

REVIEWS

Avalle Arce, Juan Bautista de. *Las novelas y sus narradores*. Biblioteca de Estudios Cervantinos. Alcalá de Henares: Centro de Estudios Cervantinos, 2006. 409 pp. ISBN: 84-96408-26-4.

This book is both sophisticated and simple: sophisticated for those who might not be familiar with the infinite variety, subtlety, and complexity of narrative invention in the Hispanic story telling tradition, and markedly simple for those familiar with the very, very long history of all western story telling, and the theory behind it, from the *Iliad* forward.

How, one asks, when one begins to tell a tale, can the teller engage the audience and make the tale more real-seeming, perhaps make story masquerade as history? The answer, like this book, is both simple and complex. To begin with, have the tale be told by one and many voices, lace it with errors, gaps, temporal faults, aporiae, contradictions, bold faced lies, and cast a sleeping Homer in the midst! The more narrators there are the better, even if some are only partially knowledgeable or others totally unreliable. The more witnesses there are, the more believable the lives seem that are portrayed through words as having been lived. If properly framed and arranged, the more perspectives on those lives the more actual and historical they appear, especially through incompleteness, fault, paradox, and mutual contradiction that must be sorted out to ascertain the presence of any underlying, problematical truth. To be sure, the errors in stories—the broken threads of narrative through their very multiplicity, diversity, affirmation, opposition, agreement, and negation may increase our sense of belief—make us more willing to concentrate, ask questions of the text, and, if properly deployed, to suspend disbelief, and query the plausibility or implausibility of what we hear or read. The problematic and the instability of the truth in narrative is the glory of the novel and paradoxically may serve as its chief truth-making device. It provokes thought about the nature of the truth itself and the trustworthiness of everything we see and hear. Unreliability may thus be crafted to persuade, engage, and stimulate reflection.

tion on the status of the truth and, when taken to a higher intellectual level, of reality in general.

The present book is divided into twelve chapters and sets out to trace the principal manifestations and variations of narrative mode or point of view, especially of unreliable narrators, in Spanish language narrative from their precursors in antiquity on through the so-called *Libro de buen amor*, Don Juan Manuel, sentimental romance, and the novels of chivalry, extending finally into Cervantes, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, narrators of the Generation of '98, and finally Borges and Cela. That said, the lion's share of attention is bestowed by Avallé Arce upon late medieval and early modern exemplars, centering principally on Cervantes, who according to the author experiments with point of view throughout his writing career beginning with *La Galatea*, systematizing and epitomizing narrative unreliability in his *Don Quijote*, *Persiles y Sigismunda*, and certain *Novelas ejemplares*.

Beyond the Cervantine crux of narrative invention, the author surveys point of view in the picaresque (*Lazarillo*, *Buscón*, and *Guzmán*), Lope de Vega's *La Arcadia*, and such later varied works like Father Isla's *Fray Gerundio de Campazas*, nineteenth-century historical novels like Mariano José de Larra's *El doncel de don Enrique el doliente*, Espronceda's *Sancho Saldaña o el castellano de Cuéllar*, and Gil y Carrasco's *El señor de Bembibre*. These are followed by Juan Valera's *Pepita Jiménez*, Pérez Galdós' *Doña Perfecta* and *Miau*, Unamuno's *Paz en la guerra* and *Niebla*, all of Valle-Inclán's *Sonatas* (approached as if they were one extended novel) and the latter's *Tirano Banderas*, inter alia. The last chapter of the book, anachronistically subtitled titled "La infidencia de ahora," is dedicated to works by Borges and Cela published during the first half of the twentieth century, in the 1940s and early 1950s. In each case Avallé Arce's approach to the novels he deals with is thorough although mostly descriptive, calling attention to the details and the mechanics of the narrative structure of the individual works. Although too broad to summarize here, each chapter contains many useful insights and contributes to a greater appreciation of the intricacies and the chronological development of narrative invention across a vast tradition, in which Cervantes, of course, both for the critic and for the history of the novel, remains the catalyst and crucial referent of the modern story-telling art.

Implicitly recognizing the lack of an adequate critical idiom to discuss the fine points of narrative point of view and unreliability in Spanish, in his survey Avallé Arce resorts to coining his own at-times-quaint terms

like Narrador Poquisciente, and Narrador Sabelotodo, Narrador Inefable, Narrador Incapaz, Narrador Antólogo, and Narrador Coloquial, etc. At the same time, several chapters include long passages of extraneous material and information seemingly alien to the critical task at hand. This is the case, for example, with several unnecessary biographical sketches of the writers treated, one of which includes a complete list of Juan Valera's diplomatic postings (296), complimented by unneeded displays of erudition like the citation of Mariano José de Larra's full moniker, "Mariano José de Larra y Sánchez de Castro" (268).

Stuffing aside, in his appraisal of point of view, Avalle Arce is most interested in unreliable narrators, noting their presence even beyond Hispanic letters up through the first half of the twentieth century. In this broader overview, he provides the expected nod of recognition to Agatha Christie's topical *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1928), but curiously not to equally important, perhaps even more notable and ambitious, modernist exemplars of counterfeit narrative like André Gide's *Les faux monnayeurs*, Virginia Woolf's prismatic *Mrs. Dalloway*, Faulkner's "idiotic" symphony of perspectives *The Sound and the Fury*, Carlos Fuentes' masterful *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, Juan Rulfo's creepy *Pedro Páramo*, Julio Cortázar's choose-your-own-adventure *Rayuela*, or Mario Vargas-Llosa's vertiginous *La casa verde*. The absence of even a passing reference to literary narrative and its close ties to late modern auteur cinema is also notable (Buñuel's *Los olvidados*, Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blowup*, Bernardo Bertolucci's *Strategia del Ragno*, or, more recently, Christopher Nolan's *Memento*.) a medium which serves as a requisite criterion for any current understanding of narrative point of view, epistemological conundrums, and the problematic of discriminating between truth and fiction in modern narrative art. Also perplexing is the fact that Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, a near contemporary expression of an experiment in painting with multiple perspectives to *Don Quijote* that is equally symptomatic of the seventeenth-century crisis in epistemology, is mentioned only four brief times, and almost in passing.

Avallé Arce is among the few non Anglo-American Hispanists who thoroughly understands the strategies of story telling and reads *Don Quijote* for what it is, a novel. To be sure, as the first modern novel where the diverse techniques of unreliable narration are masterfully controlled and developed by Cervantes via the counterpoint of authorities deployed in the very opening gambit of the work. Yet, even as he intuits and refines

his analysis of unreliability in *Don Quijote*, Part I, Avallé Arce lapses into one of the most tedious propensities of Hispanic Cervantine scholarship, namely the requirement to find fault, correct the text from outside itself, and seek positivistic philological causes for what are potentially some of the most artistically productive narrative gaps, aporiae, and contradictions in the work. For example, rather than entertain the possibility that the conflicting rubrics of chapters XXXV and XXXVI of *Don Quijote*, Part I (154) might be of a piece with--indeed be the result of--the very unreliability he locates earlier in the clash of voices amidst the glorious narrative rupture that spans Chapters 8-9, in the middle of his discussion of unreliable narrative, we run headlong into a critical somersault which proposes that these inconsistencies are the product of Cervantes's lack of attention due to his haste to turn the text over to the compositors in 1605 (the license to publish the book had been issued in late September, 1604). The same sort of argument and attempt to rewrite Cervantes' text according to extraneous logic is applied to the story of Grisóstomo (Chapters X-XIV), which according to the critic more properly belongs to the events of Sierra Morena (Chapters XIII-XXIX), since Pedro, its principal narrator, is a goatherd and not a shepherd, and goats and goatherds are more apt to be found in mountainous terrain (140-141) rather than on the plain of La Mancha, where the encounter with Grisóstomo and Marcela unfolds. However, if, to invoke Ockam's Razor, these presumed lapses of composition are included in the larger design of unreliability exposed when Cide Hamete first erupts onto the scene, they may be--indeed I am convinced that they are--a further manifestation of the increased narrative distance and infidelity of an overarching supra-narrator (see Parr) and the text's deliberate desire to provoke epistemological and ontological uncertainty in the reader, exposing what has been read for what it is, fiction--an illusion crafted from words. As Borges' Treviranus notes in *La muerte y la brújula*, "No hay que buscarle tres pies al gato" when the best answer to the puzzle posed by the human need to plot stories and events may often lie in plain sight. Is it not more delightfully ironic for us to realize that maybe we, just like Don Quijote whom we mock unthinkingly, might also have gone momentarily mad from reading? That the text that we hold in our hands might be a muddle of disparate sources, inexpertly collated or, worse, bowdlerized by an anonymous Morisco translator hired on the street, whose lack of qualifications and pulchritude we can scarcely imagine? To realize that what we have been led to believe is no more than smoke and

mirrors; to grasp suddenly that we have been duped by the “partial magic” of the story-teller’s art, to invoke Robert Alter’s splendid characterization, and its intoxicating effects upon the human imagination? What gives the critic license to correct and contradict the authority of the text, especially since through the enchantment of its artistry from its opening paragraph (“... que en esto hay alguna diferencia en los autores que deste caso escriben,” I, 1) it impertinently announces its own awareness of the fragile contingencies of its authority and tenders alert readers a heuristic key for opening the very rules they need to read, enjoy, and understand it?

That said, Avallé Arce’s offhand dismissal, and seeming unawareness, of crucially important work on Cervantine narratology of the past twenty five years (“Lo que se ha escrito sobre el *Quijote* de entonces a ahora llena bibliotecas enteras, pero me puedo desentender de casi todo porque muy pocos estudios tratan del narrador. Los que utilice quedarán consignados en notas” 135-36), is also disconcerting. While the claim may be partially true for things published in Spanish (although Carlos Fuentes, a major Spanish-language voice on Cervantes who remains noticeably absent from the book, is a prominent exception), it is certainly not so for scholarship in English. In the case of Cervantes alone, the book’s lacunae of English language bibliography is striking. No mention is made of significant studies by George Haley, Edward Riley, James Parr, Edward Friedman, Félix Martínez Bonati, and Carroll Johnson, to name but a few. To be sure, one of the shortcomings of the present study, despite its author’s long sojourn in the United States, is that it is not cognizant of these essential Anglo-American critical statements on narrative mode in Cervantes, and that it seems unaware of other vital, purely theoretical works on narratology published during the last thirty five years (things so basic as the studies by Robert Alter, Susan Lanser, and Gerald Prince, for example).

In this way, despite its merits the book falls quite short of expectations. Its reticence to pursue the clear epistemological and ontological consequences of the narrative techniques it so carefully describes, hampered by both its practical and theoretical bibliographical lacunae, and the critic’s unwillingness to surrender to the instructions provided by the texts he reads for understanding the latter more fully, frustrate the reader who expects more from the pen of its author. If thoughtfully approached, narrative point of view, unreliability in particular, can be seen as something much more than a ludic dimension of story telling. Not only what is said but what is partially said or remains unspoken forms part of the contingency and the

challenge of locating the truth. Ultimately, narrative infidelity especially may serve as a thought-provoking device that breaks the unexamined syntax of representation and compels the reader to question every sort of authority, leading to a deeper appreciation of the mediating role of language and discourse in constructing truth and falsehood. When artfully managed, point of view, and the unreliable narrator most particularly, may denaturalize the conventionality of language and its truth-making claims, exposing the deeper philosophical issues that underpin all narrative, and which point to the tenuous discursive foundations of how we are led to find the truth and believe what is said, read, or otherwise perceived. As Cervantes knew well, there is more than tasty irony in the fact that “la mentira es mejor cuando más parece verdadera y tanto más agrada cuanto tiene de lo dudoso y posible” (*Don Quijote*, I, 47). The novel, as it emerged from his pen and then on into the post-Cartesian world, became more than an intellectual tease and a medium for entertainment; it became a means for probing the very limits of language, truth, and representation. After all, it was fiction’s capacity to expose the textually constructed nature of the truth which led early modern moralists to discern its danger and condemn it so roundly.

Finally, the book is generously laced with its own narrative uncertainties, i.e., with frequently appearing typos and omissions (e.g., *Cárcel de amor* for *Cárcel de Amor*, 80; *esús* for *estas*, 135; *valencia* for *Valencia*, 228; *granada* for *Granada*, 270; *oda* for *toda*, 310, and *passim*). Mercifully, however, the work does provide an index to its sprawling content, although the former is more onomastic than analytical, with little or no cross referencing. Thus, if readers wish to consult the analysis of *El señor de Bembibre* or *El doncel de don Enrique el Doliente*, they must remember, and proceed via, the name of the author of each work, followed by an amble through the pages dedicated to him.

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