

A SPANISH DESCENDANT OF SHAHRAZAD?: AZORÍN'S USE OF FRAMING DEVICES IN *LAS CONFESIONES DE UN PEQUEÑO FILÓSOFO*

Daniel R. Treber

The story-within-the-story has long been used as a literary device. Perhaps the most famous example is *The Thousand and One Nights*, which offers many delightfully complex framing devices—stories within stories within still-more stories. Of course, many other works also use this technique, both from the traditional story-telling traditions and from more recent literary traditions.¹ Though generally considered an essayist and novelist, Azorín (the pseudonym of José Martínez Ruiz) uses similar framing techniques in his autobiographical *Las confesiones de un pequeño filósofo* and in his novel *Doña Inés* among others.

Although Azorín's frames are not as extravagant as those of Shahrazad, *Las confesiones* is perhaps the one Azorinian work in which an outline of the layering devices is most crucial to understanding the text as a whole. In *Las confesiones*, the frames parallel and highlight the sharp-yet-blurred divisions between author, narrator, and protagonist. This separation can cause confusion, since all three carry the same name—Azorín the author, Azorín the (assumed) narrator, and Azorín the protagonist.

Framing is a crucial element in the author's division between the various forms of his emerging persona. There are three main levels of framing, with perhaps a fourth minor one:

(1) José Martínez Ruiz, the author, who still has not definitively taken the pen name of "Azorín," is the first, and outer-most, frame. This is, of course, an implied frame which surrounds the entire text. Ironically, given the conventions of fiction, his only absolutely certain place in the book (despite the fact that he created it all) is on the title page. Most literary conventions assume that the author is present, despite his "invisibility," and that his personal views are reflected in the text.² Further strengthening the idea of an outer authorial frame, in 1909 the author issued a new edition of the work, with a new prologue signed by "Azorín." I construe this as a deliberate textualization of a previously implied outer frame. I will discuss this prologue briefly at a later point in my study.

(2) The second level of framing is that of the author's literary creation, the adult Antonio, who decides to write a book. This level includes the specific action of Antonio writing the book while

sitting in the family library, as well as his disappointing return to visit his childhood school in Yecla. In the spirit of Azorín's contemporary Miguel de Unamuno (for example, in *Niebla*), Martínez Ruiz enters into his own novel as a character; specifically, as the main proponent of Antonio's writing career.³ (When referring in subsequent parts of this chapter to Martínez Ruiz as a character, I will often label him "the fictionalized Martínez Ruiz.")⁴ Besides giving advice, the fictionalized Martínez Ruiz "helps" his "friend" by writing a prologue and an epilogue.

(3) The third level, which comprises the bulk of the novel, consists of Antonio's recollections of youth. Again, the main subject is the school that Antonio had attended.

(4) There is perhaps also a fourth level of childhood stories which Antonio tells, such as the tale of Menchirón. These are not re-creations of Antonio's childhood so much as they are re-creations of re-creations--adult re-tellings of the schoolyard legends he heard as a child. The result is a fairly heavy layering effect.

Ultimately, all levels present voices of the author, the inhabitant of the first and outer frame; a person who, in his many forms, despite his attempt to hide under the veil of child-like re-created fictionality, has definite opinions about Yecla, Spain, personal development, education in general, and his own schooling in specific.

The adult Antonio (who operates, in *Las confesiones*, on the second framing level⁵) is slightly different in each of the "Antonio Azorín" works; despite the use of the same name, he is not, strictly speaking, the same character.⁶ The Antonio of *Las confesiones* is much more mature than his two previous incarnations--he is much less erratic and is more at peace with his life story and with his surroundings.⁷ Within the fictionality of the inner frames, Antonio is the author of the novel; *Las confesiones* is a collection of his memories. Within this fictional set-up, the book is written at the urging of Antonio's friends (including "Martínez Ruiz") who, upon learning of his plans for a possible political career, convince him to write a book instead. While the narrator (frame #2) is a reminiscient adult, Azorín the author (frame #1) makes an effort to reconstruct the perspective of a child (frame #3), creating an impressionistic, concise, and whimsical account. Is it an accurate account? Of course not--at least, not completely. This is an act of fiction which, while obviously semi-autobiographical, selects the memories which Azorín the

author wishes to recall, in the way in which he wishes the reader to perceive them. This act of the pen highlights the artificiality of fiction itself--the author (frame #1), already shielded by the creation of a semi-autobiographical fictitious character (frame #2), hides himself even more with the insertion of an artificial child's-eye view (frame #3). This portrait of Azorín as a young boy is unique in the Antonio Azorín works, but, similar to *La voluntad* and *Antonio Azorín*, it is ultimately another version of the autobiography, the "portrait of an artist."

Also in evidence in this carefully selected collection of memories are the beginnings of a number of Antonio's (and, by extension, Azorín's) life-long preoccupations--for example, nature, time, the tolling of bells, and "the Spanish spirit." Considering the recurring role of this and other motifs in Azorinian novels, their versions in *Las confesiones* may be seen as prototypes. Or, given the intentionality of the text, and the fact that they are written after the motifs have already been established and noted as "Azorinian," they are the versions which Martínez Ruiz himself, developing into his new role of "Azorín," wishes to establish as prototypes.

The recollection frame is closed near the end of the novel (frame level #3 gives way to #2) when the adult Antonio returns to Yecla for a visit to his old school. He is struck by the lack of change after so many years: joyless boys file by to their classes, just as the young Antonio and his classmates had done years earlier, completing a "cycle of time" repetition motif within the novel. Antonio's disappointing return to Yecla is mentioned in various parts of the novel, though most completely at the end of the frame #2 library sequence. This presents an obvious seam in the framing tapestry: it is itself a recollection, but it is a recollection of the very-near, as opposed to distant, past. This is not, however, the only seam which results from narration of the visit. Other Azorinian novels contain a pattern in which a major event is followed by introspection by a main character;⁸ this happens in *Las confesiones* as well.

Essentially, these introspections are "essays-within-the-novel," as opposed to "stories-within-stories." Azorín's essays often help to explain the philosophical underpinnings of the novel, although they sometimes seem to be more like his newspaper articles that like the rest of the novel.⁹ Given that the trip to Yecla is practically the only event of *Las confesiones* (except, perhaps, the actual decision to recollect), it is inevitable that the passages following the trip reports will be rich with introspection. One resultant introspection occurs after the Yecla visit is recalled, out of chronological order, in the midst of the listing of childhood memories (55). At this point, Azorín the author seems momentarily to lose the pretense of fiction. His resultant essay-like insertion--a ponderance about Yecla, and other dying Spanish towns like it--seems to have

been filtered very little by the Antonio character. This is perhaps not surprising, however, as this is where the second and third frames, having been separated near the beginning of the novel, are beginning to fuse once again.

In this part of the novel, Azorín seems to be confused about whether he wishes to give his own *noventayochista* explanations of "the Spanish condition," with little heed to "Antonio," or whether he wishes to continue the intentional fictionality of the novel. Seemingly trying to resolve this confusion of "authorship" (and perhaps to reassure himself of his autonomy as a writer), Azorín has his Antonio character reiterate the claim that his book is just a series of impressions: "Tengo una idea confusa; no quiero arreglar nada. Me place dejar estas sensaciones que bullen en mi memoria tal como yo las siento, caóticas, indefinidas ..." (56). The inference is that the author is no longer the strident student radical José Martínez Ruiz--rather, he has become the peaceful, contemplative Azorín.

The recollection (and main) part of the novel ends soon after the fleeting image of María Rosario, a girl whom the author had seen for only an instant, long ago. This is not an accidental choice of the author, since this is perhaps the part of the novel which most effectively encapsulates Azorín's emerging style, essays about minute details, objects, and memories. The library scenes present mostly the third level of framing, although the author shifts the reader from third to second. The most obvious places to view the shifts between the first and second frames, between the author and his creation, are the prologue and the epilogue. First, Martínez Ruiz steps into the narrative to write a prologue under the guise of his fictitious self. This device sets up the artificiality, and obvious fictionality, of the novel, from the very beginning; in much the same way as Cide Hamete Benengeli in *Don Quixote* or Augusto Pérez in Unamuno's *Niebla*.¹⁰ There are two overriding elements of fiction in *Las confesiones*, roughly correspondent with the first and second framing divisions: one is that Antonio, a fictional character, has written the novel at the behest of the fictionalized Martínez Ruiz, and the other is that Antonio's "memories" reflect a thorough and unbiased attempt at autobiography by Azorín.

The deliberate fictionality of the text becomes a sort of meta-frame. The fictionalized Martínez Ruiz has advised his "friend" Antonio to pursue a writing, as opposed to political, career. Thus, the politics/writing dilemma becomes much more than just a textual construct which is embedded within the framing levels: it becomes the central binarism of the novel, which informs the whole text. While this Azorinian question of action versus contemplation, writing versus *abulia*, is a key to the plot of the other two "Antonio Azorín" works, it is not a theme of *Las confesiones*. This is because, by definition, the

matter is "settled," since *Las confesiones* is ostensibly written through the eyes of a protagonist who has already chosen contemplation, and is now looking back. The framing devices are important on a thematic level because the edges between frames coincide with edges between *yo* and *nada*, between creator and creation, and, ultimately, between the writer which José Martínez Ruiz has been versus the writer which he is becoming as "Azorín."

In the prologue, when Antonio thinks about what Martínez Ruiz has asked him, he pauses for a moment of silence: "... parecía que le costaba renunciar a un ideal querido; nosotros asistíamos emocionados a este terrible y pequeño drama íntimo" (36). By foregoing politics and action, and concentrating on contemplation, Azorín allows his protagonist to give up the struggle for "balance." In this sense, the last book of the trilogy does constitute a closure in which the two inner forces find not balance, but at least some inner peace. Finally, Antonio says: "Está bien; escribiré un libro." Martínez Ruiz adds: "Y este es el libro, lector, que ha escrito Antonio Azorín, en lugar de un programa político" (36). Azorín, the author, is now creating not only a fictional character--a mixture of real memories and poetically re-created fiction--but his own publicly perceived persona as well: any similarities between this new fictionalized life and the "real" one of its author will ultimately be up to the reader. As the reader familiar with Azorín's body of production knows, in works subsequent to *Las confesiones* the line between the two was to become increasingly blurred.

At the end of the novel, there are two epilogues. In the first epilogue, Antonio's, the two fictional levels (the second and third frames of the novel) finally rejoin completely--the recollections of youth have ended, and the actual return trip to Yecla is narrated. In the second, the fictionalized José Martínez Ruiz re-enters to furnish his own epilogue. Ultimately, the second epilogue places the work within the enduring frame, that of the reader and of the Spanish literary tradition: "Que otras digan si vale o no este libro; yo no tendría serenidad bastante para hacer una crítica" (97). Thus ends the novel.

Seemingly not content with the effect of this layering, in 1909, the author issued a new edition of *Las confesiones*, with yet another new layer, in the form of a new prologue. In this new version, he signs himself "Azorín." This edition is short--only 66 pages. Thanks, in part, however, to the intricate framing techniques used by the author, this is a work which "reads" much longer.

NOTES

¹ I do not intend to engage in a full-scale discourse on the framing genre here. Various other works explain and justify the existence and use of narrative frames. Within the general subject of Spanish literature, Galdós provides a particularly fertile ground; especially in critical treatments of the novel *El amigo Manso*. John Kronik's "Our Friend Manso and the Game of Fictive Autonomy" is especially helpful. Kronik notes that Chapters 1 and 50 of the novel "constitute a frame that establishes Máximo Manso in his own words as a lie, a fictive invention" (158). He adds that these two chapters provide the "structure that shapes the entire novel" (162). Another useful work is Hazel Gold's *The Reframing of Realism: Galdós and the Discourses of the Nineteenth-Century Spanish Novel*. Gold stresses the importance of framing devices to the nineteenth-century novel, calling their role "paramount" (10). She explains that the rapid increase in general classified knowledge led to similar developments in literature: "... the realist novel . . . in attempting a similar codification, comes to depend specifically on the aesthetic principal of framing" (107).

² See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: "In short, the author's judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it" (20).

³ While this character operates on the second level of framing, he appears mostly in the prologue and epilogue, parts of the novel in which levels of framing and of fiction are sometimes meshed together; this is consistent with the growing confusion between the author's real personality and his literary personality.

⁴ See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *On the Making of Discourse*: "The essential fictiveness of novels, however, is not to be discovered in the unreality of characters, objects, and events alluded to, but in the unreality of the *alludings* themselves. In other words, in a novel or a tale, it is the *act* of reporting events, the *act* of describing persons or referring to places, that is fictive" (29).

⁵ Theoretically, one could differentiate here between the "adult Antonio" (second level) and the "child Antonio," (third level) considering them as two separate characters. Ultimately, though, the child Antonio is a recreation of the adult Antonio, and both are creations of the author.

⁶ This point is hardly original to this study. Among others, Johnson notes this, especially in her treatment of *La voluntad*.

⁷ This point, too, has been made before. It is interesting to note what a change this is, though, from the Antonio of *La voluntad*, especially with regard to his attitude toward his old school. In *Azorín as a Literary Critic*, Fox notes a change in the author as early as *Soledades* (1898).

⁸ The strongest examples of this are perhaps Don Pablo's visions in *Doña Inés*, which occur after major events. In *La voluntad*, trips with Yuste usually provoke *noventayochista* musings about the Spanish countryside and character. Antonio's marriage to Iluminada is certainly a major event, but the lack of subsequent introspections, rather than weakening the argument, in fact strengthen it by symbolizing his figurative death. In *Antonio Azorín*, Antonio's return trips to Madrid provoke sadness and much introspection.

⁹ Credit must be given once again to Johnson's work in *Crossfire*, as well as to Fox's *Azorín: Gula de la obra completa*.

¹⁰ While these constructions are well-known to students of Spanish literature, they do merit explanation. Cide Hamete Benengeli is a "translator" of the *Quixote* (as opposed to Cervantes, who is the author), but he is a fictional character. See John J. Allen's "Levels of Fiction in Don Quixote," which is included in the Norton Critical Edition of the Ormsby translation of *Don Quixote* (919-927). In Unamuno's *Niebla*, the protagonist Augusto Pérez rebels against his (fictional) death. In protest, he travels to Salamanca to argue the decision with the author, Unamuno himself! From the beginning, however, the character's fictionality has been underscored as one "created from the mist." These comparisons are by no means original to my study. Cide Hamete Benengeli figures prominently in Gold's work, and Kronik certainly sees similarities between Máximo Manso and Augusto Pérez. In the article "Interior Duplication and the Problem of Form in the Modern Spanish Novel," noted Azorín scholar Leon Livingstone makes comparisons similar to those of Kronik.

WORKS CITED

- Azorín [José Martínez Ruiz]. "Las confesiones de un pequeño filósofo," 1904. Vol. 2. 31-97. *Obras completas*. Ed. Angel Cruz Rueda. 9 vols. Madrid: Aguilar, 1947-1954.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961.

- Fox, E. Inman. *Azorin as a Literary Critic*. New York: Hispanic Institute in the United States, 1962.
- . *Azorin: Guía de la obra completa*. Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 1992.
- Gold, Hazel. *The Reframing of Realism: Galdós and the Discourses of the Nineteenth-Century Spanish Novel*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.
- Johnson, Roberta. *Crossfire: Philosophy and the Novel in Spain 1900-1934*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1993.
- Kronik, John. "Our Friend Manso and the Game of Fictive Autonomy." Ed. Jo Labanyi. *Galdós*. London: Longman, 1993: 157-190.
- Livingstone, Leon. "Interior Duplication and the Problem of Form in the Modern Spanish Novel." *PMLA* 73 (1958): 393-406.
- Ormsby, John, trans. *Don Quixote*. By Miguel de Cervantes. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981.
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. *On the Margins of Discourse*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978.
- Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*. Trans. N.J. Dawood. London: Penguin, 1954.
- Unamuno, Miguel de. *Obras completas*. 9 vols. Madrid: Escelicer, 1966.