



Aylward, E. T. *The Crucible Concept: Thematic and Narrative Patterns in Cervantes's Novelas ejemplares*. Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1999. 327 pp.

In this study, Aylward expands critical models used by other Cervantes scholars in previous studies of specific texts, and draws upon his own theories from *Cervantes: Pioneer and Plagiarist* (1982), to analyze the *Novelas ejemplares* (1613) as an ordered collection. He states in the introduction that his heaviest debt is to the late Ruth El Saffar, whose "alchemical" approach to the purification of the protagonists' values in Cervantes's posthumously published romance, the *Persiles* (1617), provides the basis for his own interpretation of the narrative process through which the *novelas'* overarching thematic coherence is achieved. In considering the *Novelas*, Aylward argues that "What these twelve stories have in common is the narrative technique by which Cervantes repeatedly subjects his protagonists' lives to a painful purification process that I call the crucible concept: a *solutio* or acid bath that strips away all the tangential elements of the human psyche and ultimately yields a pure nugget of psychological and spiritual integrity" (15). Characterizing the *Novelas* as an "otherwise curious and incongruous collection" (11), Aylward takes as his point of departure the assumption that Cervantes's narratives are structured upon a Christian romance subtext that makes their resolution predictable, despite the gritty, or novelistic, trials endured by the characters as their stories unfold (19). Aylward admittedly positions this study within a corpus of traditional Cervantes criticism with which he fundamentally agrees, and he cites such *novelas* studies copiously. Other approaches, particularly feminist and historicist readings of the *novelas*, are mentioned with the intention of dismissing their validity, with the exception of favorable reference to certain articles by Carroll B. Johnson. For example, when Aylward discusses criticism of "La fuerza de la sangre" in the second chapter, he dispatches an article by Patricia Grieve, stating that "Such feminist criticisms seem valid enough on the surface, but fail to take into account the peculiar circumstances in which Cervantes wrote. . . ." (115). Similarly, in reference to historicist interpretations of "La española inglesa," he

concludes that “the aforesaid efforts have been wasted on a wild-goose chase” and that the work “simply happens to be one of the Spanish writer’s more remarkable feats of legerdemain: Cervantes skillfully lays a veneer of pseudo-historical facts atop a totally imaginative moral tale” (133).

The contribution of his own most recent book, Aylward argues, lies in the discovery of a new series of formal principles governing the arrangement of the narratives in the *Novelas ejemplares* collection as a whole. In the ensuing study, work by work, of the narrative strategies that accomplish the representation of the moral purification process in Cervantes’s characters, Aylward aligns himself with critics (Sobejano, Riley, Gerli) who have found no corresponding formal evolution in the collection from novel to romance nor a polar relationship between groups of its narratives, but rather a hybrid in which novelistic, or realistic, elements are juxtaposed variously with archetypal romance patterns in individual works. His study, aimed at the formulation of a “theoretical statement about Cervantes’s general artistic plan for this unique collection” (31), uses the narratological categories of Seymour Chatman’s *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (1978) to tease out some new structural patterns and relationships between the *novelas* that are not immediately evident in Cervantes’s ordering of the collection. For Aylward, Cervantes’s real exemplarity is not the moral “crucible effect” that drives each narrative; it is the author’s invention of distinct narrative strategies that permits him to elaborate the telling of a few basic moral tales in multiple ways, and his carefully orchestrated alternation within the collection of these formal variations on single tales, presumably so that diverse readers’ understanding of the lessons will be enhanced by an appreciation of the *Novelas ejemplares*’s artistry. To make sense of the order that Cervantes assigned his *novelas* in the 1613 Juan de la Cuesta edition, the critic proposes that they reveal consistent underlying structural narrative patterns, derived from four basic types of story that are arranged in alternation, with incremental variations in the telling or retelling of each sort: *novelas* with Italianate or idealist story lines but innovative narrative techniques; less innovative, realistic biographical tales from a distinct source—the Porras manuscript; dramas in narrative disguise; and a layered narrative experiment. Of the four cited, according to Aylward, three categories are clearly composed according to the “crucible effect” design of the collection, and the fourth, the alleged Porras works, owe their anomalous elements to Cervantes’s having opted to adapt external sources. Working through each of these groupings, Aylward proceeds to analyze the linear development of the narrative discourse that recounts events in each work according to Chatman’s five categories, paying particular attention to the type and number of analeptic narratives and ellipses with which the narrating discourse structures the sequencing of the story told. Finally, he arrives at a classification that is intended to lay bare Cervantes’s artistic blueprint for the collection: “each of the *Novelas ejemplares* can be reduced to one of several storytelling strategies” (34), or narrative patterns, which are alternated according to a balanced plan within the collection. This plan itself is eventually discussed and demonstrated by means of further schematic diagrams in the conclusion (277–88).

Aylward's study consists of the introduction, which positions his study with respect to selected trends in *Novelas* criticism and gives a plot summary of each *novela*, five chapters in which he again summarizes narrative structures of individual works while analyzing clusters of *novelas* according to the affinities he finds in their narrative patterns, and a conclusion that revisits the arrangement of the collection by Cervantes. Following are notes, and an accessibly structured bibliography plus a useful index of critics cited. Chapter One focuses on "La gitana" and "La ilustre fregona," two works of his first loose Italianate grouping linked thematically by the restoration of marriageable daughters to their proper identity. According to Aylward, both works are structured upon a smoothly flowing series of sequential scenes condensed by ellipses and interrupted two-thirds of the way through by analeptic summary. According to Aylward, the artistic flourish of the second telling (*IF*) lies in the doubling of scenes and analeptic summaries brought on by the doubling of the male protagonist into both Avendaño and Carriazo. Chapter Two examines structural symmetry in "El amante liberal," "La fuerza de la sangre," and "La española inglesa," the remaining works of Italianate, idealistic type. His analyses and schemas propose that these works exhibit a narrative strategy either of regularly alternating narrative scenes and flashback summaries (*AL*), or halves (identical or inverse) each bisected by flashback summary (*AE*, *FS*). Chapter Three argues that, unlike either of the more complex groups above, the "biographical" works commonly seen as more realistic ("Rinconete y Cortadillo," "El celoso extremeño," and "El licenciado vidriera") are structured as a series of uninterrupted scenes characteristically linked with ellipsis, or the suppression of discursive commentary. Here Aylward invokes the argument of his *Cervantes: Pioneer and Plagiarist*, attributing this group's noticeably more streamlined narrative development to a common source predating Cervantes's own artistry, the Porras manuscript. Chapter Four focuses on the two *novelas* that other readers have also noted for their theatrical elements ("Las dos doncellas" and "La Señora Cornelia"), finding in them the shared structure of an extended scene interrupted by both comic interludes and analeptic blocks. He once again argues that the second of the two works further elaborates the techniques of the first by doubling all of its structural components to create an elaborate, "fuguelike" structure aimed at pleasing the tastes of his more sophisticated readers (239). Finally, his fifth chapter finds the two closing *novelas*, "El casamiento engañoso" and "El coloquio de los perros," to be the culminating artistic experiment of the collection, two independent narratives fused as one, and hence properly placed at the end to draw the readers' attention to Cervantes's artistry. The Conclusion, sketching all the *novelas* individually for the third time in the study and offering fourteen more structural schemas for a total of fifty-two, argues that Cervantes deliberately ordered his collection for publication with the intention of alternating works according both to their thematic and their structural elements, closing with a hybrid of two tales focused on what he has been doing throughout—storytelling.

One might question the adequacy of the Chatman model to the study of the author in question, for it almost clinically severs the complex and playful

relationship between the planes of *discours* and *histoire* that many critics have pondered in Cervantes's exemplary narratives, and the question of irony is for the most part not considered. The relationship of narrative discourse to the stories told in the *Novelas ejemplares* in this study appears to be relegated to variations on formal sequencing, not the narrator's manipulation of the readers' perceptions in ways that challenge them to play an active role in thinking about the messages of the works they read. Aylward's claim to have "offered a new theoretical approach to the reading of Cervantes's 1613 collection of short stories" (288) may well strike readers as an overly ambitious assessment of his study. Nevertheless, in applying Chatman's paradigm to each of the *novelas*, he does, in a series of finely detailed analyses, offer further insights into the diversity of their narrative structures; his argument about Cervantes's concealed plan for the structural patterning in the collection's order will convince some readers and leave others skeptical. In addition to its narratological analyses, this study offers multiple detailed synopses of the *novelas* themselves and is informed by a broad knowledge of bibliography in the field, which should make it useful particularly for the non-specialist reader.

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