

Technical and Thematic Aspects of Juan Marsé's *Un día volveré*

The past few years have witnessed many diverse trends in Spanish fiction.¹ This fact has not hindered the emergence of a common factor in many Spanish novels, which could be summed up as a desire for narrativity, and the search for a tale to tell, a feature which Forster considered to be the most fundamental aspect of the novel (Forster 42). This characteristic has been a constant element in all of Juan Marsé's works. As early as 1970, in an interview with Federico Campbell, Marsé asserted that having an "interesting, cataclysmic story, fun to tell" and doing it properly made up the essential fabric for weaving a good novel (220-225). *Un día volveré*, published in 1982, partakes fully in these propositions. Besides the narrative component, there are elements of the detective novel, a genre that a number of Spanish authors have cultivated in the past few years. To this we must add a narrative world that delves into a deeper and more ambitious panorama: a social and existential subject that takes on relative importance in the discourse. The goal of the reflections presented in this article will be to comment on all of these characteristics.

The plot of *Un día volveré* could be summarized as follows: Jan Julivert Mon, a one-time anarchist gunman, after having spent a number of years in prison, returns to what had been his mother's house in the Guinardó quarter, where his sister-in-law Balbina and her son Néstor now live. Everyone in the neighborhood awaits Jan's return with great anticipation, especially his nephew and the latter's friends, who dream of the possible events this ex-political activist and boxer might set in motion. Yet the passing of time shows just the opposite, and Jan Julivert seems to have repudiated his past and now leads a quiet life. Things are kept on a more or less even keel until Jan decides to work as a guard in the home of Luis Klein, who had been a

judge during the infamous years of repression and had been in contact with the ex-prisoner. This occurrence will lead to a number of suspicions on the part of Jan's old friends and fighting companions, who had preconceived plans with respect to the distinguished judge. Nevertheless, Jan's behavior will once again disappoint his onlookers, who at the last moment misinterpret his conduct to the point of provoking his death.

A feature that is present in all detective novels is an abundance of facts and dates that are supposedly significant to the protagonist. This type of detail appears right from the beginning of Marsé's work, thereby allowing us to have a glimpse of the events taking place in Jan Julivert's world. Thus, for example, we are inundated with the following data: "9 de junio"; "hacia las 3 de la tarde"; "en 1930, a los 20 años pesaba"; "una mañana de abril de 1936"; "no volverían a verse hasta 1947"; "quince años después en 1975" ("June 9"; "at around 3 in the afternoon"; "in 1930, at the age of 20, he weighed"; "one April morning in 1936"; "they would not meet again until 1947"; "fifteen years later in 1975").

Besides this data there is an air of mystery which permeates the entire structure of the novel. A conventional division of the book into four parts, divided in turn into four or five chapters with subsequent sections, allows us, for the purposes of this article, to track the waves of suspense that the writer injects gradually into his story. The plot that drives the action and keeps the reader in suspense is provided by the expectations—which on occasion coincide with those of the reader—of the various characters as regarding the activities the protagonist carries out in this new stage of his life of freedom. The climactic points of this tension are found strategically distributed at the beginning or end of each section. In the fifth chapter of the first part, Julivert finally accompanies Néstor to inspect the home of Judge Klein. Similarly, the last chapters of the second and third parts, as well as the first chapter of the fourth part, represent possible decisive moments: Jan, in his role of night watchman, (re-encountering) Luis Klein; the decision to admit the latter to a psychiatric clinic; and, finally, the plans to kill him.

The characters who seem in some ways to be rudimentary, upon critical examination turn out to be artistically interwoven

through the use of perspective. The reader, actively involved in this type of novel, must put together the trail supplied to him by the three narrative focuses in order to get a total view of the protagonist. There exists an adolescent world, and through its eyes we see the transformation of the mythical figure in the imagination of the boys who knew this man only through references. The imagined impression of boxer-bandit-political revolutionary clashes constantly with the actual passivity of the supposed hero. The dreams and frustrations of this juvenile myth are narrated with a successful and often lyrical nostalgia and its distortion is highlighted by the violence of the vulgar street jargon used by the group of youths and the people of the neighborhood. A second perspective is presented through dialogue and the evocative reminiscence between the "viejo Sau" and Polo. Their situation, as opposed to that of the protagonist, will allow the antagonistic views they have of Jan to be judged. The old painter of cinema posters reconstructs the humanistic and committed image of the man who marched in the Durruti column. Counterbalancing this positive memory, Inspector Polo emphasizes the life he led as a gunman and thief. Clearly the final option is the one the reader himself is able to deduce, thanks to the periods of omniscient narration and to the reader's position as an observer in the development of the action, that is to say, using Booth's terminology,² through the narrative alternation between "scenes" and "summaries" used by this more reliable narrator.

The role of active reader must be constantly performed in order to assimilate and fully understand Marsé's novel. It seems appropriate to define it as an enigmatic book that stirs up many unanswered questions (Thompson 81). It is quite evident that the text is plagued with question marks. Is Néstor the son or the nephew of Jan Julivert? Is the death of the policeman Polo a suicide or a murder? What happened to the money stolen by the protagonist? What kind of relationship existed between Jan, Luis Klein and his wife, Virginia Fisas? What was the meaning of the hair clip or tie pin belonging to the Kleins? The answers to some of these questions is only found at the end of the novel, when the reader has access to more detailed knowledge of different events that occurred in the lives of the main characters.

Somehow this proliferation of questionings allows us to reach the conclusion that we are dealing with a work based on "eternal textual return" (Thompson 94).

As in earlier novels, *Un día volveré* emphasizes the social problems of the post-war world and the stifling Franco dictatorship. The intertextuality present in the work of this Catalan writer is an element that has been underlined many times, and has even been termed "intratextuality", when all the novels are considered as a continuous work (Sherzer 57-67). The repetition of scenes (urinating on Fascist political symbols), anecdotes (burying a pistol underneath a tree), characters (Balbina, Palau, Sendra), and the subjects themselves are manifest proof of the presence of this element in the world of Marsé's novels.

The subject of the Franco period is dealt with imaginatively and lyrically (Villanueva 53). The political struggle, the repression, the various factions and other matters are wisely diluted in a narrative in which action and subjective value are underlined. The range of impoverished characters that move about before our eyes illustrates the available options for living during those years. An existence which, in the majority of cases, was fatally determined by poverty or the repressive situation (e.g. Balbina's case). There is also a focus from another perspective, the opportunistic choices of people such as the doctor, Mr. Folch or "Mandalay", who knew how to take advantage of adverse situations. The world of poverty is juxtaposed by the victorious wealthy class, the Kleins, who, settled in their villa-paradise, form part of the group of people who could ignore this unpleasant and bothersome aspect of reality were it not for its potential attribute of danger.

Social criticism is polarized in the protagonist, Jan Julivert. This man, whose image questions the need for a myth in old age and childhood as a survival weapon, at a deeper level raises the possibility of an empty existence, alien to any current development since the truth is that one does not live but only survives in a world where change is not possible, in which everything stays the same. The existentialist subjects of alienation and failure are expressed accurately through the living prism of Julivert. The confrontation between the ex-revolutionary individual and party aims, and the social circumstances that pre-

vent their being attained, does not refer exclusively to the social condition of Spaniards, but also seems to go beyond these limits, expanding into the state of modern man's alienation and disenchantment. Existential nausea and vomit, products of a conscience threatened by the oppression of facts, are shown with tremendous dramatic intensity in the following excerpt:

Y aun así, aun aferrándose de forma implacable a esta atrafagada cadena de cometidos triviales pero llenos por lo menos de sentido práctico, inmediato, aun así volvió a experimentar súbitamente en su ánimo el tirón hacia abajo, el mismo vértigo que sintiera el primer día de cautiverio en una fría celda del penal de Burgos, años atrás, cuando algo le hizo comprender de pronto que su vida se descolgaba de la vida, que perdía pie, que ya nada volvería jamás a tener sentido, ni siquiera los recuerdos.

Se levantó, abrió la puerta corredora de cristal y vomitó en la terraza, bajo la lluvia. (196)

(And even then, even clinging relentlessly to this engrossing chain of tasks, trivial but at least full of practical, immediate sense, even then in his spirit he suddenly felt that downward pull once again, the same vertigo he had felt his first day in captivity in a cold cell at the Burgos penitentiary, years before, when something made him suddenly understand that his life was slipping away from life, that he was losing his footing, that now nothing would ever make sense again, not even his memories.

He got up, opened the glass sliding door and vomited onto the balcony, in the rain.)

This viscous and obstructive atmosphere, typical of an existential picture, is also perceptible in the other social sphere, the world of the Kleins. It is the judge himself who speaks to the protagonist of his intuitions regarding the unpleasant odor of the past: "Igual que una charca pestilente" (228) ("Just like a fetid pond").

The determining past that dragged Jan Julivert to the situation of the present narrative is parallel, although antagonistic, to the past of another important character, Luis Klein. The comparison between the two figures, of opposite signs, could be taken as a constant in the reading of the work, since the circumstances of their lives led them to come into contact on decisive

occasions. The actual moment of forgetting, willful in one case and accidental, but accepted, in the other, is a new point of contact. This parallelism in their lives seems to serve as well as a means of revealing their personalities. The definition of Jan provided by the judge is the sharpest and most realistic definition in the realm of the the novel: "Una mezcla de pensador y de hombre de acción. Pero tenga mucho cuidado: el hombre que actúa siempre se ve mal interpretado por el que piensa" (230) ("A mixture of a thinker and man of action. But be very careful: the man who acts always finds himself misunderstood by the man who thinks"). This advice prophesies the end of the novel. Jan's reflex action was negatively interpreted by the real instigators of the attack.

The theme of guilt is another constant in Marsé's writings that emphasizes their intertextual nature. Feelings of guilt are, in the majority of cases, closely tied to the problem of alienation (Sherzer 189-195). In this novel Balbina's character clearly projects the link between the two elements. To the external alienation provoked by the difficult situation she faces in the world that surrounds her, which never hesitates to take advantage of her unfortunate circumstances, we must add her own weakness, which makes her more inclined towards less demanding positions. Her resignation towards being a waitress and a prostitute is a cause for the feelings of guilt she has on judging her life and it's possible influence on her son, as she herself expresses: "Soy una fulana, cuñado. Podría haber sido otra cosa, pero no pude o no supe" (52) ("I'm a hooker, brother-in-law. I could have been something else, but I wasn't able or didn't know how").

In *Un día volveré* Balbina also highlights another primordial element in all the novels by this author: sexuality. Although it is not as clear as in earlier works, it is easy to discern the presence of a significant erotic component. As Marsé himself confirmed, he likes to "show, demonstrate the characters to the reader, to physically profile them" (Freixas 55). Thus the narrator of *Un día volveré* on various occasions dwells on physical descriptions of Balbina that highlight her sensuality, especially in situations in which the possibility of a rekindling of affections between Jan and herself is revealed.

From a structural point of view, the linear mode of the narrative and its simple language permit this book to be studied on a less demanding level. The systematic abandonment of complicated metaphors and frequent comparisons however, does not exclude the presentation of certain decidedly lyrical passages. In contrast to these fragments, one must underline the predominance of language that reveals the social condition of the different characters. The use of street jargon, rich in sexual and aggressive expressions is notable: "minga", "pajillera", "birló", "guan-tazos", "me cago en su padre", "vete a tomar por el saco", etc. Moreover, the narrator tends to adapt to the reality of the scene, and on occasion takes on the discourse of other characters or groups.³

Un día volveré should be included within a current trend in which history, as a basis for the story, becomes a fundamental element of attraction that satisfies the expectations of all good reading material. With this novel Juan Marsé brings us a well-structured creation with a fluid narrative, imbued with a more profound, transcendent subject matter.

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NOTES

- 1 For a specific study of the different trends see the the special issue of *Insula* 464-465 (July-August 1985).
- 2 The difference between telling and showing may be studied in chapter 1 of Booth's book.
- 3 This fact could be analyzed in detail from the point of view of heteroglossia, see Bakhtin 310-325.

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