Historia fantástica: Genre and historiography in Juan Benet's *Una tumba*

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Una tumba appears to be exceptional within Juan Benet's oeuvre. This short novel or long story was published in 1971, after Benet had staked his claim on the literary map of Spain with *Volverás a Región* (1967) and *Una meditación* (1969). His first novels pose a unique challenge to readers, with a dense lyrical style that recalls Proust in its tendency to endless digression on details of sensory experience, Faulkner in the extensive but rigorously grammatical sentences, and Kafka in the minimal, inconclusive plot and lack of traditional character development.[1] If we keep in mind Benet's fondness for technical and obscure vocabulary, neologisms, and allusions, it is not hard to understand why discussions of Benet dwell on the demands he makes on the reader. (The insistence that with each work we get closer to an understanding of his mythical Región is the most common attempt to mitigate that challenge by claiming that unity and completion, and hence comprehensibility, will reward the patient and attentive reader as soon as Benet's final book arrives.) Yet *Una tumba* is generally recognized as a more accessible work than the previous novels and short stories.[2] Along with its brevity comes concentration on a single plot, which adds dramatic storytelling to the considerable intellectual pleasure of Benet's style. That the story should involve the demonic possession of a young boy by the spirit of his great grandfather increases the pleasure of reading and makes it a *historia fantástica* in at least the double

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sense of referring to the quality of the work and to its genre.

The incorporation of fantastical elements is not new to Benet; *Volverás a Región* and *Una meditación* include things like the guard Numa, the gambler's magical coin that cannot lose, and the prophetic telegraph machine.[3] But in *Una tumba* it occupies the discursive enter of the text, operating constantly in the foreground as we gradually learn of the threatening presence, psychological or "paranormal," of the long dead brigadier whose remains belong in the eponymous tomb. Benet's novels, however, incorporate fantastical elements much in the manner of magical realism; they are scattered throughout the text more to create an atmosphere and spice up isolated tales than to contribute to plot or character development. By contrast, the plot of *Una tumba* relies on the gradual elaboration of the tension between the world of the living and the dead that is symbolized by the open grave. This tension between the natural and supernatural characterizes the fantastic as a genre, and if we take into account Benet's poetics, we will understand that this tension parallels the other concerns of his fiction. After reviewing Benet's theoretical writings and understanding them in the context of the theory of the fantastic, we can turn to the exegesis of *Una tumba* as a comment on Spanish historiography, especially concerning the problem of civil war.

Stylistically, Benet's originality resides in the juxtaposition of formally precise prose with the dislocating of traditional narrative unities such as plot, character, and place.[4] Carmen Martín Gaite has pointed out the debt that Benet's description of Región owes to the technical vocabulary of civil engineering, Benet's primary occupation. She notes that his style is "indisolublemente vinculado a su profesión, a la necesidad de resolver problemas sobre la marcha o de inventar el trazado de un puente, camino o túnel que dibujado parece practicable y luego las adversidades del terreno o de la burocracia convierten en ilusorio" (230). Perhaps this is why Benet insisted, in a 1989 interview with *El País*, "me ha enseñado más que leer a Conrad, Proust o Kafka mi trabajo de ingeniero" (Méndez 14). The reader of any of Benet's fiction will notice the strict formality of his often long sentences: though subordinate clauses abound, as do compound verbs, parenthetical digressions, and catalogues of elements, the sentences turn out to be formally correct, providing a subject for every predicate and an object for every transitive verb. Benet constructs complete semantic units, in contrast, for example to the often fragmentary style of Samuel Beckett or Louis-Ferdinand Céline, to mention two of Benet's favorite novelists, or to the unpunctuated stream of consciousness style used at times by his Spanish contemporaries Miguel Delibes and Juan Goytisolo. In a recent article in *Ingeniería y Territorio*, Javier Muñoz Álvarez agrees with Gaite that the methodical, practical aspect of Benet's writing might be a reflection of his profession (22). In a follow-up article, Juan Guillamón Álvarez identifies moments in which an engineer's perspective is expressed thematically (15-16), and he adds that "la narrativa de Benet deja un rastro indeleble del espíritu indomable que caracteriza su condición de ingeniero" (15). Gimferrer notes the juxtaposition of neutral, objective language that might

be characteristic of a technical expert with a lyrical language that lends his writing "a mythical and allegorical dimension" (49, my translation). But John Margenot has written most suggestively about this topic in the first chapter of *Zonas y sombras*. He proposes that the construction of a fictitious world highlights the difference between the "calidad lúdica" of literature and the science upon which the practice of engineering rests (33). Benet himself insisted, however, in an interview with Marie-Lise Gazarian-Gautier, that literature was a mere pastime for him, suggesting that it was above all a break from engineering (32).

The irreproachable formal construction of Benet's prose contrasts sharply with the fractured unity of narrative, character, and theme. Even the relatively simple *Una tumba* could be disconcerting to a reader accustomed to more conventional narratives. It consists of four sections that are not in chronological order and include long temporal gaps. The first section, in turn, is divided into four subsections that are also out of chronological order. Of the young protagonist, whose experience makes up three of the four sections, we learn little background information, not even his name. Although Región is specifically mentioned, we are located on an unnamed estate during a civil war upon which the marker of a proper name, the capital letters, is not bestowed. The gripping third section tells of the death of a similarly unnamed brigadier, and we are led to believe that it is his spirit who frightens and abuses the guardian of the estate and whose gradual possession of the child occasions his awakening sexuality and his climactic confrontation of the guardian on the final page. However, the narrative also clearly suggests that the spirit's activities reside in the community's superstitions, that, in other words, they imagine that the spirit is responsible for actions that belong to their own vices and customs (50).

The difficulty of deciding exactly what is happening in Benet's novels and stories is often played out in attempts by critics to assemble the fragments of a plot.[5] More often, critics talk about the ambiguity of his novels in terms of the poetics developed by Benet in his theoretical writings. It is important to recognize, as has Carmen Martín Gaite, the stylistic similarity between fiction and essay, specifically "la proporción en que se inflitran reflexiones analíticas en sus obras de ficción y tiradas de corte narrativo en sus ensayos" (245).[6] This tension between fictional and real inquiry participates in the central theme of his theoretical writing on literature. Benet's essays often contrast literature with science, since, for him, both scientific and literary discourse attempt to describe and understand the world. In one of Benet's most direct statements of his conception of literature, the essay "Incertidumbre, memoria, fatalidad y temor" (in *En ciernes*), he insists that both scientists and novelists are initially confronted with the world's mystery. While scientists turn their fascinated ignorance into methodical inquiry, converting enigmas into questions that can be gradually refined and problems that can be solved, the task of literary artists is to preserve or to commemorate mystery in the same way that science advocates knowledge (50-51). Literature and scientific discourse share a world and a language, but are opposites with regard to

ignorance and knowledge. Speaking of the literary artist, he writes:

> Utilizará su razón para oponerse a la razón, para cerrarle el camino con lo no pensado y en último término con lo no pensable, haciendo uso de las mismas reglas que utiliza la ciencia pero cargadas—digámoslo así—de una polaridad distinta, al igual que el cambio de signo en la carga del electrón convierte la materia en antimateria. (50)

This passage captures the sense in which Benet's precise and at times obsessively logical prose participates in rationality in order to create an entity that opposes itself to reason's propensity for wholeness, unity, and comprehensibility. The reader is not left, however, in a state of absolute ignorance; one can see in this theoretical passage, too, Benet's grasping for an analogy to orient the reader, and as so often happens in his fiction, the selection comes from science. Rather, readers are given a multiplicity of points of reference, and ultimately they find themselves suspended between a sense of certainty and uncertainty, between ignorance and knowledge. A scientist might consider this uncomfortable, though Benet wonders whether the experience is essentially different for the "man of science" and the "man of letters." For Benet this suspension is not an illness but what he elsewhere calls "the incomparable health of mystery," for it is precisely this tension that attests to the vigor of literature's words and thoughts (*Del pozo* 29, my translation).

This glorification of mystery could be taken to be the mere whim of a self-indulgent, somewhat manipulative author, an attempt to be difficult by suspending the reader between two incompatible positions. It is important to note, therefore, that the most common literary theoretical reference point when speaking of Benet, apart from his own essays, locates such a suspension at the very heart of "the literary." Tzvetan Todorov's work has served to explain Benet's literary language, and his book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, in particular, has served to explain the role of the fantastic in Benet's novels (see Aveleyra 123; Sandarg 171; Herzberger, "Numa" 188-89). Though *The Fantastic* presents itself as a study of one particular genre, Todorov repeatedly remarks upon the necessity of speaking of literature in general. Of particular importance for him, as for Benet, is distinguishing literary from non-literary discourse, including criticism. "The very existence of literature," Todorov writes, "implies that it cannot be replaced by non-literature" (23). As a structuralist, Todorov sees individual works of literature as engaged in a tension between conformity to a particular genre and transformations of the laws of that genre: "every work modifies the sum of possible works, each new example alters the species" (6). Such an idea echoes T. S. Eliot's well-known discussion of the relationship between "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in the essay of the same name. It is also one of Benet's first concerns in his seminal book on literature, *La inspiración y el estilo*, where he speaks of the new artist finding (or inventing) a "vacío" or "hueco" (a "void" or an "empty spot") in the field of existing literary works, filling in the gap

by writing, and thus altering the nature of the field (34-35). The rules of a genre are based on existing literary works, and thus appear to be at any moment complete and self-sufficient. Yet the creation of new works, says Todorov, requires that new works effectuate a subtle change in order not to be trite "popular" literature or "academic experiments" (6). As a consequence of this tension between tradition and originality, Todorov returns repeatedly to statements reflecting literature's "paradox": "Literature can become possible only insofar as it renders itself impossible," he says, describing how the originality that gives a literary work entrée into tradition also comes to define tradition (75).

In *The Fantastic*, not only does Todorov expound upon the nature of literature in general, but he concludes that the fantastic is not merely one genre among others. On the contrary, he writes that "the literature of the fantastic is a kind of narrow but privileged terrain, starting from which we may draw certain hypotheses concerning literature in general" (153). For Todorov, the peculiarities of this genre are analogous to the particularity of literary discourse as a whole. Just as literature exists in a tension between convention and invention, the fantastic holds the reader in a state of tension between reality and unreality, between what Todorov calls "real and imaginary" or "fiction and literal meaning" (75). Todorov says directly: "The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (25). As long as this hesitation is sustained, he explains, the work is fantastical. If it becomes clear that there is a natural explanation, the work is uncanny; if it becomes clear that the author incorporates other-worldly laws into the familiar world, the work is of the genre of the marvelous (41). Benet's early work is full of elements of the fantastic, such as magic, prophecy, and the fulfillment of ancient superstitions. But the enigmatic quality of his work as a whole also lends a tension akin to the fantastic: like the question whether a ghost exists or is merely the character's interpretation of natural events, the reader of Benet gathers questions about events, characters, and themes without being able to come to definitive answers to those questions. In short, just as Benet's theoretical work attempts to account for the particularity of literary discourse, his fiction emphasizes those qualities of narrative most essential to literature.

In his discussion of "An Open Grave," Ricardo Gullón takes the fantastical nature of the novella as his point of departure and agrees with Todorov that the primary theme of the fantastic is human reality ("Sobre espectros" 206). In general, human reality always includes the possible irruption of the incomprehensible. In the three sections that take place during the Spanish Civil War, we see this in the recurrent appearances of an otherworldly presence which moves the cemetery gate and the boy's bedroom door and which constitutes a constantly puzzling, if not menacing presence. Likewise, in the third section the brigadier's ability to survive the murderous designs of his enemies is astonishing. Yet, true to Todorov's description of the fantastic, these seemingly impossible elements might also have natural explanations. David Herzberger has pointed out, for example,

that the brigadier's death was modeled on that of Rasputin (*Novelistic World* 106-7). This suggests that the brigadier might, like the Russian, have possessed an uncannily strong constitution, allowing him to survive prodigious amounts of poison, a blow to the head with a bronze candelabra, a gunshot wound to the chest, and being dropped into a well. It is also striking that in the novella, as in much fantastical literature, human reality is constructed with a strong element of sexuality, history, and class.[7] Of course, like most of Benet's fiction, *Una tumba* takes place in a concrete historical and cultural context, without which such a meditation on what Todorov calls "the relation between man and world" (120) would remain too abstract. Benet's fables—published in *Cinco narraciones y dos fábulas* (1972) and *Trece fábulas y media* (1981)—would have to be described as examples of the genre of the marvelous, rather than the fantastic, since they deal more with logical and practical conundrums than the complexity of human reality. A sympathetic and informed a reader of Benet, Gullón is aware that Benet's works hold forth enigmas, and he explicitly refers to the nature of violence and ancestral fears, and the relationship between inner states and physical action ("Sobre espectros" 218). For Gullón, though, the historical references merely serve to reinforce the effect of indeterminacy and fear. I contend that Benet also deals with a specifically Spanish problem, the weight of the past, the power that old prejudices and privileges have to endure, and especially their recurrence in what he and so many other Spanish thinkers refer to as "fratricidal struggles."

This is a companion piece to another essay I am writing on *Saúl ante Samuel*, the 1980 novel Benet considered his masterpiece. In it, he addresses the Spanish Civil War more directly by focusing on some of the social and ideological forces at work as well as troop activity and an instance of literal fratricide. The novel embodies the hostilities between the "two Spains," or at least between wealth and tradition, on the one hand, and ideals of economic and social justice, on the other. Though much of *Saúl ante Samuel* takes place during the war, it also narrates a cousin's wait for the return of the fratricidal brother, and it includes other material such as the brothers' grandmother reading the future of Spain in a deck of cards. *Una tumba*, by contrast, remains in the time of the Civil War except for a return to the previous century. Its central figure is, of course, the grave opened by a proletarian mob at the beginning of the war. And it recounts the experience of a young boy who goes to stay at the family estate in order to avoid persecution; while there, he feels the ghostly presence of an ancestor described in the third part as a brigadier who fought for loyalist troops in the Carlist wars. While *Saúl ante Samuel* seeks to project the dynamics of the Civil War into the future, *Una tumba* examines the way in which the war relates to the past.

In *Una tumba* Benet rehearses in his characteristically allusive way many common motifs of Civil War historiography, and his meditation on the transmission of power along class and gender lines ultimately rejects notions of Spanish destiny popular in the Generation of 98 and Francoist ideology. Central to these two movements was a paradoxical notion of Spanish exceptionalism that took

seriously the eponymous claim of Catholicism: as the standard bearer of Catholic Europe—an honor passed to Spain by Renaissance Italy and consolidated by Charles V and Phillip II's flight with Reformation Europe—Spain's uniqueness was its very universality. Along with this idea of Spain came other myths of national identity. These include the idea of Spanishness as a spiritual identity for which ideas were not as important as ideals; Don Quijote thus serves as the ultimate figure of the Spaniard. Icons such as Don Juan and La Celestina reveal a fierce individualism that indulges in sensuality and risk. The decline of Spain since its peak of power and influence has been in part the failure of solidarity—represented in the myth of Spanish *cainismo* and the myth of two Spains—as well as a resistance to the increasing prestige Of reason in the form of philosophical systems. In Francoist ideology in particular, this history resulted in a confrontation between eternal, universal (that is, *Spanish*) values and modernity. Both sides in the Spanish Civil War believed that destiny was on their side: in the Republic because they represented progress and among the rebels because they represented God and eternal Spain.[8]

While it is true, as Gullón has pointed out and as I have mentioned above, that the temporal and spatial reference points of the novella are imprecise and indeterminate, Benet nevertheless inscribes the story within history using minor details. The uprising of generals and subsequent proletarian revolutions within the Second Republic are conflated within the indication that "la tumba había sido profanada en las primeras semanas de la revolución" (22). Later, when a drunken reveler greets the guardian "con un viva a la revolución cuya intención era desmentida por su tono sombrío y apologético" (28), we might recall that the term *revolution* belonged more to the anarchists and communists than to the military rebels, who preferred "sublevación" and the cry "¡viva España!" Nonetheless, without the first revolution of July 17, 1936, the others probably would not have taken place (Esenwein 238). Benet also indicates in this section the danger which the boy's family experienced in the unnamed capital because of "las amenazas que sobre todos los de su nombre se cernían" (23), an echo of the execution of Benet's father and the decision by his mother to move with her children to rebel-controlled San Sebastián.[9] Many minor details add up to create a picture of the era: the graffiti of "letreros vindicativos y siglas proletarias" (24) do not include references to the FAI, CNT, or UGT familiar from photos of the era; the *gorras* of common workers and the khaki uniform of the officer who appears after the profanation of the tomb as well as the lack of military protocol and discipline (27-28) clearly repeat the image of the Republican militias familiar from history.

When it comes to telling the story of the brigadier's death, the specific date and mention of two Carlist and two loyalist generals contrast with this tendency. However, on closer inspection, these details are equally indeterminate. In the first case, the date is vague, with a reference only to "allá por el año 84 del siglo pasado" (37). In the other case, the precise details are used to illustrate a supernatural event: "en el mismo verano, el mismo día y a las mismas horas que

se había visto combatiendo al infante don Alfonso de Cuenca, trataba de detener el avance del cabecilla Savalls por la carretera de Ripoll a Puigcerdá…" (46). In general, the historical moment is established with minor details for which some historical background is helpful. The brigadier's opposition to the Carlists suggests that he was, like many Spanish military men of the Nineteenth Century, of liberal sympathies. As José M. Sánchez points out, Spanish liberalism had little room for compromise with or sympathy for the church, whose extreme reaction to seizure of church lands widened the gap between political reformists and organized religion (4-5). Hence the brigadier's propensity for blasphemy and also the inclusion of a priest among the conspirators (39). An important irony of the story is the fact that the descendants of this liberal general should become the target of an anarchic proletarian mob. The "turba" takes the summer revolution as a cue to open the grave of the brigadier and burn his possessions, but their graffiti—which, aside from proletarian slogans includes "símbolos obscenos y blasfemos" (24)—recalls the attitude of the brigadier himself, who meets the aggression of his enemies "lanzando toda clase de improperios contra ellos, contra Dios y contra la religion" (40). With this irony, Benet suggests that logic and intellect do not necessarily govern the formation of political rivalries. This is a point he makes also in two works on the Civil War, *¿Qué fue la Guerra Civil?* and "Tres fechas sobre la estrategia militar de la Guerra Civil española," an essay included in *La construcción de la torre de Babel* (85-116). One explanation of people clearly failing to base their political beliefs and actions on reason would be to see the thoughtless masses carrying out an inexorable destiny. Ramiro de Maeztu, by contrast, insisted that the failure of the masses to be led by an elite was an effect of "extrajerización," an importation of the "foreign" idea of the universal rights of man (15). As Julio Rodríguez-Puértolas points out in *Literatura fascista española*, the ideologies of the Falange and other allies of Franco often derived this sort of idea from Ortega y Gasset's concept of the nation as "unidad de destino en lo universal" (36). We will see, however, that Benet appears to think differently.

A more direct reference to the Civil War takes place in typical Benet fashion as an analogy meant to elaborate on a less weighty issue. As the boy is wandering through his ancestral home, looking through the half-darkness at furniture and the nooks and crannies of the rooms, the narrator says the house's contents are "tan indiferente a la violencia de las horas como la cohorte plebeya a las luchas fratricidas de los grandes señores por la cabeza del imperio" (51). Benet recurs here to a common epithet for the Civil War, one which ties in the myth of the two Spains and lends Biblical proportions to the conflicts that extended from the Nineteenth Century to the Civil War. According to this myth, an essential division in the Spanish character between devotees of progress, on the one hand, and lovers of tradition, on the other, has doomed Spain to a history of Civil War. In his critique of the two Spains, Claudio Sánchez Albornoz rightly points out that this tension between innovation and tradition exists in all modern countries; he recalls the tumultuous history of Germany and England in particular to suggest

that countries need a time of civil strife in order to force them to learn to live with difference (1381). But while he insists that the division within Spain is not unique to it, he does not go so far as to question the excessive simplicity of this conception of the culture, a development that, except for some vague intimations in literature, has had to wait until more recent histories have been able to learn from the pluralization of post-Franco Spain. In the introduction to a history that takes very seriously the diversity that has always existed in Spain, José Álvarez Junco and Adrian Shubert maintain that English and Dutch politicians created the myth of the inexorable violence of "la España negra" and that Spanish thinkers eventually adopted this view as well (2-4). In any case, the details of *Una tumba* remind us that identity is shaped as much by the perception of others as by one's own will or self-consciousness.[10] The boy's family became unified in its sympathies in the war as a result of the family name; there is no sign here, as in *Saúl ante Samuel*, of actual fratricide. In fact, Benet's narrative suggests in this analogy that the majority of the soldiers in the war ("la cohorte plebeya") chose sides by geography or family allegiance, rather than ideology or sympathy for one of "los grandes señores." By relegating the mention of the cliché of fratricidal conflict to the subordinate position in an analogy, Benet suggests that the theory of two Spains and the interpretation of the war as the latest outbreak of *cainismo* deserve no greater regard than to be a creative way of describing the languor of old, neglected furniture.

The transformation of the brigadier's liberal sympathies into his descendant's alignment with conservative politics is but one problem in a novella obsessed with communication and transmission. In its imagery, rhetoric, and action, *Una tumba* builds a monument to the tenuousness of language and logic, as well as their ability to lend human experience comprehensibility. That is to say, rather than casting communication as the key to consensus and justice, as does Jürgen Habermas, Benet presents notes sent and not received, unintended or misunderstood communiqués, and ambiguous messages.[11] In contrast to his other fiction of the era, *Una tumba*'s prose could be said to clearly represent events with unclear explanations; hence, the reader experiences a greater sense of tension than when reading *Una meditación*, in which unclear events are represented in a language also designed to foil clarity. Appropriately enough, writing appears in *Una tumba* more often as a gesture than as a means of communication. The graffiti and symbols left behind by the mob have a completely conventional character in order to threaten the wealthy family, damage their property, and on the second occasion, exorcize the brigadier's spirit (24, 35). The "chapa en forma de banderola" above the gate to the graveyard has lost its legend, showing the ability of time to obliterate written communication. The narrator also returns several times to images of an incomprehensible writing. One of the brigadier's supposed offspring dies of a horrific illness that leaves markings on his body "como pistas de gusanos entrelazados" (49). The narrator maintains that they might be capable of being deciphered: "entre sí formaban un inextricable laberinto en el cual cabía suponer que

estaba escrita—en el lenguaje de su propio mal—la esotérica manda de la justicia extraterrena" (49). Earlier in the book the boy's heels leave a cuneiform-like writing in the ice at the bottom of the grave. The narrator suggests that the boy himself tries to decipher this unlikely script: "Quizá podía descifrar algo en ellas… algo que se relacionara … con el enigma (de su soledad)" (18).

Besides these images of a language that cannot be read, *Una tumba* presents a real writing lesson with plausible psychological and social effects. Upon her departure, the *señora* leaves the boy with a pencil and a writing workbook whose exercises he diligently completes. This seems inextricably linked to the transformation of the boy in the care of the guardian into the dominant heir of the property and of the brigadier's position as a transgressive, dominant force in the region. For while the boy practices his writing, the illiterate guardian's fear grows along with his confidence that the practice sentences—no doubt harmless—"denotaban un saber que no estaba a su alcance," for which reason he sensed the "presencia del poder hostil que había pactado directamente con el niño" (20). Ironically, then, Benet insists less on the power of knowledge than on the power of ignorance, less on the oppressive nature of the upper class than the complicity of the ignorant masses in their own subordination. Indeed, the source of conflict here is not the boy's acquisition of power but the guardian's conferral of power on the boy as a result of the latter's access to the mystery of writing.

In this story that is all about transmission and in which writing is so strikingly said to pose a threat for its indecipherable quality, one might expect to see a privileging of the power of speech. In fact, the very tomb to which the title refers is described as the organ of speech, a mouth surrounded by "labios de tierra" (12). And yet, rather than speak clearly and articulately, the tomb is almost, as the popular idiom says, "como una tumba": it challenges us with silence and indetermination.[12] And indeed, throughout the novella, speech is nearly as equivocal a medium as writing, except that general messages are delivered via something without inscription or visible sign, like speech. Most striking, perhaps, is the first appearance of the ghost, when the guardian—clearing the grave in response to "un mandato llegado desde muy lejos" (14)—suddenly leaps out of the grave and flees (15). Benet's narrator prefers the more indeterminate forms of communication: indirect speech predominates, and there is reference to something like speech acts more than actual speech. Hence the boy's writing lesson, for which he cannot expect help from the guardian and his wife, is interrupted by an "interrogante… en el lenguaje del silencio" (21); the woman at one point responds to the boy's actions with "un sonido interrogatorio incomprensible" (26). The mysterious presence that occasionally appears to the boy manifests itself as a "mandato del silencio" (52). Near the end, the narrator speaks of the position to which the boy was destined and the way in which this had been conveyed to him "por el silencio, no con palabras" (56). This preference for speech is ironic, for while it includes the essential quality of speech, the presence of a subject whose fullness of meaning is conveyed— these expressions also eliminate the element of sound and even

the medium of language. In a sense, then, by recurring to silence and to the gestural quality of an act (warning, question, conferral), speech aligns itself with writing, with its silent functioning and its material, physical nature. (We ought to recall here, too, that the handwritten note meant to guarantee the brigadier's attendance of the conspirators' event is written in flirtatious "letra cursiva inglesa" by "una señora a la que tiempo atrás había tratado de cortejar, con escaso éxito" (38). Handwriting's charm resides in recalling the unique subject of enunciation whose presence is essential to speech.)

This preference for a sort of scriptural speech (or enunciative writing) recalls Benet's poetics and his attempt to suspend a reader between ignorance and knowledge or between reason and anti-reason. Similarly, it echoes his treatment of the Spanish past: though something like a curse might appear to be transmitted from the Spanish past, the process of transmission is so tenuous, the things transmitted so liable to change or to get lost along the way or to become indecipherable, that such a concept of the past is as good as fantastical.[13] By linking this transferal of power, instead of to some nebulous destiny, to economic interests and the privilege of literacy that they include as well as to interpersonal rivalries, Benet does not strictly deny *cainismo*, he merely suggests that much more mundane forces could offer a more adequate understanding of events. The function of the fantastic, after all, is not to convince us of otherworldly forces but to suspend us between a natural and an unnatural explanation.

We should note, though, that besides economics, gender plays an important role in the novel. It is the woman who tells the boy "todo esto será tuyo" (25); she appears to be preserving the status quo and she is the one who gives him the notebook and pencil for writing lessons. Nevertheless, there are suggestions of a more radical nature that imply that her role is not merely servile. After the profanation of the grave, their home (where she had been left by her husband to care for her nephew) is visited by the militia officer I described before, whereupon the narrator says, "no había tal señora, era soltera" (27). It seems that she denies her marital status and takes up an affair with the young officer. This affair might begin by seeming desperate, or perhaps opportunistic: it mitigates the threat that the revolutionaries pose to a wealthy household with a powerful name, and it provides food for the *finca*'s inhabitants as well as toys for the boy. However, it also demonstrates the woman's agency, her taking control of her own sexuality by choosing a man and flouting the tradition of a faithful marriage. More curiously, this action on her part affects her relation to the boy and permits us to glimpse the most tangible sign of the boy's possession by the brigadier. First motivated by fear, the boy goes to sleep with his aunt after she has spent afternoons in her bedroom with the officer. Their caresses become increasingly intimate and increasingly mutual, to the point at which the two are in the habit of sleeping together in a naked embrace. It is the precociousness of this act, as well as its transgressive quality (for the possible accusations of pedophilia, adultery, and incest) that recall the brigadier, who was also famous all over the region for his prodigious sexual

appetite and disregard for moral discretion. This arrangement—referred to as "la imperfecta posesión de aquel cuerpo tan temprana, aromática e irremediablemente querido" (31)—was arrived at through a tacit agreement, once again a kind of speech without speech: "uno de aquellos convenios tácitos que a partir de uno primero parecen dictados por reflejos involuntarios que suprimen toda formulación" (31). The woman's role is similar to that of the guardian in that she, too, glimpses something like an otherworldly presence in the boy. Late in the story he wonders whether his power does not reside in his access to the mechanisms that rule the world: "se preguntaba por ende si el único don de su soledad estribaría en aquel fácil acceso a todos los resortes y secretos de un mundo tan ordenado… que obedecía a sus impulsos…" (57). Here the genre of the fantastic operates at the level of plot reminding us that there is nothing inherently otherwordly about the relationship between the boy and his aunt. His control over her may reside in an innate understanding of psychology and human nature. Unlike the guardian, however, she seems to be much less in thrall to the boy's power. She even seems to be engaged in cultivating his power, not only up until her departure but beyond, by leaving him with the notebook.

The señora recalls the many women involved with the brigadier, who were not victims but willing participants in his sexual transgressions. One clears him of the charge of adultery by swearing "ante los evangelios que el brigadier no había abandonado su casa ni su lecho en los días de auto" (48). At stake here is perhaps the idea of the Hispanic woman as *santa* or *puta*, and with the woman's combination of piety and sin, that dichotomy is also questioned. The narrator goes on to explain the brigadier's sexual prowess, though his role as the don Juan or *machista* is likewise questioned by the willing participation of women: "Así que para muchos—para ciertas mujeres, en particular—gozaba de ciertos poderes demoníacos el menor de los cuales no era, sin duda, su capacidad para conjurar la esterilidad, razón por la cual se fue creando un sinnúmero de enemigos…" (48). So we see another indication that the political or politicized violence of the novella is questioned by more mundane kinds of issues.

A reader of Benet's theoretical writings will gather that literature is not the place to directly address questions of historiography or historical understanding. *Una tumba* certainly strives to offer a scenario in which the idea of fratricidal struggle in a land dominated by men fades before concerns that might seem petty by comparison to a grand myth. Perhaps the primary function of Benet's style, as Gimferrer suggests, is to lend greater—mythical or allegorical—meaning to the mundane. If Sánchez Albornoz criticizes the idea of two Spains, he nonetheless is very insistent in *España, un enigma histórico* on the idea that history has handed down a unified Spanish identity. Benet's ghost has other ideas. We read that the doors of the ruined house were half-open ("entreabiertas," 50) while the boy lived with the guardian. On the two occasions in which people are physically accosted by what appears to be a ghost, they struggle to close a door which something seems to be trying to swing open: the guard strains to close the gate after he leaps

from the grave in the first section (16-17) and the boy's uncle gets trapped between a door and the wall in the last section (54-55). What is this insistence on openness if not a reminder of the power of the open question, the case that refuses to be closed, the enigma? The narrator tells us it is also a stimulant to move forward in time. The fact that the doors are open, we read, "había de constituir el primer estímulo a avanzar, sin ayuda de otros, sin sugerencias ni órdenes… por aquel tiempo deleznable y harapiento que le había sido entregado…" (51). Although so much of the story is focused on the boy's possession by the brigadier, when at the end he stands defiantly at the open grave to face the guardian, he represents open possibilities, without any allegiance to the claims of the past. The "pequeña obra maestra," as Gullén calls it (206), likewise projects a Spain that would remain resolute in its openness to the future even as it appears possessed by the past.

NOTES:

[1] Any approach to an exhaustive list of Benet's forerunners would predominantly be made up of writers in English, as he suggests in his interview with José Luis Merino (56). Among the more apparent influences would be Joyce, Poe, and Conrad. For a discussion of the relation between Henry James and *Una tumba*, see Gullón's Introduction to *Una tumba y otros relatos* (29, 32) and his "Sobre espectros y tumbas" (206-13); the former analysis also compares Benet's short fiction, especially "Duelo," to traditional English gothic tales (32).

[2] Marco was the first to consider it "más comprensible" (153) than previous work and Herzberger repeats this judgment in *The Novelistic World* (101). Ken Benson both agrees and disagrees when he considers the impression of comprehensibility a trap (316). For him, *Una tumba* seems simpler while in fact remaining just as absolutely incomprehensible as the rest of Benet's work.

[3] One of the striking developments in Benet's oeuvre is the abandonment of these magical realistic elements after the publication of "Numa" in 1977. But the supernatural was always just one of many elements that created an epistemological tension in his stories. For example, while in "Baalbec, una mancha," the epistemological problem is focused on distance and time, in "Sub rosa" it concerns the lack of witnesses, faulty perception, and the effects of physical privations on mental faculties. Herzberger, in *The Novelistic World of Juan Benet* (1976), notes that *Una tumba* is "the most easily understood and least complex of any of Benet's novels to date" (102), saying that it "is written in a straightforward, direct manner of exposition with almost a complete absence of marathon sentences and syntactical mazes" (112). In contrast to Benet's longer works, the impenetrability of this work is primarily a function of the fantastical element.

[4] This is the thrust of Julia L. Wecott's studies, "Exposition and Plot in Benet's *Volverás a Región*" and "The Subversion of Character Conventions in Benet's Trilogy."

[5] A dramatic case of this occurring concluded nearly twenty years after the publication of *Volverás a Región* when Brad Epps' contended, with compelling textual evidence, that the feminine voice of Benet's first novel ought to be identified as Marré Gamallo. In this he contradicted previous critics who thought the voice was either anonymous or that of María Timoner ("Cold Furnace" 39-48).

[6] To my knowledge no other critic has noted the continuity between Benet's practice of essay and fiction writing. When Epps says that Benet enacts in literature what he asserts in his essays, he assumes that Benet maintains the conventional dichotomy of theory and practice of

literature (35). While it is true that Benet asserts in the essays, exactly *what* he asserts is subject to the same ambiguous and contradictory forces as the facts and interpretations in his fiction. Just as *Herrumbrosas lanzas* appears easy to understand beside *Una meditación*, the essays of *Páginas impares* are generally much easier to follow than those of *En ciernes*.

[7] These are the themes of more recent studies on the fantastic, most notably Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*.

[8] Valuable accounts of Francoist ideology include Randolph Pope's "Historia y novela en la postguerra española" (18-19), David Herzberger's *Narrating the Past* (20-23), and *A New History of Spanish Writing*, by Perriam and others (25-43). José Rodríguez Puértolas's *Literatura fascista* has an illuminating account of Spanish fascism, its writers, and their inspiration in Nineteenth and Twentieth century thinkers such as Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, Ramiro de Maeztu, and José Ortega y Gasset (30-72).

[9] The detailed biographical sketch of Benet that opens the special issue of *Cuaderno El Urogallo* devoted to Benet is especially clear and useful. This incident is treated on page 32.

[10] This notion of the other's role in the elaboration of the self is a constant in philosophy and psychology since the nineteenth century. With important differences, it is central to the thinking of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marx. It is an equally important element of Freudian psychoanalysis, as Lacan points out by situating the birth of the psyche at the moment at which the infant sees itself as other in the "mirror stage."

[11] On Habermas's concept of communication, see "What is Universal Pragmatics" in his *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (1-68). In his useful introduction to the volume, Thomas McCarthy says that the short answer to the question posed by the title to the essay is "a general theory of communication" (xvii).

[12] Jean-Pierre Ressot points out how the contrast between the indefinite article of the title and the definite article of the first sentence creates a tension in the temporal status of the story between historical connection and isolation (74). I would add the title to the list of what he calls "bizarres paranomases ou alliterations" (78) as well as suggest the reference to the idiom, making the story present itself as a figure of silence.

[13] In her interpretation of Javier Marías, Isabel Cuñado demonstrates that ghosts serve as an indirect, perhaps even subconscious way of representing the force of the past in Spanish everyday life. Such a figure achieves the complex intertwining of presence and absence, appearance and concealment that is characteristic of ghosts and of the effects of the Civil War in a country eager for peace, prosperity, and modernity. Cuñado's grounding of her discussion in Derrida's discussion of the sceptre suggests that such an analysis could be carried out on Benet, even though ghosts are not a constant feature of his work. Such an analysis would have to build an analytic bridge between the late Franco era, the Civil War, and the Carlist Wars of the brigadier's day. Though this would doubtless be a fruitful project, I can only allude to some of its elements here.

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