THE NOVEL THAT HAD NO NAVEL: HISTRIONIC INSURRECTIONS AND UTOPIC INVENTIONS IN ÁLVARO CUNQUEIRO'S *UN HOMBRE QUE SE PARECÍA A ORESTES*

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Although it won the *Premio Nadal* in 1968, Álvaro Cunquiero's novel, *Un hombre que se parecía a Orestes*, has managed to aggravate, exasperate, and irritate its public. John Kronik, in his review of the text in *Hispania* in 1970, commented that the work's irrational structure and its failure to lead anywhere "can easily discourage, bore, baffle, or annoy the reader" (152). In short, the novel is divided into six parts. The first three follow what one would characterize as traditional prose with an omniscient narrator's retelling of the Greek tragedy, the *Orestia*. A radical narrative shift occurs, however, in the middle of the text when one of the principal characters, Eumón, reads aloud a play written by one of his fictional compatriots. In so doing, the convention of written dramatic form materializes within the story as the page that the reader holds represents both a page in the novel and a page in Filón el Mozo's play.

Such an interior duplication leads many critics to declare the work an insurrection against orthodox fiction. Both Jacqueline Eyring Bixler and Robert Spires have explained the book's lack of apparent purpose as a mode of metafiction. In other words, these critics conclude that the novel, by failing to lead "somewhere," must instead point inward toward itself. While concurring that self-referential elements exist in the novel, I also ascertain that the work's structure does not only lean toward its own fictional frame, but also implodes upon itself toward and absolute non-place, a phenomenon that structurally mimics the political and cultural chaos of Spain in the late 1960s. Thus, Cunqueiro's use of fiction within fiction equally refers to social operations as it does to literary functions. In fact, Cunqueiro himself has commented

that utopic societies are no longer merely part of fiction, but attainable in reality. This dualistic purpose to the writing process affirms that *Un hombre que se parecía a Orestes* may not only address the arbitrary laws that govern fiction, but also the subjectiveness of boundaries that control people.

After the insertion of theater in the work, the narrative appears to collapse upon itself as it erodes toward a mere list of characters and places without a narrative skeleton. Again, Robert Spires and others have only viewed this narrative breakdown as a rebellion against traditional forms of writing, proclaiming that the novel acts as a "bridge [. . .] between the Spanish New Novel of the 1960s, and the Self-Referential Novel of the 1970s and 1980s" (*Rebellious* 343). Nevertheless, in a dionysian light, where drama represents an undisciplined nature of being, the invasion by theater in the narrative may constitute an appropriate match to the work's violent content. Theater in the novel, I will assert, is just as threatening to the political structure of Cunqueiro's fictional kingdom as is its anticipated coup. Both produce chaotic results that decimate stable actualities and the structure of realist discourse.

In an article printed in 1974, Cunqueiro stated that "una sociedad utópica no nace como resultado de un progreso dentro de la marcha general de la sociedad. Es una invención *ob ovo* [. . .]" (*Utopia* 55). In this same article the Galician writer discusses modern man's ability to reach the utopic and declares that this capability constitutes one of the most important developments of his time:

> Santo Tomás Moro, Swift, el viajero a las islas Sevarambas y otros inventores de sociedades utópicas, creo yo que, en el fondo de su pensamiento, sabían que sus utopias no eran realizables. Pero ya no puede sospecharse lo mismo de Aldous Huxley ni de George Orwell. Ahora y gracias al dominio por el hombre de técnicas muy complejas [. . .] los inventores de sociedades utópicas creen saber que su sueño, su invención, es realizable. (*Utopia* 55)

Un hombre que se parecía a Orestes reinvents the *Orestia* in which originally the hero, Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, avenges his father's death by slaying Aegisthus, the king of Phocis along with his wife, Clytemnestra. Simply put, this assassination never "occurs" in Cunqueiro's version, and instead, the king grows old awaiting his avenger and eventually dies of pneumonia. *Un hombre que se parecía a Orestes* distorts the events around the murderous ending. The hero arrives after the king's death and only views his act of vengeance inside of a crystal globe, "una bola de nieve," designed by the dramatist, Filón el Mozo. Thus the novel does not rob Orestes of his revenge, but merely reassigns it to the realm of utopic invention and incubates it *ab ovo*.

Interestingly, according to Cunqueiro, utopic societies are no longer merely part of fiction, but attainable in reality. His statement parallels Michel Foucault's "effectively enacted utopia," the heterotopia. Such a place constitutes a zone "in which all the other real sites that can be found within a culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." These spaces dwell "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (24). Naturally, a theater and its space constitute one of these sites. Henri Lefebvre, both Cunqueiro's and Foucault's contemporary, explains: "By means of such theatrical interplay bodies are able to pass from 'real,' immediately experienced space (the pit, the stage) to a perceived space-a third space which is no longer either scenic or public. At once fictitious and real, this third space is classical theatrical space (188). Thus, the use of theater in the novel draws the direction of the narrative away from itself toward and elsewhere, a third space of the real-and-imagined that creates not self-referentiality, but, as David Herzberger would say, split-referentiality (419).

Throughout the first half of the novel, the "realist" half of the novel, theatrical representations, not armies, constitute the gravest threats against governmental stability. The work begins with the violation of the kingdom's borders by a pantomime, who one evening, dressed as a lion, forced king Aegisthus to retreat to a secret bunker. Soon after, the reader discovers that protective fortifications surround the land in

anticipation of Orestes' arrival. In addition, Aegisthus, in an attempt to thwart his own murder, never leaves his palace and establishes an entire network of spies and counterspies to flush out his future assassin. Meanwhile, paranoia causes King Aegisthus to consume night after night in an insomniatic state as he imagines his own demise. He states: "Lo pensaba todo como si la escena final se desarrollase en el teatro, ante cientos o miles de espectadores" (79).

Aegisthus, in treating his own passing away as the final act of a play, discovers that at the precise moment of his death, non-existence will prevent him from taking a proper bow and directing the murder of his wife. To resolve the timing issue of his own extinction he arranges for Filón el Mozo, the royal dramatist, to write the concluding dialogue to his life. As the years pass, the king continually remains in his palace as he edits and rehearses this final "comedia de errores" (87). The king's self-invented drama imprisons him on the dramatic stage, where he is incapable of escape and lives in constant fear of histrionic insurrections. He affirms that "siempre se asustaba temiendo que la realidad se diese a imitar sus imaginaciones" (124).

As a result of fetishistic theatrical practices, Aegisthus renders himself socially and politically defunct well before his death. The imaginative conversion of his life into theater shatters the normal boundaries of reality and contributes to the self-fashioning of an aesthetic coup that erodes the powers of Aegisthus' kingdom and the dominance of the novel's transparent stylistics. Hence, the invention of other worlds in the text constitutes insurrections against orthodox fiction as well as against hegemonic structures.

It should thus come as no surprise when Orestes' quest of vengeance is interrupted by another Filón el Mozo production. As the hero reaches a bridge that leads to his enemy's land, Filón el Mozo's work slices into to the narrative. This intrusive play constitutes the true avenger of the novel that plunges not a sword, but an invented space into the belly of the text. The insertion of such foreign terrain infects the traditional narrative, overturns a clearly discernible structure, and blasts the remaining narrative into unconnected encyclopedic chunks.

Filón el Mozo declares: "Mi Orestes será variado [. . .]. Si el

público de teatro fuese educado en fisiognomonía, haría un acto solamente con los gestos, pasos, escuchas, dudas, preparativos para el acto vengador [. . .]. Una luz estaría siempre sobre el rostro del protagonista, sobre sus manos, sobre sus pies [. . .]" (168). Filón el Mozo introduces an experimental theater comparable to that of Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* as he deemphasizes the use of words and proposes an alternative language based on music, body movements, lighting, and spatiality (*Double* 68). This downplaying of words opposes the basic structure of the novel in which the embedded text gestates. At this moment, one that has been deemed purely self-referential by Eyring Bixler and Spires, the text migrates away from itself, not toward the construction of a novel, but toward a theatrical *misè-en-scène*.

The king's aide, Eumón, after praising the playwright's dramatic efforts, enters his room at the Mantineo Inn where a window frames a view of Doña Inés' tower in Paso de Valverde. As the sun rises, Eumón reads the script "con el verde y frondoso país como telón al fondo" (169). The landscape forms his stage and he fills its empty space with the audible pronunciation of the text he holds. Curiously, the work begins with a prologue sung by women who suffered in "la Guerra de los Ducados". These women of the proletariat, the omniscient narrator explains, "no pensaban en otra cosa que en ponerse en camino y pasar la selva, cruzando la raya seca, adentrándose donde dicen Imperio, que allí reinaban en paz las leyes" (169). These ladies seek a territory of a new society in which peace and not war constitutes the dominant order. They march out of the theatrical shell toward a new life. Their mere appearance introduces the relationship between social demonstrations and structural upheaval.

The angry female mob, although described as part of Filón el Mozo's play, does not appear in the dialogue of the embedded script. Instead, this aspect of the play is transmitted through novelistic discourse. The exclusion of the chorus from the dramatic form blurs the division between Eumón's effective reality and Filón el Mozo's invented fiction. The militant women seem to belong both here with the implicit reader, Eumón, and there in the play. They are the voices of change that dwell in the opacities of this immediate reality and that remain simultaneously

tangible and out of reach. It is the incursion of the theater within the novel that permits such an amorphous hiatus.

Still described through novelist discourse, the women leave Doña Ines' tower. Her maid enters and pulls back the green curtains in order to take in the morning light. Flowers of all varieties lie throughout the scene as a postal worker enters and admires the decorations. "Filón estaba muy satisfecho de la escena, y que le parecía que daba la figura y el tono de la dama [. . .]" (170). The omniscient narrator, before the insertion point of the script, acknowledges the dramatist's approval of the staging; it is then mentioned that the author traditionally recites the script to the municipal aristocracy. Clearly through prose, Cunqueiro establishes the theater space of the invasive work and its bond to socio-political construets before he animates it with dialogue, pointing his text not toward itself, but merely elsewhere.

The women who march for peace along the vague borders between texts exemplify an awareness of a trialectic among public aggression, theater, and social change. They maintain a liminal presence, which depends upon the transitional moment between novel and theater when the work dances between these two entities before settling into a redefined dialogical ordering. Such a turbulent exchange has comparably been described by Cunqueiro in his essay "Arte verbal y estruetura social". In these writings, he interprets a Medieval Galician cultural phenomen called the *loia*. The *loia*, like the Basque *bertsolaria*, constitutes a type of sung verbal combat in which everyone present exchanges offensive lines of verse. "Que eso es, un combate, que proporciona a los espectadores una verdadera fruición, y en el fondo están asistiendo a una representación dramátiea, la cual dura hasta el alba" (89). Popular Galician poetry, he states, represents a form of aggression that in reality demonstrates multiple dimensions of Galician social structure (89). Cunqueiro, quoting Lisón Tolosona, concludes his essay with the deelaration: "'He aquí la estética de la agresión [. . .] o la agresión estética gallega' " (89).

Although this belligerent attack of theatrical space has heen deemed purely self-referential by other crities, such an assault appears to cause the novel to retreat from itself toward something else entirely. This is

to say that the text here reemerges as a dialogical combat that results in the removal of all characters from their setting and the imprisonment of narrative entities in an alphabetical listing. Figures within the concluding index of the work remain trapped in a textual vacuum located nowhere in particular and void of narrative coordinates.

In fact, in the embedded drama, a musician seeks refuge in Doña Inés' tower in Valverde. He tells her the story of one of his earlier performances for the military. The mass of spectators at the concert forced the man to flee as they threatened him with his life if he did not sing their requests. He confesses: "Las lanzas, las espadas, las hoces estaban cerca de mis manos, las buscaban, y yo huía sin moverme, huía de aquel bosque de hierro homocidia, interpretando una música loca, la música de mi terror [. . .]" (182). The audience then assaulted the performance and attempted to change its outcome just as the group of female protestors, conversely, had exited the drama in order to attack the laws of reality. It is precisely this continual invasion and counter invasion of opposing discourses that supports the novel's distortion of spatial boundaries, of fictional genres, and of social structures.

Perhaps the most evident connection between imagined space and structural chaos emerges from Doña Ines' fusion of her self-identity with the space that she occupies. The imaginative creation of an alternative ordering, she states, constitutes her means of transforming constrictive surroundings:

> Yo soy el palacio, este palacio, este jardín, este bosque, este reino. A veces imagino que me marcho, que abandono el palacio en la noche, que huyo sin despedirme, y conforme lo voy imaginando siento que la casa se estremece, que amenazan quebrarse las vigas, se desgonzan las puertas, se agrietan las paredes, y parece que todo vaya a derrumbarse en un repente, y caer, reducido a polvo y escombro, en el suelo. (180)

Doña Inés speaks of change. Her world transforms not through the progression of time and the improvement of social practices, but

through change's mere invention. The power of the dream is reinforced when a beggar, a seemingly powerless figure, arrives at Doña Inés' palace and declares that he imagines himself replacing Aegisthus as king; "Yo veo lo que sueño. Tanto que algunas veces levanto la mano para tocar el sueño, que está muy cerca, de bulto" (200). His invented order is almost tangible. It dwells just out of reach. His utopic discourse, like that of a staged play, appears touchable— "que su sueño, su invención, es realizable" (Cunqueiro *Utopía* 55).

The novel, due to its combative discourse, appears to lead nowhere. The theater's presence retards the momentum of the plot. The king never experiences his long awaited assassination. Doña Inés can never run from her palace; the frightened musician flees a threatening scene without running ("huía sin moverme"), and the vagabond does not execute, but dreams a coup. Like its characters, the novel's structure goes nowhere. Geographical and historical references are never pinned down and remain perpetually in limbo. Thus the text's structure parallels that of the performative combat of the *loia* or the *bertsolaria* as well as the destructive actions of anti-Francoist protestors who do not strive to produce tangible cultural artifacts to be catalogued and filed by the establishment, but rather emphasize the improvised liminality of a particular moment. Such works *mean* only in its present context in which the process supersedes the product. Zulaika's observations of the *bertsolaria* indicate this procedure toward nothing:

> Because of their complete immersion in the present to the point that time is ruled out, the *bertsolaria* and the political activist have real difficulties in framing their performances-in picking a title, choosing a theme, delimiting a cause, or being able to see and use the redundance of literary-political realities. (234)

The entire plot of Cunqueiro's novel appears to occur in a space-time singularity that encompasses all places and times, while at the same time, pinpointing none of them. The work, accordingly, stresses the inability of its characters to identify the reality or fictionality of

events as well as the geographic and historic location of people and places. The text opens, for example, with Don León's crossing of the city's walled border, establishing from the onset a sense of lying on the edge between a home-space and an other-space. Above the threshold of this frontier, the inscription of "Palomar de Braves del Rey" suggests the power structure of the land. The focus of Don León's prolonged gaze at the border's gateway emphasizes the origin of this figure as one from outside of the sealed society that he enters. Furthermore, a lack of information in the beginning of the novel does not allow the reader to identify this foreign invader nor his citizenship. However, the novel's title and one's prior knowledge of Greek tragedy would lead one to believe that the intruder is the king's future assassin, Orestes. One of the king's spies, Eusebio, also reaches the same conclusion, and we discover that the agent's job is to register all immigrants and to capture anyone who appears to be Orestes. Many, in fact, have been arrested and so the true murderer permeates all places at all times in the kingdom, but is never definitively identified.

This empire of multiple Oresteses into which the reader migrates alongside Don León is, like the omnipresent killer, one that engulfs all times and places but specifically represents none. Most geographical references appear to place us in ancient Troy. However, one discovers that Filón el Viejo, another dramatist in the kingdom, rewrote a version of Lope de Vega's *El Caballero de Olmedo*. Similarly, another character quotes Alexandre Dumas' 1844 novel *The Three Musketeers*. Dragons, sirens, centurions, the tainos of Florida, Ponce de Leon, and the Teutonic Knights of Saint Mary's Hospital at Jerusalem all coexist within the kingdom.

The blurring of space and time persistently intensifies after the insertion of the Filón el Mozo's drama until the work's encyclopedic conclusion, where geographical locations are "defined" in vague terms. Accompanying an entry for Lucern, one finds the following: "Ciudad que nunca ha podido ser bien situada en las cartas, y mientras unos aseguran que es puerto de mar, otros hablan de una polis helvética, perdida entre montes, junto a un lago" (240). This definition delineates nothing. Lucern is a place located nowhere, existing neither here nor

there: it dwells betwcen reality and fiction. The text squirms as the reader attempts to pin down a concretc reality based on the ambiguities offcred. Furthering such ambiguity, one discovers that entrics of the work's final part resultcd from an amalgamation of "La Historia Antigua, de la tragedia, de las divulgaciones modernas, de los rumores de Argos, del Obispo Fenclón y de las memorias abreviadas dc los alcjandrinos, amén de Atenco y Pausanias, y de otros" (207). Thus, the glossary's sources consist of myth, hearsay, and fiction. The novel, accordingly, concludes with a final mockery of the reader still grasping for a discernible time and place.

"La niebla abandonaba lentamente la plaza. Se podía ver ya la alta torre de la ciudadela [. . .]," are the words that begin the novel and that build the familiar environment of the work's first half. Like Orestes' vengeful act caught in the *bola de nieve*, the entirc work constitutes an imaginative unit that is shaken by its creator at will. A global view of the novel's structure, therefore, reveals a trajectory from a concrete spatiality with depth and fullness toward an apocalyptic disintegration of the setting into nowhere in particular. The histrionic insurrection in the middle of the text, Filón el Mozo's drama, acts a bridge, an elsewhere, that connects a somewhere to an absolute nowhere. In fact, at the end of part three, just before the emergence of the theatrical incursion, Orestes approachcs the future site of a bridge that will direct him toward his vengeful aspirations. A resident of the arca informs the hero that the construction of the overpass will begin the following week. Orestes therefore views the site of his supposed fate, but never reaches it. On the other side of the shore dwells a visible, almost realizable point that remains just out of reach (163). By the time Orestes reaches his target, the "victim" has already died of natural causes. His quest is only later fulfilled through utopic inventiou; Thomas explains: "the only vengeance that takes place is in a plastic re-creation of the event in the unreal locale of a 'bola de nieve'" (43).

Perhaps the most revealing illustration of Cunqueiro's creation of cnigmatic borders arises when a group of characters discusses the physiology of eenturions. One of the participants in the makeshift symposium presents the example of a boy with abnormally long cars.

His ears were of such length, in fact, that he remained on horseback his entire life just to be able to get around. Since the boy grew with the horse, as years passed, he became indistinguishable from the animal. The case of the boy presents the question of whether or not one could indeed label the child a centurion. A gentlemen's conversation then turns to the scientific studies of Sir Andrea who, through his investigations, attempted to pinpoint the exact location of a centurion's naval. His thesis would reveal the identity of the creature as either man or horse and would resolve the debate about the long-eared boy. The controversy, like Sir Andrea's study, comes to no conclusions. One never targets the centurion's umbilicus as either lying in the animal zone or in the human. The naval remains in a third enigmatic region: nowhere. The case of the centurion thus exemplifies both the meandering structure of the novel as well as the problems of national identity that a country encounters as its future lies in question.

Naturally, as Robert Spires has donc, one may view Cunqueiro's transitional metaphors as representations of a rebellion against the norms of realist discourse. Such a perspective, I believe, is both intelligent and justified. What I suggest, given the chaotic political environment of Spain in the late 1960s, is that a change in the novel's order may not only signify a change in the laws the govern fiction, but a statement regarding the boundaries that restrict people.

The political dimensions of the novel allude to the final years of the Francoist regime in which Spanish citizens witnessed an increase in authoritarian censorship and the violent repression of oppositional groups. The government in Cunqueiro's work monitors and censures literary production, outlawing the fictional appearance of the king's enemy, Orestes. "Pero Filón el Mozo, pese a las prohibiciones del senador de comedias, que le registraba la easa cuando, escribía en secreto la tragedia sabida [. . .]" (53). A draft of a prohibited script emerges within the greater text, and therefore any person who reads the novel partakes in oppositionist behavior simply by continuing to read. As such, the inclusion of the theatrical text constitutes hoth an infraction against a tyrannical government as well as a contention of metafiction.

Similarities between the Spanish nation's predicament in the late sixties and that in the novel seem evident. A revolution brews within the background of the plot as casual mentionings of riots threaten the king's power. The populace gathers to protest current tax laws, the king speaks of angry mobs that seek a bloody ousting of monarchical power, and citizens have trouble identifying the enemy, "a problem reminiscent of the Spanish Civil War" (Thomas 44). Descriptions of the king are so similar to that of the elderly Generalísmo Franco that they must be considered in any critical approach to the novel. The king, a self-appointed tyrant who took power by means of a military coup many years earlier, created a series of myths about a ravenous lion that threatened the city. The story was invented by his government "para distraer a las gentes, y para que el miedo no se hiciese política" (43). However, as time passed, the fictitious source of fear faded since only the elderly could recall the tremulous event. "Los años han ido reduciendo el miedo a fábula [. . .] y ya solamente los ancianos [. . .] recuerdan el asunto y discuten el final de la tragedia [. . .]" (43). Thus, the society of the novel parallels a Spain of late-Francoism with its aged venterans of the Civil War, with its faded myths of holy crusades, and with its dying dictator whose physique no longer embodied the ideals of the Cid and those of the catholie kings.

The seventy-year-old monarch of Cunqueiro's novel repeatedly shows signs of parkinsonism: "se metía de hombros y euando llevaba el vaso a la boca le temblaba la mano" (129-30). One cannot deny the novel's allusions to the Spanish dictator, who shook of Parkison's as his falangist foundations quaked underneath him. As Franco, the *Caudillo*, slowly deteriorated, many Spaniards also awaited the construction of their bridge to new possibilities on the other post-Francoist shore. The novel fabricates well the sentiments of an opposition that desperately awaited the long-dreamed death of a tyrant. In an interview in 1979, when asked about the motivation of his fiction, Álvaro Cunqueiro responded that there were several impetu for his writing; among them was, "la posibilidad de convertir en realidad los sueños [. . .]" (Torre 118). Clearly fictitious creation for this Galician author journeys beyond its traditional borders. Such travels allow one

to touch a dream and reach better worlds through the verbal combat of literature. The elsewhereness of the novel's embedded theater supports the antiestablishment operations, which ambush the tangible first half of the novel and fragment written discourse to bits. Cunqueiro's novel truly forges itself well beyond the metafictional mode since the ambiguity of identities and spatial-temporal coordinates approach core questions of social change. As one critic clearly articulated, "At the heart of the issue of change are the symbolic-social questions: What is the place on which I stand? What are my horizons? What are my limits?" (Smith 143). Cunqueiro surely proposed these same questions to his Galician readership through the ambiguities of man who seems to be a hero in a novel that seems to lack a navel.

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