplares* is a non-verosimile work (219). Following this logic I would like to push this idea further to the extreme and suggest that this work and these works are inherently anti-verosimile. What I wish to say is that this work overturns the notion of verisimilitude in an active manner, but not necessarily with intent.²

Campuzano’s narration makes it necessary for us as readers to confront an inevitable epistemological choice. If we choose to trust the verisimilitude of “Rinconete y Cortadillo,” “El celoso extremeño,” and perhaps all the works of this collection we must concede that dogs talk. If we choose to steer clear of such a seemingly ludicrous statement we would have to admit that everything in this work is apocryphal and we have wasted our time reading the rantings of an idiot who was tricked by his own trap.

The nature of the ties that exist between reality and fiction are of the utmost importance in the case of “El coloquio de los perros” and it can be said that the ties themselves function through the process and state of verisimilitude. Américo Castro speaks about how verisimilitude functions in the works of Cervantes. He writes in *El pensamiento de Cervantes*:

² The distinction between activity and intention can be best understood by understanding the operation of the text and the intent of the author as related yet possibly separate phenomena. The result of the nature of verisimilitude within this text does not in any specific terms agree with the supposed intentions of Cervantes.

The perceptive taught Cervantes to clearly define the area of universal or idealist art in the face of particular or naturalist art. And it pleases him, as soon as the perimeter its delimited, to breach it and show the impossibility of such limitations...For our author the possible and the impossible, the verisimile and inverisimile, are not merely objective, but rather that they depend on the relationship of the object to the subject; in other words an ideal and subjective element. (my translation) (36, 40)

Here verisimilitude does not fulfill its typical function because the plane of reality is not attached convincingly to the plane of fiction. The breaches that Castro describes demonstrate that verisimilitude is at least a problematic issue in Cervantes' works.

On the other hand, Ruth El Saffar observes that the narrative structure of these works actually reinforces verisimilitude. Her argument makes sense because it bases itself on the doubtful credibility of Campuzano as a good person, but furthermore as a good narrator. In her book *Novel to Romance* she states:

Many commentators have seen in Campuzano's story of his marriage an example of Cervantes's careful protection of verisimilitude. By putting the story of talking dogs into the mouth of a man already self-defined as untrustworthy, Cervantes dodges the responsibility for the story's implausibility. Campuzano...would be trying to represent the story as having actually happened to win his friend's credulity in order to increase his enjoyment of the work, for neo-Aristotelian theory stresses the importance of credibility in the pleasure a work of fiction affords a reader. (69-70)

It is very possible that Campuzano is lying and taking us for a ride, especially when we consider the penultimate words of Peralta (Campuzano's scholarly friend); "Even though this colloquium be fake and never happened, it seem to me that it is so well put together that the Ensign could move forward with a second" (my translation) (359).

Perhaps Campuzano will win fame through his fantastical colloquium

of the dogs much like the drummer of the story with his ingenious mutt (332). But why do hypothetical results preoccupy us so? If we think of these works as the superstructure of the exemplary novels, everything is at stake and will possibly turn out to be a pack of lies; our own self-deluding trickery. The fact that Campuzano is a deceitful syphilitic and not an omniscient narrator is important but it has its own important limits when we think of the exemplary novels as a whole.

It may be that Cervantes uses Campuzano in order to avoid taking responsibility for the improbable nature of the story, but the fact that other verisimile novels appear within Campuzano's tale seems to diverge from El Saffar's suggestions. Why is there a mix of verisimile and non-verisimile facts and occurrences within these novels? What is Cervantes getting at?

Furthermore, this argument which suggests that Campuzano tries to present this story as truth seems a bit paradoxical when we take notice of El Saffar's quote. Initially Campuzano presents himself as a person not worthy of trust. Within the narration of "El casamiento engañoso" he concedes that he attempted to trick Doña Estefanía. Peralta and the readers already know what he could have up his sleeve. Yet in the final sentence there exists the suggestion that he is truly trying to verify the truth of verisimilitude.

Nicholas Spadaccini and Jenaro Talens again provide us with a way to qualify the extreme nature of this narrative function. They also speak of the neo-Aristotelian ideas that impose rules upon narration within a system that regulates and reinforces the verisimilitude of stories. This system is visible in many Renaissance and baroque works that implement various levels of narration but do not center themselves upon a problematic central point. We can say that this aforementioned system constitutes the typical definition of heteroglossia when applied to narrative voices. This system provides the reader with the opportunity to found their reading on something concrete that does not cast doubt on the verisimilitude of the work in its entirety. It is of little importance if the narrator recounts true facts, but rather what truly counts is the process of assimilation which the readers or audience must undergo. Frequently in such a system it takes little effort to follow the changes in narrator

and perspective, but the works of Cervantes are not always so generously lucid because the process is already so full of breaches that the reader is almost incapable of finding firm ground from where to begin.

Furthermore, the various subjective perspectives of Campuzano and Peralta undo the border between fiction and reality. El Saffar notices that these perspectives inherently question the process of production; it is not only the truth of the story but also its verisimilitude that functions as a tool within writing and storytelling. She writes:

In the *Casamiento* a discussion between the fictional author and the fictional reader of the *Coloquio* raises the question of whether the manuscript reflects the fictional author's dream world or a real world in which miracles take place. Peralta, the reader, easily adopts the first explanation, while Campuzano, the author, for whom the experience was so intense and immediate, is hard-pressed to give up the second...By insisting on presenting the fictional author's attitude toward his manuscript, Cervantes is asking the real reader to contemplate not only the finished piece of work, but the process by which it was created. (72, 73)

The presence of the writing process in conjunction with the question of reality is an issue that demonstrates to us that there exists the possibility of various relationships with reality and this manifests itself in force within discourse and interpretations of it, especially when perspective is considered as an active player within these relationships.

In his book *(A)wry Views*, David Castillo proposes that not only is perspective complicated within Cervantine literature, but also that it is anamorphic (2). Due to this, the firmament of our reading stands in a land of unknowable geography; that which does not give us sufficient distance in order to see the world like a map. Perhaps it can be said that the narrator is omniscient, but the reader will never share this sense of infallible knowledge. When we yearn to hear that a monk, a scribe, or a wise man put what we are reading down on paper, we discover instead the dog's growling, yowling, grunting, and howling.

The form of "El coloquio de los perros" both criticizes and threatens

itself in a spectacular manner. Cipión is a very paradoxical character due to the fact that he continues to criticize Berganza's narration throughout the entire novella despite the fact that in the beginning he muses on the strange existence of their verbal faculties. Berganza and Cipión say:

BERGANZA: Brother Cipión, I hear you talk, and know that I am speaking to you, and yet I cannot believe it, for it seems to me that for us to be talking oversteps the bounds of nature.

CIPIÓN: How true, Berganza; and the miracle is all the greater in that not only do we talk, but we discourse with reason, when in fact we are devoid of it; for the difference between animals and man is that man is a rational creatures and animals are irrational ones. (1)

This part of the dialogue lies in contrast with its other interjections that appear to systematize the rules of narration, and a rubric that decides which narratives are pertinent and acceptable.

In this sense Cipión can be seen as a quixotic character due to the fact that he uses reason in order to rationalize a situation of unreason. When Cipión begins to pontificate on philosophy and reason in relation to narration, it is possible that the seasoned reader of Cervantes will recall Don Quijote and his windmills. After realizing that the windmills are truly not giants, he attempts to explain the imaginary world within the limits of the real world by appealing to reason; "...I think, and therefore it is true, that the same Frestón the Wise who stole my room and my books has turned these giants into windmills in order to deprive me of the glory of defeating them..." (59). Cipión does the exact same thing, albeit in a different situation; he rationalizes the real world within the unreal world.

The figure of Cipión has provides us with various interpretations of the value of his role within this novel. His function may be obvious but the nature of this function is what is truly in play. Is Cipión an astute being that presents a reasonable system of narration or is he rather a ridiculous caricature of the desire to systematize discourse? Marta Isabel Miranda suggests in her article "Cipión: su carácter y sus funciones en *El*

coloquio de los perros” that Cipión is the only one with a decent head on his shoulder within this novel; “Cipión, on top of guiding and advising Berganza, analyzes the situaciones [of the novel] with more common sense than his friend” (my translation) (195). I personally agree with this observation when it is taken in the comparative sense. Berganza talks, talks, talks, talks and sometime philosophizes, but at its root it is nothing more than a string of facts. Berganza is certainly not more astute than Cipión but I still cannot bring myself to say, without apprehension that Cipión provides us with a viable system. People found intelligent when compared to idiocy may still be found lacking.

The acts of murmuring and backbiting are crucial to Cipión’s ideas and because of them he trims the strings of Berganza’s story and weaves them together according to his personal desires and beliefs. Interestingly enough, Cipión knows Greek, Latin, and the rules of adequate narration yet he never stops being an animal, a brute, and perhaps a product of witchcraft. It is possible that an analogue can be seen when Cipión is viewed as a symbol of men who learn, study, and philosophize but can never truly transcend their primordial states.

Cipión is Don Quijote’s humanist companion. During the episodes that occur at the Cave of Montesinos, this character attempts to use all of his instruments of knowledge and education in order to convince Don Quijote that his account of what transpired inside the cave is impossible. But these explanations fall on deaf ears. Don Quijote insists on believing his account just as Berganza continues to murmur and backbite despite his promise to cease and desist. Cipión and the cousin are in some sense characters who use their knowledge of the systems of the world in order to disabuse others of their unreasonable/unreasoned beliefs and practices. Interestingly enough, both Don Quijote and Berganza partly ignore the commentaries of their interlocutors. The system of these wise sages has little to do with the perspectives of others. Therefore it could be posited that the rules which control narrative are nothing more than an artifice with which we trick ourselves.

An issue that is related strongly to the ideas of Cipión is the difference between the acts of murmuring and philosophizing. These two acts are divided by a thin and porous border that forces us, as readers, to ask

what difference lies between them. I suggest that there is a difference, but it does not originate from the acts themselves. It truly has its place in the circumstances which surround the acts.

Cipión cautions Berganza of the dangers of murmuring and says it is something to be avoided. He advises Berganza, "...Inasmuch as I have heard that a great poet of antiquity once said that it was a difficult thing not to write satire, I shall permit you to gossip a little, giving light but not drawing blood, that is to say, merely pointing out without wounding or ridiculing anyone in any particular thing. For gossip is not a good thing if it kills one person, even though it makes many laugh. And if you can please without it, I shall consider you very wise" (8). Berganza assures Cipión that his advise is well taken but later begins to feel the urge to murmur rising again within him and he says, "Brother Cipión, may Heaven grant you everything your heart desires if you will just let me philosophize a little without taking it amiss..." (18-19).

In this instant the vocabulary has shifted and it is quite easy to separate backbiting and philosophizing. The problem lies in the fact that Cipión constructs an interesting relationship between the two acts. In his response to Berganza Cipión says:

Make sure, Berganza, that this desire to philosophize that has come over you is not a snare of the devil. For gossip has no better veil to attenuate and conceal its viciousness than when the gossiper implies that all he is saying are philosophical maxims, and that speaking ill is reprehending, and revealing the shortcomings of others is done with good intent. And mark well that there is no gossiper whose life, if examined and looked into, will not be found full of vices and insolence. And now that you know this, go ahead and philosophize as much as you like. (19)

The problematic nature of this quote appears most notably in the word "veil". Philosophy is not a being which can be separated from gossip but rather a disguise that obscures the salient features of the speaker. Furthermore, the speaker in true form is already expounding the ideas of philosophy but no one heeds them because the listener is dissuaded by

something; the vices, the insolence, and in other words the murmurer's ostentation.

What is the difference between the ideas of Cipión and those of Aristotle? The answer is that one is a learned philosopher who speaks under the auspices of dominant society and the other presents his philosophies between growls and slobber. This proves to be an important fact because the appearance of the speaker was just as important then as it is today. This appearance or ostentation has a complementary relationship with verisimilitude because an equilibrium between these two factors will determine, in part, the reception by the individual readers and society as an institution of the speaker's proclamation.

The concordance of the ostentation of the narrator is something that Cervantes frequently complicates in his works through a contrast which pushed the equation of ostentation/verisimilitude to its limit. The other level of contrast imbedded within the structure of the story is that of the philosophical ideas of the dogs. Within the majority of the criticism written on these works it seems Cipión is the preferred choice when matters of trusting intelligence are at stake. And once again I am in agreement, but cannot help chuckling at the realization that I am seriously comparing the philosophies of two mutts!

The destruction, or at least the ridiculization, of these rules opens the metaphorical door of narration and on the other side we encounter a double function which greatly impacts genre. The possibilities of genre are exploded and multiply in an almost infinite manner. Everything is possible because the control of verisimilitude has lost its value as something necessary.

Without verisimilitude, the multiplication of genres also points to the ridiculousness of typical and canonical works. Berganza narrates his life as a pícaro, but he also becomes a shepherd, finds himself in Lope de Vega-esque situations, and always seems to note the inherent hypocrisy in each case. The shepherds are not shepherds but rather wolves. The picaros are members of the highly structured realm of Monipodio. The witches are penitent sinners.

Américo Castro observes that the genres which Cervantes presents to us do not line up well with the canonical fictions which define the

generic rules. He writes, in *El pensamiento de Cervantes*; "In simply saying that real shepherds are dirty, that they sew their own sandals, etc. is to say that they are not like those found in books. Berganza, according to Menéndez Pelayo, 'found great distance between reality and fiction'" (my translation) (37). Due to this it can be suggested that Cervantes' genres have little or nothing to do with verisimilitude as a process of narration and discourse.

This idea could be useful and enlightening if we avoid the first conclusions that can be arrived at, which is to say that Cervantes writes in direct opposition of the genres he implements (i.e. the popular opinion that Don Quijote is an anti-chivalric work). In my personal opinion this argument doesn't make much sense if we think of the peculiar nature of verisimilitude in these works. In the canonical works of the pastoral, the chivalric, the picaresque, etc. verisimilitude is an essential part of narration. Even though these works are fictional they attempt to root themselves firmly within reality. This grounding in reality is an important part of the reader's reception of the works. That said, it makes more sense to criticize a genre by presenting a symbol of the genre in a ridiculous manner but within the context of verisimilitude. Now, I do concede that Don Quijote is a ridiculous symbol of the book of knight-errantry but many other skilled readers have pointed out that ridiculousness is not isolated within Don Quijote's personality. Why so many complications? In my opinion, it's because these works are not attacks on stereotypical genres. They are works that complicate but do not intend to destroy.

In Berganza's world where verisimilitude doesn't seem to function, genre is like a sinking ship. Perhaps Cervantes' works criticize certain genres but if we consider *El coloquio de los perros* we must say that his works criticize all genres and its possibility.

I would like to end with an observation provided by Ruth El Saffar cited in Spadaccini and Talens previously mentioned article. She states, "when the unnamed narrator intervenes and Campuzano wakes up...we realize that the very act of reading the story has released the dogs from their solitude and estrangement and that we have participated in their liberation' (83)" (235). Here we are reminded of the words Cañizares spoke when she prophesized the transformation of Berganza into a man.

We also notice that this transformative power lies in our hands and that the book, the author and the genre do not dictate our perception of verisimilitude. We are the only ones that can place ourselves at the mercy of the infinite trap of interpretation.

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