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Ontological inversion in the novels of Ramón Pérez de Ayala

We are all well aware of the radical changes that occurred in the exterior and interior structure of the conventional realistic novel in the late 19th and early 20th century. I refer to the novelistic practices of such well known writers as Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust and André Gide, and of such lesser known ones as Machado de Assis of Brazil and Miguel de Unamuno and Ramón del Valle Inclán of Spain. All of these writers have in common the fact that their formal innovations were so radical and so obvious that they immediately attracted the attention of the average reader. He had come to expect the observation of certain stylistic conventions and consequently reacted strongly to these writers who so patently refused to observe them. These great innovators owe a large portion of their initial success to the ease with which the average reader could perceive their innovations. In the hands of these writers, the conventional realistic novel went through a formal and structural transformation which was both obvious and radical. In fact, the transformation was at times so radical that the conventional realistic novel was put entirely to one side and a different kind of novel was offered in its place.

My own study of the 20th century realistic novel over a number of years has suggested to me that perhaps another kind of change, simultaneous, just as radical, but far less obvious, was taking place. I refer to a kind of inversion of the modes of existence inside the ontological structure of the novelistic world of the conventional realistic novel, by means of which all substantial being became non-substantial in the eyes of the author, the reader, and the character. Such an ontological inversion becomes apparent to the reader only if he makes an analysis of the ontological structure of the novelistic world created by a particular writer and an examination of the writer's manipulation of the artistic distance that exists between himself, his reader, and his characters. And yet not only the average reader but also the student of literature will very likely not make such an analysis and such an examination, since ontological inversion occurs precisely in those novels which seem, superficially, to be written in a way which is entirely conventional and which therefore invites nothing more than conventional analysis. That is, some novelists have written what seem to be conventional realistic novels and have at the same time subtly subverted those novels internally by means of ontological inversion. Such novels appeared during the very same years that the more obvious structural and formal innovations in conventional realistic novel were taking place.

I believe that this demonstrates the pervasive effect of a way of seeing which was to characterize the 20th century. This way of seeing was reflected more obviously in the new and unconventional novels of the day and covertly in the coetaneous conventional novels. The practitioners of conventional realistic novel may have been entirely unaware of the peculiarly inappropriate inverted ontological scheme that they had given to their otherwise conventional realistic novels. Their lack of awareness is beside the point, since their novels are what they are and not what anyone, including the authors, wants them to be.

I would like to demonstrate how such internally subverted novels are made, as well as the implications of such structures, by specifying the ontology of the novelistic world of Ramón Pérez de Ayala (Spain, 1880-1962), as well as by specifying the way in which Ayala manipulates the artistic distance between himself, his reader, and his characters. By specifying these things, we will arrive at Ayala's world view: that is, his view of what the human condition is and is not, can and cannot be, should and should not be.

Ayala is considered, technically, to be a conventional realistic novelist. His novels are written according to the traditional norms inherited from the 19th century. His major works include four autobiographical novels published between 1907 and 1913 and three novels (the last two in two volumes each) published between 1921 and 1926, whose subjects are, respectively, language, love, and honor. Many critics have called him, incorrectly, I think, a writer of intellectual novels, since they have seen his works as nothing more than an attempt to exemplify, through character and situation, certain ideas that Ayala had about life. Rather than that, I believe that his books are representations of the human condition in and of itself. The discrepancy between my view and that of many of my colleagues can best be explained in terms of a difference of focus as we each approach Ayala's works: they nearly always concentrate on *what* he writes, while I am more interested in *how* he writes. In the present study, through an examination of the structure of Ayala's novels, we will see a typical example of the kind of ontological inversion that I have defined above.

First let us examine the author's manipulation of the artistic distance between himself, his reader, and the novelistic world. Here we notice an inversion of terms which will be duplicated later within the ontology of the novelistic world itself. Contrary to what one might expect in a conventional realistic novel, here the artistic distance is varied in such ways as to constantly increase or enhance the presence of the personality of the author at the expense of sharply reducing the autonomy of the book. The reader never loses his awareness of the creating presence of the author. The author maintains constant direct contact with his reader through a number of means, all of which are prejudicial to the successful making

of the novel: Ayala interpolates episodes which amuse him (and hopefully the reader) but which break the interior logic of the novel: he constantly gives his own personal attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices directly to the reader in the form of digressions, footnotes, and asides; many descriptions of the landscape are really only affective projections of the mood or personality of the author, quite unintegrated into the fabric of the novel; Ayala jokes about the supposedly fortuitous way in which the action of the plot is structured, thus reminding the reader that the succession of the action is, after all, completely responsive to the author's whim and not to the interior logic of the novel; in describing people and objects, he gives them very ambiguous, often antithetical being; he makes the actions of the characters paradoxical; he demonstrates a constant and very strong personal ambivalence toward the novel that he is making and its parts; worst of all, he is also constantly ambivalent toward the visualization that he has of himself in the role of creator, as so many of the above examples indicate. All of these uses of artistic distance cause the palpable substance of the book to become in part the means by which the author conducts a continuing dialogue with the reader concerning the reaction that they both have to the way in which the author is making the book. Consequently, the book itself exists ambiguously: it is neither a thing in itself nor entirely a means to some other ends. The exterior structure of Ayala's novels responds solely to his need to manifest an ambivalent attitude toward everything which lies beyond his consciousness. All of this is a complete inversion of the traditional use of artistic distance in the conventional realistic novel.

Ayala demonstrates this same ambivalence in the way in which he makes the ontological scheme of the novelistic world itself. Everything that surrounds the character exists only in terms of his actually, possibly, or potentially perceiving it. The character duplicates the author's ambivalent attitude toward his world and hence it too exists ambiguously. In such a scheme, the only quantity that gives any kind of existence to the entities which inhabit the novelistic world is the personality of the individual character, phenomenalized in his engaged attention. The observed world is merely an affective mass which is gradually differentiated and defined in terms of the projected mood of the observing character. The specification of the nature of the character and of his world becomes a single, integrated process, since they are each other. The ontology of Ayala's novelistic world has a foundation of shifting reality in which permanency and fixity of being are denied. People, objects, and phenomena are what the individual needs for them to be at any particular moment. This kind of ontology is an inversion of that of the conventional realistic novel. There, each entity has an in-itself being, and the varying perceptions of the same object never have the effect of transforming the observed object into something else or of causing it to exist ambiguously.

So far, our examination of the artistic distance and the ontological structure of Ayala's novels suggests that his point of departure, as he makes his novels, and the basis of the novels' ontological structure, is psychological process: that is, the process whereby each individual relates his consciousness to everything that lies beyond it. In the act of writing his novels and within the ontology of the novelistic world itself, Ayala demonstrates explicitly and implicitly an attitude toward one particular phase of psychological process: the nature and the interrelationship of perception and being. Ayala's attitude is that perception imparts being; that is, that perception is actually creation in that in the act of perceiving we transform the perceived object into what we need or want it to be. This is an ontological inversion, since technically and scientifically, the act of perception consists in the gradual and successive discovery of the inherent qualities of the perceived object. Ayala's ontological inversion of perception and being can be demonstrated by specifying the way in which psychological time and chronological time are made and interrelated within Ayala's novelistic world.

Ayala invents a time scheme in which passing chronological time exists only as an extension of the character's psychological needs. Chronology is not an abstraction measured by clocks and calendars but rather a human succession of varying psychological states. Things happen at the most psychologically propitious moment. Chronological present time is inert, extraneous, and meaningless unless shot through with personality and appropriated for some use by the character. Years, days, and weeks are important only in relation to the intensity with which they are experienced by the character. Time duration is not scientific but rather psychological: the sensation of duration exists only in relation to new events which occur within the individual psyche. Chronological time is affectively destroyed and psychological time is put in its place. Each individual character invents the chronological present in that he attributes to it the qualities that he wants it to have, rather than attempting to discover and use the inherent qualities of the chronological present. For example, the character ascribes to the chronological present the qualities of being static and prolonged, since these are the qualities of the psychological present, and hence the qualities that he needs for the chronological present to have. In actuality, the chronological present is of itself fleeting and brief. Each character also affectively remakes chronological past time from the vantage point of the psychological present. Past time is transformed into what the individual wants it to be in the psychological present moment. In its most severe form, this affective transformation of the past entails a

denial not only of chronological past time but also of individual psychological existence in the past: both the character's past and the past character are declared never to have existed.

The implications of this scheme are obvious. Scientific time has no existence of its own in the world that the character perceives. It is merely absorbed into the consciousness of the character along with all other external phenomena and remade into what the character needs for it to be. Therefore, all time inside the novelistic world (i.e., the world perceived by the character) has only contingent being: time exists only in relation to the engaged personality of the character who is occupied in making use of it. This is an ontological inversion of the time scheme of the conventional realistic novel. The same kind of ontological inversion occurs in Ayala's novels in the scheme by which physical space and psychological space are made and related to each other. Neither scientific time nor physical space has any existence in the character's world apart from his perception of them.

Thus we have seen that under the guise of writing conventional realistic novels, Ayala actually has produced subtle travesties of them. The ontological structure of Ayala's novelistic world is the exact opposite of that of the conventional realistic novel. In the latter, the life quality is self-generating and self-maintaining; that is, the physical universe exists in itself and is the everlasting axis around which the microcosm of each individual's consciousness revolves. Ayala makes an inversion of this scheme and invents a world in which individual human consciousness ascribes being to its surrounding universe. This causes Ayala's novelistic world to have a foundation of shifting reality in which permanency and fixity of being are denied. All existence is situational and not substantial. The surrounding physical universe is a shadow world that exists intermittently at the whim of the individual consciousness. The agonies of existence in such a world are evident: nothing is sure, nothing is permanent, nothing exists in itself. Moreover, the overlying propensity for discontinued existence implies the strong possibility of sudden annihilation.

I would like to suggest that Ayala's novelistic practice is not an exception. I believe that a close analysis of the ontological structure and the artistic distance of other supposedly conventional realistic novels of the early 20th century will reveal that they have been more affected by that period's way of perceiving and of interrelating perception and being than a cursory examination might suggest.

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