

THE CITY AND THE COUNTRY IN LATER YEARS: LUIS LANDERO'S *JUEGOS DE LA EDAD TARDÍA* REALISM IN ROBBE-GRILLET AND BALZAC

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After being rejected by nearly every major Spanish editorial house, Luis Landero's novel *Juegos de la edad tardía* (1989) was picked up by Tusquets whereupon it became a national best-seller and the recipient of the highest critical praise.¹ Curiously, while critics were elated with the appearance of a new author who showed evidence of having actually read before putting pen to paper, they generally agreed that Landero's prose was too similar to that of some of the masters he had read.² For a novelist writing in the throes of postmodernism, a Cervantine or Proustian style, they argued, however well-wrought, was unhappily anachronistic.

Landero's problematic style lends to his subject matter a similarly dated feel. The setting of *Juegos de la edad tardía*—the middle Franco years—although not without contemporary precedent, is presented devoid of the pastiching and problematizing of the past that typifies more "postmodern" novels.³ Instead, the novel recreates an earlier Spain whose supposedly anachronistic issues remain the rule of the day. The following analysis shows, however, how Landero's use of one of these issues, the tension between urban Spain and its rural backwater, responds to alternative contemporary social and political concerns, thereby explaining how what appears old-fashioned to editors and critics has enjoyed such unexpected reader success. Specifically, Landero employs city/country tensions to expand initial reader identification with a protagonist's search for wholeness into a broader search for collective meaning in a socially, politically, and even geographically disintegrated world.

Juegos de la edad tardía narrates the rise and fall of a middle-aged, wholesale clerk-turned-world-renowned-poet, Gregorio Ollas. Gregorio's rise begins with a series of phone calls from a fellow worker, Dacio Gil Monroy. Gil, a traveling salesman, exiled from post-war Madrid for over two decades by a job more tedious than Gregorio's, thirsts for news from the modern metropolis. Gregorio, trying to satisfy Gil's demands for ever-more interesting information about modern-day Madrid, verbally constructs an alternative city and a corresponding alter-ego who inhabits it, the poet Augusto Faroni. The heart of the

novel describes Gregorio's increasingly complicated attempts to revel in the pleasures of this alter-ontology while eluding the increasingly oppressive demands of his original mid-life existence. Gregorio ultimately fails and is forced to flee Madrid for the countryside where in a poetic turn of events he happens upon his old friend Gil in a stereotypical Franco-era *pueblo perdido*. As the narrative concludes, the two have abandoned all cosmopolitan dreams in favor of an Arcadian future of farming and philosophy.

The obvious quotation of the pastoral tradition at the conclusion of the novel is only the final evidence of a narrative that retells the common city/country experience of the post-war Spaniard, a story familiar to readers of Jesús Fernández Santos, Miguel Delibes, and Luis Martín Santos as well as spectators of Spanish movies such as *Surcos* (1951), *Lo piel quemada* (1964), and the plethora of *paleto* films of the late 1960s. Like the doctor in Fernández Santos's *Los bravos*, Gil is a city slicker out of place in the countryside who meditates obsessively on the cosmopolitan life-styles of his former friends in the city, while Gregorio, similar to the doctor in *Tiempo de silencio* or the characters in so much *paleto* cinema, is a country boy who is crushed-on-arrival by the alienating effects of metropolitan modernity.

The success of the novel depends on the respective positioning of the two Franco-era protagonists' and their "postmodern" Spanish readers. These readers apprehend the protagonist's experiences according to vast economic, cultural, and technological gulf—whether real or represented—that separated city and country in Francoist Spain and that continues to exercise a profound effect in the contemporary Spanish collective conscious (see for example Pedro Almodóvar's film *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!*, 1984, or Suso de Toro's novel *Calzados Lola*, 1998). That understanding lends credibility to the outlandish fictions that Gregorio creates for his companion and that serve as the motivating force for the novel. For example, Gil's perceptions of the modern metropolis initially seem absolutely naive. Yet, his beliefs recall those of characters from the "realistic" novels and films of the 1950s and 1960s. Like the peasants of Fernández Santos's *Los bravos*, Gil "knows" that anything and everything important happens in the city: "era en las grandes ciudades donde se estaba decidiendo el destino del siglo" (110). According to Gil, things are so bad in the provinces that even thought has died (132). Gregorio, of course, "knows" from "experience" that Gil is misinformed. Still, he can never quite speak the

truth. It is all too easy for Gregorio, living in a culture in which city/country divisions have been so culturally constructed, to be unsure of what that truth actually is. Gregorio, furthermore, knows that he has hardly lived himself, that perhaps Gil—a man of cosmopolitan origins no matter what his current situation—knows something that he does not.

Contemporary readers of *Juegos de la edad tardía* share with the characters a similar relationship to the city/country division. María Antonia García de León, in a study of cinematic representations of rural Spain, has described all contemporary Spaniards as ultimately *paletos* whose self-perception is inextricably linked to the films they have watched and the novels they have read (17, 24). These works more often than not confirm a vision of city/country relations more appropriate to Gil's outlandish demands than to Gregorio's or the readers' better judgements. Consequently, while readers may be as frustrated with Gregorio for his inability to deny Gil's demands as Gregorio is with himself, they also sense what Gregorio senses: that there is some truth to what Gil demands, that the city is indeed magnificent, that the country may indeed consist of little more than a miserable lot of *pueblos perdidos*.

Landero positions readers—their objective vision already distorted by the pre-narrative constructs that García de León mentions—to identify with the characters' longings for their respective lost paradises, especially with that of Gregorio. Landero accomplishes this reader-protagonist identification through a series of flashbacks to Gregorio's childhood in the country. Readers learn that as a child Gregorio lived in the remote countryside, "en la soledad de un llano y unos cerros ásperos, junto a unas minas abandonadas" far from even the closest "pueblo pequeño con calles empinadas y casas bajas de cal" (51). Of his childhood in the country, Gregorio recalls, "Yo tenía entonces unos cinco años y aquella fue la época más feliz de mi vida" (51). When Gregorio's progenitors die he migrates to the city where he loses his rural innocence. After finding initial escape through books, he succumbs to the pedestrian demands of the modern metropolis, settling down into an unfulfilling job and marriage.

Then Gil appears. As Gregorio begins to receive phone calls from his isolated friend, he rediscovers the repressed, romantic yearnings of he tried to express as a young urban scholar and poet. Gil, a man of age and experiences similar to Gregorio's, serves by way of their phone conversations as a kind of mirror whereby Gregorio is reawakened to a

sense of self. Gil's calls inspire Gregorio, moreover, to rediscover language as a tool for making sense of this new self and for overcoming his alienation. However, the intensity of encountering his self reveals that recourse to his former poetic expression cannot suffice. Gregorio must master language, and thus he begins to create his alter-identity of world-renowned poet, Augusto Faroni.

Readers, already identifying with Gregorio through his earlier loss of innocence, again accompany the protagonist in his poetic awakening. This second stage of identification also achieves a higher level of intensity. Situated within the discursive boundaries of the city/country paradigm, readers come prepared to experience Gregorio's transformation much as the movie spectator relives the process of subject formation within the dark confines of the theater. The modern city has also produced contemporary readers like Gregorio and has awakened them to their subjectivity as beings trapped within disconcerting parameters. Also, just as Gregorio's awakening is only possible thanks to Gil who acts as his mirror, the readers' awareness of the influence of pre-narrative discourses on them results from Gregorio acting as their mirror. All experience the realm of the symbolic, in which the subject is always already incomplete, on a never-ending quest for wholeness. Readers, like Gregorio, feel *jouissance* followed by loss and the ensuing insatiable desire for wholeness. Readers, like Gregorio, attempt in the second half of the novel to recover the initial *jouissance*, to overcome the lack that seems to grow with every attempt to overcome. But the lack can never be overcome because Gregorio's and Gil's geographic positions relative to one another preclude any enduring honesty. The narrative thus positions its readers to intuit lack as inextricably linked to a socio-spatial problem: that of the gap dividing city from country. The connection between alienation and the socio-spatial will ultimately provide the key to vindicating *Juegos de la edad tardía* from designations of mere anachronicity.

In the meantime, Gregorio spends seven years creating a world of philosopher-robots, magnificent city-scapes, and imaginary wars in an ambitious attempt to satisfy Gil, to please himself, and to discover a way out of the very mess he is creating. All the while, the spaces of his original ontology press in on him. As his fantasy world grows bigger, his material one collapses; he finds himself unemployed, unwelcome in his own home, and wanted for attempted murder. At the same time, his world—despite its constant utopian promise—continues to weigh on him.

Finally, he intuits that the only solution to escaping these opposite but equally restrictive spaces is to traverse the city/country division altogether; that is, to abandon the city once and for all, and thereby the discursive division that separates him from Gil and allows their mutual deception to continue.

Gregorio decides then to board the first train out of town. Despite his hurry, he makes one last stop at the flat of his neighbor, don Isalas. Don Isalas is an odd hermit with purportedly magical powers who seems to offer a possible final explanation for the madness in which Gregorio and the reader have been involved. He represents a kind of last-ditch opportunity for the protagonist to transcend the alienation and frustration of his bi-ontological existence. After over an hour of personal anecdote and homespun philosophy, however, don Isalas has explained little or nothing. Desperate to salvage at least his reputation, don Isalas finally recurs to memories of his own childhood, as Gregorio, Gregorio's grandfather, and Gil all have previously. In another apparently absurd anecdote, don Isalas explains how his own childhood happiness depended above all on his possession of a large diamond. This happy state shattered one day when a raven snatched the gem up in its beak and flew away, while squawking the phrase, "Viva la España colonial."

Don Isalas's story seems absurd, another piece of nonsense in the diatribe of a madman. And yet, the narrative positioning of the reader to this point draws special attention to this particular absurdity. First, the story of the diamond figures as part of a childhood memoir, a form employed in the initial interpellation of the reader's nostalgic desires. Of still greater importance, the raven's seemingly out-of-place phrase catches the attention of readers sensitive to socio-spatially induced alienation. Indeed, Isidoro Álvarez Sacristán locates the origins of contemporary Spain's most pressing socio-spatial tensions in the very collapse of Spanish colonial power to which the raven refers (114). Álvarez Sacristán explains that contemporary regionalist and neo-nationalist movements arise at precisely the moment when Spain loses its final colonies, and therewith loses the external "other" that had facilitated the nation's only extended period of political, social, and cultural unity.

In short, the socio-spatial resonances of the raven's call fill don Isalas's anecdote with allegorical potential appropriate as much to tensions in the Spanish present as in its past. One may read the paradise

that don Isaiás remembers as a unified Spain, his diamond as the economic, cultural, and political security promised by the colonies, and in a larger sense, as a symbol of the power over an Other that maintained the Spanish sense of a unified identity. Many readers, of course, may not capture or even accept such a strict reading; nevertheless, the narrative positioning suggests some connection between city/country and regional/national tensions. Furthermore, readers subsequently learn that the disappearance of the diamond occurs during roughly the same years as the disaster in Cuba and that it is precisely the loss of the jewel that incites don Isaiás to begin conjuring up the alchemy that eventually, they learn, instigates Gregorio's own sense of loss and alienation.

Hence don Isaiás's search for wholeness, a search with resonance to Spain's politico-spatial divisions, engenders Gregorio's own spatially tied journey. Through this connection the connotations of the socio-spatial as defined within the rubric of the city/country binary expand. City/country becomes, as Pedro Bosch-Gimpera outlines in an analysis of Spanish regionalism, a metaphor for any number of socio-spatial divisions through the centuries. From historic clashes between Kings and *Comuneros* to the contemporary antagonism between the Madrid Federalists and the Basque Nationalists, center/regional divisions and court/country (later city/country) divisions are inseparably linked (134).

Finally, a proliferation of flashbacks, flash-forwards, and indexical allusions to events impedes readers from locating stable temporal referents for many of the spatial divisions in the novel. Readers must work through the proliferating socio-spatial tensions without resort to the tools of a rational historiography. Consequently, the city/country binary slides along the axis of history, picking up the multiple sociopolitical associations that Bosch-Gimpera identifies. This accumulation then allows the novel to tap into readers' own ahistorical, utopian longings for wholeness in a contemporary Spain under the stress of ever-broadening and deepening city/country-modeled ideologies. The power of the novel then turns as much on the readers' utopian memory of the past as on their own contemporary ideological positioning.

This combination of the utopian and the ideological, finally, recalls Frederick Jameson's analysis of the postmodern. Jameson has defined the postmodern condition as neither historically (ideologically) centered, nor entirely cut off from its history (the utopian) (74, 75). In a sense Jameson describes the city/country binary in *Juegos de la edad tardía*

when he explains that postmodern art draws explicit attention to history while simultaneously effacing any causal connection to that history (74, 75). This simultaneous awareness and negation of the past typifies contemporary Spanish culture in its search for identity. On the one hand, they are pulled by desires to tap into deep regionalist roots that often, like the realm of Faroni, only exist as far as the ontology-constructing capacity of language can take them. On the other hand, they seek to recreate themselves according to cosmopolitan modes. Torn by such seemingly incompatible desires, contemporary Spaniards live Jameson's postmodern contradiction.

Within the temporally disjointed play between city and country, readers just may encounter that combination of ideological challenge and utopian promise that characterizes their polarized identity. Such cultural schizophrenia ultimately responds to a novel that divides the reader between unresolvable binaries, in this case not only between that of the city and the country but between the anachronistic and absolutely contemporary.

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NOTES

¹ Gonzalo Sobejano, in a review of the Spanish novel of the 1980s, calls Landero's novel *the* novel of 1989 and calls Landero *the* literary discovery of the end of the decade (Sobejano 44).

² Critics have compared Landero's style to that of Cervantes, Galdós, Kafka, Proust, Onetti, Faulkner, and García Márquez (Beltrán 130-32; Hidalgo Bayal 114). Luis Beltrán also notes its connections to Mennipean satire and to the folkloric (130-32). An article in *El Europeo* calls Landero "narrador abundante, pero anacrónico" (Pope 59). Santos Sanz Villanueva identifies *Juegos* as "un libro de sabor clásico" (Pope 59).

³ Frederick Jameson argues that in postmodern times the depth necessary for parodic narrative has disappeared and been replaced by a narrative of "pastiche." He explains: "pastiche, like parody, is the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any

conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody" (73-74). Practitioners of the pastiching novel in Spain include Antonio Muñoz Molina (see Robert Spires's analysis of the uses of jazz, detective fiction, and *film noir* in *El invierno en Lisboa*), Rosa Montero (her use of boleros in *Te trataré como a una reina*), and Miguel Sánchez-Ostiz (classic cinema in *La gran ilusión*).

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