CREACIÓN


In an attempt not to judge too harshly novels that, while enjoyable, do not contribute significantly to the canon, critics often use the term «a good read». In the case of Alfonso Fernández Burgos's *Al final de la mirada*, however, one finds a good read that is truly a good read. The novel is, pardon the repetition, highly readable, in the sense that the clear prose flows smoothly and holds the reader's interest consistently, and at the same time it contains structural, stylistic and descriptive elements that are in perfect synchrony with the plot of the novel.

The temporal structure, for instance, presents an impressive exactitude. The narrator follows the protagonist, Eduardo Curtíl, almost minute by minute through a daily existence that is regularly interrupted by a systematic collection of past memories that steadily explain what has brought us to the present that constitutes the plot line. The attention to detail, especially personal detail, is equally exact. The novelist surprises the reader at times with his subtle descriptions of the protagonist's movements, his attention to detail, no matter how slight, or the effect of physical phenomena such as light, rain, or pain upon his reactions and expressions. In short, one finds in this author an excellent ability to invent a fictional character that appears to be a recreation of an actual human being. Furthermore, the deft combination of third person narration and indirect discourse clearly supports this aspect of the novel; the roundness of the character is, to a great extent, a result of his being created simultaneously from the outside, by his narrator and from the inside, by himself.

The novel is a careful presentation of the protagonist's agonizing present and the visions of the past that it creates. The present, September, 1995, at first seeming an almost arbitrary temporal referent, is constituted by gradual depiction of the intimate relationships that surround him (including his cat, who is semi-personified due to its role as the most constant witness to Curtíl's suffering), while the past is developed through the particular memories that painful present evokes. Slowly what seems at first to be a novel directed toward a particular protagonist and his own personal problem, his forthcoming death from cancer, is woven into a political and historical referent: the Spain of the Franco years and the clandestine opposition to the dictatorship. The referent is skeletal, but essential almost mythical in its representation of generational stereotypes: the protagonist's father was an integral member of the Franco regime; the son was a member of the Communist party in his student years. And it is particularly this political opposition (father/son) that is privileged in the text. The final memory, a depiction of the worst mo-
ment of Eduardo's political adventure, appears toward the end of the novel, and it contributes to a definition of his character more than any other of his previous recollections. This particular evocation constitutes a more substantive ideological statement than has been seen in all of the earlier visions of the character's past, and one wonders therefore, if a mental rereading of the novel is called for here at the end of the text, a process called for in novels such as Juan Marse's La muchacha de las bragas de oro, given that the protagonist's actions might now have to be seen as redefined by this crucial moment from his past.

In spite of this gradual development of the historical and political referent, the author directs an equal emphasis to the personal element of the narration, in which Curtil deals constantly with the problems he has infused into his daily existence: his relationships with his first wife, with his current companion, and with his son, for example, but, more importantly in order to define his character clearly, his frustrating inability to recognize the positive value of what he possesses, figuratively speaking, until it has become a part of his past. The novel, thus oscillates, as it develops, between the personal and the political, both serving finally as a background for the other.

While the novel is written, its argument is not highly original. The forthcoming deathmotif, police repression, the role of the family servant, the attempted reconciliation with the past, the abuse of alcohol and tobacco, all are somewhat trivial novelistic elements by now (the protagonist is highly redolent of the first person narrator of García Hertelano's El gran momento de Mary Tribune), which Fernández Burgos manages to weave together neatly enough so that the reader should not consider the next banal; the telling itself should be seen as taking precedence over what is told. Curiously, however, in a work that is composed with such a smooth and consistent style, it is surprising that there are an inordinate number of grammatical errors, most of them run-on sentences. These phrases do not at all seem to be purposeful exercises of poetic license, such as those one finds in the novels of Goytisolo or Muñoz Molina, but simple errors in sentence construction. While this may seem an inappropriate note to conclude on, it is nevertheless important, for it is surprising, in the work of a prize winning novelist and experienced journalist, as well as in a text published by a reputable publisher, to find so many basic grammatical errors. One can only hope that this is not a sign of a relaxed interest in detail and attention to traditional language study in Spain.

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