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GONZALO DÍAZ-MIGOYO

Reading/Writing Ironies in "En el estado"

Carmen:—¿Cómo podéis hablar de cosas que ignoráis?
El Sr. Arnau: -Precisamente.
JUAN BENET, *Un caso de conciencia*

The many difficulties of *En el estado* will not deter the faithful reader of Juan Benet who is, no doubt, already accustomed to Benet's brand of teasing narrative challenges and rewards. This time, however, the paradoxical nature of these challenges and rewards may surprise the reader: he will find that its uncharacteristically transparent prose leads into a blind alley, and once there, that the pleasure of reading is not based on avoiding the trap set for him but on falling into it. He may also remember that Benet had already tried something similar in his previous novels, particularly in *Un viaje de invierno* and *La otra casa de Mazón*.

Un viaje de invierno offered a double narrative in different keys: mythopoetic in the center of the page and rationalizing in the margins. Their relationship was one of substitution rather than of reciprocal explanation:[1] to accept the logic of the poetic narrative amounted to a dismissal of the marginalia's rationalizing thrust; and conversely, to insist on using the glosses as a guide to a rational understanding of the tale only succeeded in annihilating it. This narrative strategy repeatedly forced the reader to choose which road to follow: either the logical one or the mythical one. The priority of the latter was never in doubt, but to a large extent this assurance was due to the renewed confirmation that the marginal translations of the main text were unsatisfactory, although correct. The novel presented the reader with an insoluble problem, or

rather, it may be more accurate to say that it highlighted the insolubility of the interpretative quandary—even though, paradoxically, it facilitated a strictly poetic reading of the text, because part of the pleasure derived from the poetic narrative resulted from the impossibility of its logical translation.

In *La otra casa de Mazón*, Benet attempted something not altogether different. Here he tried a transvestism of comic and tragic modes whose goal was, in Benet's own words, "an impossible hybrid."[2] He attempted to escape the modal straitjacket that style imposes on the subject matter not so much through a mere juxtaposition of both styles as through an exchange of their corresponding masks. The chief similarity between this strategy and the one used in *Un viaje de invierno* is centered in the notion of ironic narrative attitude: ironic in *Un viaje de invierno* because of the counterposing of its two mutually exclusive texts as if they were simultaneously affirmative and negative readings, and ironic in *La otra casa de Mazón* because of the attempt to fuse the reciprocally contradictory poles of style by means of disguises.

En el estado aims at something similar: the difficult operation of revealing to the reader the inherent fiction of usual interpretative attitudes. Benet invites the reader to view the spectacle of fiction at work by forcing him to see himself reading—an operation fraught with ironic reversals and reflections. This preeminent interest in irony, however, should not be surprising in a writer who holds opinions such as these:

> La literatura, la filosofía o la ciencia no son más que algo así como el disimulado acomodo del hombre al imperio del azar bajo la máscara del conocimiento. De esos acomodos hay uno que me interesa sobre todos y es aquél mediante el cual el hombre, al no saber cómo tratar de otra manera los problemas sobrenaturales que le circundan, se burla de un poder que en cualquier caso le domina. El recurso a la ironía.[3]

At first glance it would seem that Benet confuses here two types of irony that we usually consider different: involuntary irony, that is, irony of events, or objective irony, and intentional irony. But this confusion is perfectly conscious. Actually, it is not even a confusion. Objective irony is nothing but a tacit, willful irony in which the ob-

server, by attributing ironic intention to a fictitious supernatural agency, stubbornly maintains expectations that are contrary to the facts he witnesses. Intentional and objective irony are in fact the same basic type of mockery by the individual of a power stronger than he.

In the case of the ironic novel, the writer himself is both an intentional ironist and a self-appointed observer, or describer, of objective ironies that he, of course, has created in the first place. The reader also plays a double role. He is as much a passive spectator of both types of irony as a secret ironist who maintains the validity of his own narrative beliefs and expectations by attributing ironic intention to the author of the narrative statements. There is plenty of evidence in *En el estado* to support this hypothesis, and some of it will be discussed later. First it may be helpful to sketch the general requirements of ironic statements so that the examples from the novel will be easier to understand.

A statement is ironic when the following three traits are noticeable: first, its prima facie verisimilitude. Without it the deceiving power is lost, since irony is based on an appearance of truth. Immediately thereafter the ironic statement must reveal itself as misleading. By taking the reader away from the original goal instead of toward it, it must reveal itself as contradictory. This is the second requirement of irony. Now, this contradiction may be due to an involuntary error on the part of the writer (or of the reader). Therefore, to understand that the statement is intentionally contradictory (ironic), the reader must be able to detect in it the trace of that intention; the trace of the writer's reason for endorsing that particular equivocality. We come thus to the third requirement of irony: given the circumstances of the ironist's utterance, the literal meaning of an ironic statement must refer to a desirable situation. Without the kind of circumstances that make the statement's literal meaning refer to a desirable, although inexistent or impossible, state of affairs, the reader cannot understand it as ironic.[4]

To what extent and with what consequences are these three conditions met in *En el estado*? The novel's verisimilitude, that is, its promise of traditional meaningfulness, is related to the apparent fulfillment of the expectations that it raises and encourages. *En el*

estado creates them from the very beginning. Thus, the blurb in the book's cover reads: "Retomando el clásico tema de la relación que varios personajes hacen de sus vidas en el alto de un viaje . . . Juan Benet nos introduce en el mundo de tres lunáticos personajes, dos varones y una rancia dama, que narran . . . sus respectivos destinos y trayectorias."[5] It is immaterial whether these words are the publisher's or the author's. In either case they create the expectation of a traditional narrative development. Its fulfillment, though, is anything but traditional; so untraditional is it, in fact, that the original expectation has to be either discarded as impertinent or modified to the point of disfiguration. Even this decision is difficult to make. On the one hand, the irrelevance of the expectation is never completely obvious. On the other, it is not clear what its substitute should be. Consequently, the more misleading it turns out to be, the stronger is the reader's hope that it will eventually prove adequate.

The narrator keeps alive the reader's original expectation by extending a helping hand to him now and then. He rekindles hope with seemingly helpful allusions, but just as often the tale fails to fulfill their promise. Chapters I, II and III, for instance, seem to be firmly linked by the apparent clarity of the title of Chapter II: "Sucesos diversos que enlazan los precedentes con los siguientes" (p. 23). Yet in Chapter III the narrator immerses the reader in "Un tema de otro tiempo" where he begins, unaccountably, the story of the loss of the virginity of a mysterious old lady. Who is she, the reader wants to know. One of the travelers already introduced? With whom is she speaking? Where does the conversation take place? Nothing has been said about that.

Or take the recurring question, "¿ Circasiana?," with which the old lady's unknown interlocutor keeps interrupting her account. It insinuates insistently her relationship with the "acusados rasgos circasianos" (Chapter II) of La Señora Somer, one of the travelers. But the insinuation becomes immediately inoperative because at every turn the old lady rejects the question's relevance. Finally, she pronounces the word "circasiano" herself, and stops. Her puzzled interlocutor asks then "¿Qué pasa? ¿Por qué se detiene ahora?" and she explains: "En fin, me he equivocado una vez más, creía que era usted más perspicaz" (p. 43). The reader, able to recognize the word

"circasiano" as a valuable clue, yet unable to determine what its value is, begins to see himself in the lady's interlocutor. He suspects that perhaps he is the one who lacks perspicacity—a suspicion that doesn't help his confusion.

The Spanish reader will find this question even more pointedly intriguing. It will remind him of some famous "pastillas circasianas" advertised in Spain a few years ago as a miraculous stimulant for breast development. He will, therefore, relate "circasiano" to the "senos pendulares" (p. 27) of the mad lady, so conspicuously mentioned in the previous chapter. Later on, he will remember the word again in this connection as he encounters yet another outrageous reference to this same woman's faded charms:

> con una alelada sonrisa hunde sus manos en el escote y extrae sus dos pechos que presenta al caballero como si se tratara de dos limones en manos de una frutera. "Por estos pechos, Ricardo, *mon roi.*"
>
> "Parecen calabacines," comenta Ricardo . . . "Y un poco pasados." (p.88)

Humorous allusions of this sort occur too often to list them all, but there is one exceptionally tantalizing type that deserves special mention: recognizable literary allusions. They come in all sorts: from the direct to the covert, not to mention outright parodies and pastiches—even of Benet's own idiosyncratic style. The intertextual quality of these passages satisfies, first of all, the literary vanity of the reader who is able to spot them. Taking advantage of that very satisfaction, the allusions make the reader believe that he should be able to find his bearings at the level of the model, since he is completely lost at the level of the narrative itself. But this orientation also proves impossible, even as it announces itself more and more insistently.

Consider, for instance, the repeated exclamation of that same old lady: "Oh, Richard, mon roi!" It makes one think of one of the British Richards: either the knightly Richard, the Lion Hearted, whose memory causes his damsel to sigh like that in Walter Scott's romances, or any of the Shakespearean Richards. The first connection is made possible by the abundant allusions to Brittany's knighthood to be found throughout the novel. The second is brought out

by the end of Chapter XIV, the preposterous tale of the old lady's sixth orgasm, when one realizes that it is a potpourri of quotations from Cleopatra's death scene in Shakepeare's tragedy.[6]

These clues are so tempting, so obvious, so promising—even though it is not clear to what purpose—that I hesitate to point out only a few, instead of attempting to link all the loose ends of the puzzle. But ultimately I think that the reader must not allow himself to be thwarted by these obscure riddles. Instead, he must accept their teasing and deceitful nature and acknowledge that they lead nowhere but to their own interior, the interior of the fiction that they help create, rather than to any outside reality, literary or otherwise. And it is precisely by making this decision that the reader enters into the second phase of irony.

Before finishing the novel—which confirms that none of the stimuli achieve their goal—the reader already suspects that the contradictory character of the narrative is pervasive and intentional. He does not need to wait until page 204, near the end, where it is openly declared: "He aquí un último capítulo en el que, según es costumbre, se debería desentrañar el misterio. Pues bien, el que lo quiere descifrar es quien lo crea." The realization occurs much before that point, as soon as the reader notices that even the clearest of intimation is frustrating. For example, the description of Mr. Hervás on the second page: "Pequeño de estatura, tras haber disfrutado de un cuerpo macizo en sus anõs de plenitud ha adelgazado de manera tan desigual que al friso de su sexta década es contradictoriamente gordo y delgado, ancho y estrecho, consumido y lozano . . . . rasgos que en buena medida se corresponden con las notas más sobresalientes de su carácter."

Neither the narrator's admission of the contradictory nature of the character's appearance (or rather, of his own description of the character's appearance), nor the irony of the final assertion satisfies the reader's curiosity; instead, it spurs it on: "Surely Benet has a reason to admit this flagrant contradiction," thinks the reader. "No doubt, this will be cleared up later. I must keep it in mind as I read on." Of course, the day of reckoning never comes. After a few pages the reader is forced to abandon all hope, just as he has given up on

organizing the action—or actions—chronologically, despite the repeated references in the text to temporal precedents and continuities. Some are obvious: "Recordará el esforzado lector que no bien se hubo detenido el autobús, el primero en pisar tierra de la Portada fue nuestro viejo conocido el señor Hervás" (p. 17). So is the already mentioned title to Chapter II: "Sucesos diversos que enlazan los precedentes con los siguientes" (p. 23). Others are more subtle and, as it were, apparently inadvertant, like the beginning of that same Chapter II: "Hervás vuelve de nuevo al campo despúes de su larga permanencia en la casa de las sombras" (p. 25). The reader has not been informed about that stay. He has, therefore, reason to be puzzled by the "de nuevo," to say nothing of the identity of "la casa de las sombras." He will be tempted, though, to assume that it is the same exit mentioned *later on*, in Chapter X, where it is pointed out that "el señor Hervás . . . sale de nuevo al campo en busca de Ricardo; y aprovecha el viaje para hacer una micción por la parte trasera del caserío" (p. 114).

One of the most effective ways in which the text frustrates the reader's curiosity—the very curiosity that it has excited before—is through the aforementioned literary allusions. The device is paradigmatic of all narrative inasmuch as it attempts to lead the reader to the point of departure, to fiction itself, to a referent whose reality is literary and, therefore, ultimately arbitrary and impossible to verify. All of the novel's characters—with the possible exception of its three theoretical protagonists—are taken from and refer to a world of fiction. Even their activities are nothing but a weaving of fictions. Take, for example, that Beckett-like couple, the innkeeper and his companion, called "El bulto." About the former we are told by way of introduction that "se dicen cosas muy graves. Se decían más bien años atrás" (p. 16). This is followed by a series of rumors each more outlandish than the last. About the latter we learn that he has come back from knightly Cornouailles by the Resporden of Concarnuea (we never know which) post. He then refuses to account for his travels and the innkeeper, in what he thinks is proper annoyance and just retribution, bites off one of his legs, reducing him to the "heap" he is now said to be. The reader may be here reminded both of the absurdities of Beckett (a favorite writer of

Benet) and of chivalric romances, but will not be able to make anything of these echoes.

The conversations of these two voices—it would be excessive to call them characters—are just as recognizably allusive as their descriptions; and just as pointless. They deal, especially in Chapters V and X, with the question of being and nonbeing, a subject in which the reader hears echoes of among others, Calderón's "autos sacramentales," Hegel and Heidegger, and even the writings of the Spanish counterculture guru, A. García Calvo.

In the case of the old lady, her family origins, rather than fictitious, are intentionally incredible. Her tale opens with the intriguing exclamation "¡Falacias, infundios!" (p. 37) only to culminate with the last words of Shakespeare's Cleopatra: "Tell'st the world it is not worth leave-taking" (p. 167). The subject on which she waxes so eloquent is first the highly fantasized loss of her virginity and second her absurd desire to reach orgasm number seven without having to go through the drudgery of the sixth. Thus we have, so to speak, two speculations on the subject of absence, or nonexistence.[7]

Consider the Prussian colonel Max Hoffman, bent on a new kind of warfare: "Una contienda actual es una pugna entre dos previsiones que si están cuidadosamente desarrolladas, si se han considerado los menores detalles, incluso aquellos reveses locales que puedan amenazar la consecución del plan, apenas deben verse afectados por los resultados en el campo" (p. 135). The whole thing has a marked flavor, or is at least an inevitable reminder, of the best-known military theoretician of modern times, Karl von Clausewitz.

All of these cases repeatedly stand out as theoretical, not practical; they are imaginary rather than concrete, and fictitious rather than real. Inevitably, they frustrate any attempt at verification on the part of the reader.

The most interesting of these figures is Pope Gapón. This outlandish personage is historical, although duly obscure and mysterious because of his covert activities at the turn of the century as a spy for the Tzar's police in the Workers' Syndicate, and later in the Social Revolutionary Party. Among other avatars equally fantastic and improbable, he tells of his service in the household of Gustave Flaubert. In his tale the novel offers its most representative passage,

one that I am tempted to call emblematic of the whole: the dealing with Flaubert's composition of his novella on the death of John the Baptist.

When the French writer began to describe the state of the sky at the beginning of our era, he came to doubt the accuracy of his astronomical knowledge and decided to ask a friend in Paris to check Arago's *Encyclopedie Astronomique*. As is well known, this incident really happened. But in the hands of Benet/Pope Gapón, it takes on a strangely fantastic aspect. Guided by "un aviso del más allá," Flaubert writes two sentences: ". . . la constelación de Perseo se hallaba en el zenit. Apenas asomaba Agalah . . ." (p. 188). Then, seized by the urge to verify this statement, he stops: he wishes to make sure that scientific knowledge agrees with imaginative intuition. He sets in motion thereby half of Europe's servants. And he does it, according to Benet, "con gesto zumbón y seguro de sí mismo (. . . con una anticipada ironía hacia todo el esfuerzo de Europa) . . . Toda la cultura europea, lo más granado de nuestra cultura—y no sólo los especialistas en astronomía, lenguas orientales o textos veterotestamentarios—se había de lanzar con verdadera pasión—y con exclusión de cualquier otro deber—al esclarecimiento de aquel enigma" (pp.192–93). This assertion is preceded by a dizzying list, in four dense pages, of fifty to sixty scholars, their works, their schools and relationships, a display reminiscent above all, of the false scholarship of Borges.

In commenting on the historical incident on another occasion Benet remarked that "un novelista desenfadado hubiera logrado un resultado casi equivalente [to the one that concerned Flaubert] si con un poco de desparpajo se hubiera decidido a violar las convenciones eruditas y adentrarse en los terrenos prohibidos de la fantasía."[8] It is Benet, though, who seems to have taken to heart this advice. He is the one who behaves like the novelist he fancied years ago, by pulling out of the hat that huge account of scholarly consultations. The ironic effect against Flaubert could thus have been perfectly achieved. But there is still one more loop in Benet's joke: it turns out that all those fifty or sixty names and all the works mentioned do correspond to real men and real texts, some alive and

some well known at the time, 1877, in which Flaubert undertook the historical search. It turns out then that Benet has also taken Flaubertian pains to base his references on fact.

The irony that Benet once directed against Flaubert, as well as the irony that Flaubert is said to direct against that concerted European effort, has a boomerang effect for the reader of *En el estado*, both for the reader who assumes that Benet has brazenly invented those names, and for the reader, who, like Flaubert, has felt the need to verify their historical accuracy. In both cases the text proves that fiction refers only to itself even when it reflects a historical reality. It does so in this instance by means of two ironically contradictory examples: Flaubert's, in which fiction coincides with reality, and Benet's, in which reality seems fictional. All in all, this constitutes fiction's most definitive check on the reader's rationalizing urge: on the strength of his own behavior he is forced to admit that, like the supposedly passive observer of an objective irony, he—not Benet—has made this irony possible. He has done so by insisting on the use of rational expectations and probabilities as an obligatory counter to narrated fact. This conclusion is thus related to the third requirement of irony: the existence of narrative circumstances that make desirable, although impossible, the literal tenor of the ironic statement.

For whom could this type of novel, with such proliferating allusions, such obvious reliance on other literary texts, so openly exhibiting the problematic character of its interpretation, be desirable? No doubt primarily for a reader in hot pursuit of allusions, influences, and models; that is, for that intertextual reader who is so bent on tracing either facts or logical structures in fiction that he misunderstands its imaginative nature.

Benet himself may also find such a novel desirable, for by adopting the stance of the Socratic "eiron," he has feigned to accept all the opinions and expectations of this type of literary interlocutor, putting himself in the position to give his "esforzado" and "paciente" reader a revulsive dose of his own medicine—homeopathy with a vengeance. On Benet's part this is undoubtedly a question of revenge against a certain type of reader whom he finds particularly

annoying. Benet's attitude toward and remarks about literary critics are sufficiently well known to make unnecessary here a repetition of his less than agreeable pronouncements on the subject.

I could conclude by pointing out that *En el estado* is a text whose only value is negative—a literary purge that tacitly cancels its positive virtues since, in catering and conforming to the taste of a certain kind of reader, it ends up proving its own irrelevance. That would be to adopt too narrow a perspective of this novel, however. Besides, when dealing with an ironic statement of novel length it is doubtful whether the normal negative consequences of all irony are pertinent.

Could it not be said that the type of reader mocked by Benet is the one who actually "creates" this irony? Doesn't he do so by imposing his own expectations and rationalizations on the "facts" presented by the novelist? Isn't the reader's anxious search for structure the real fiction here? And isn't the fiction of *En el estado*, then, the only undeniable fact at hand? It may well be, therefore, that the reader's attempt to attribute ironic intention exclusively to Benet is only a weak ploy to preserve the validity of his own traditional expectations, his own desired rationality.

I do not mean to imply that positive truth is wholly on the side of Benet, and false pretense on the reader's. Nor do I mean to reverse my preceding assertion that *En el estado* has only negative virtue. I mean, rather, that fiction seems neither more nor less fictitious than the reader's own rationality; likewise, that fiction, free from verifiable ties, is able to delight us in a real, although mysterious, way unavailable to rationality; and last, that ironic fiction seems the only way, paradoxically, to achieve a faithful and realistic depiction of reality—at least, reality when seen through the speculative prism so dear to Benet. Thus, it would be as valid a statement as any of the preceding to say that *En el estado* depicts the incoherence, the absurdity, the meaninglessness of existence, or, more pointedly, of certain concrete habits, opinions, individuals, and situations. But all this can only be partially true, just as it would be only partially true to describe the novel as a tour de force of literary slapstick.

The power of the ironic spiral is such that we cannot be its passive recipients or observers: if we do not ironize with the author of

En el estado, as often, as seriously, or as mockingly as he does, we cannot become his true interlocutors. We will merely be absurd fictional readers, as preposterous as the rest of the figures who parade through the novel.