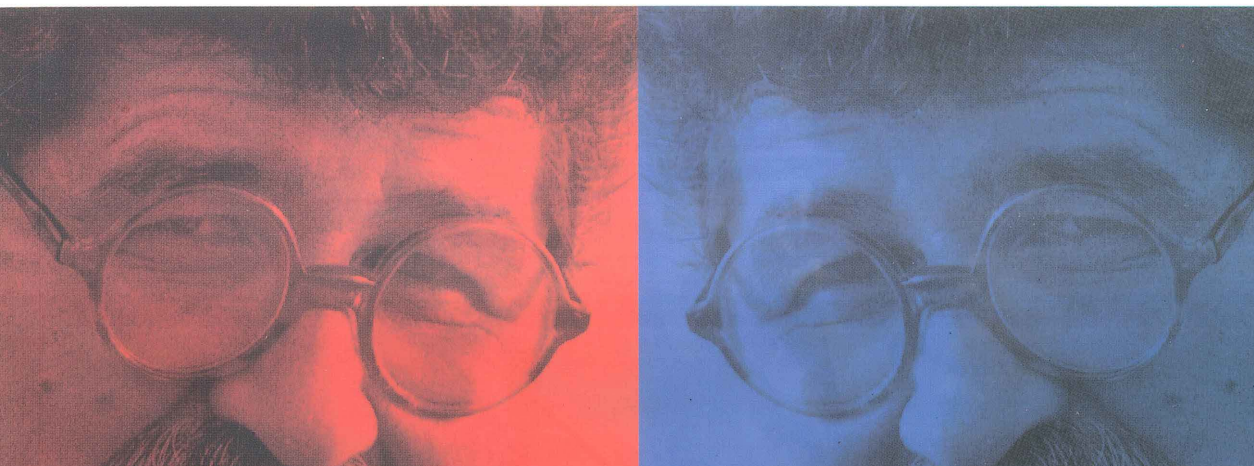


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Capítulo 16

LOS MUNDOS DE ALFREDO BRYCE ECHENIQUE

Nuevos textos críticos



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Language as Protagonist: Tradition and Innovation in Bryce Echenique's *Un mundo para Julius*

Jennifer Ann Duncan

Most novels have already been written. Those which manifestly do constitute a literary innovation may have been a fascinating exercise for the writer but they are too often tedious for the reader. They are so self-consciously determined to challenge every assumption the public has about the genre that they demand a great deal of effort on the part of the reader, who is therefore going to be drawn from a sophisticated minority and, even so, risks being left with the feeling that the value of the experiment is limited, since it does not inspire him to read or create more novels based on these principles. The future of the novel is therefore in jeopardy.

Fortunately, many works are now coming out of Latin America which are exhilaratingly original as well as being accessible to a reading public beyond those who are professionally interested in the craft of fiction and prepared to suffer some discomfort for the good of the cause. *Un mundo para Julius*¹ is one of these books.

The first impression this novel creates is that it is tremendously enjoyable. Its length (591 closely-typed pages) is no obstacle to this; on the contrary, the world being created for Julius is so absorbing that we leave it with regret. The reader's pleasure springs largely from the fact that the novel appeals to three very basic human instincts: the urge to be told a story, to be amused and to recognize our own world in that of art. Contemporary experimental fiction tends to deny us the gratification of these needs, precisely because they are so innate in human nature that they have dictated the form of art for centuries. Writers who wish to the original feel that novelty must lie in the rejection of these out-model functions; a novelist will have achieved nothing unless he forces the reader to adopt new attitudes.

¹ Barcelona (Seix Barral), 1970; Lima (Seix Barral), 1971.

Bryce is not, however, deliberately proposing to accomplish anything, beyond satisfying a desire to narrate. (He maintains that the book grew out of conversations with a friend in Lima, in which they recounted memories and invented stories in a style created for the purpose, modeled on the speech of various sectors of the Limeñan population).² This lack of a sense of moral obligation on his part (coupled with a certain inner compulsion, without which the book might lack merits beyond that of being readable), is largely responsible for the exuberant spontaneity of the narrative, which in turn communicates a feeling of freedom to the reader. The very humour and lightheartedness of the tone, in which some nonetheless abrasive observations are made about Peruvian society in particular and human nature in general, contribute to the reader's impression of freshness, and constitute an important innovation in Peruvian literature.³ However, humour characterizes many contemporary works in

² See Wolfgang Luchting, *Alfredo Bryce, humores y malhumores*, Lima (Milla Batres). 1975, pp. 17, 85 and 109-110. Bryce further denies (*ibid.*, pp. 11 and 118-20) that there was any deliberate satirical intention behind the novel, although he admits that the mere depiction of a society can sometimes prove to be an indictment. The choice of subject matter (life in upper-class society in Lima, contrasted with that of other social groups encountered by Julius), the constant irony, and the presentation of events mainly through the eyes of the youthful Julius, unworped by the prejudices of his class and moved by an innate sense of justice, mean that the pervasive satire cannot be totally fortuitous. However, the irony is indulgent rather than angry, directed at all the characters, not just the representatives of one social class, so that the oligarchs lose their prestige without becoming villains and the well-meaning figures appear ludicrous and clumsy rather than admirable. Bryce is clearly fascinated by human ridiculousness more than moved by passion for social reform. Yet the predominantly humorous vision through which he depicts society accentuates the critical approach since humor is invariably a weapon whereby appearances are demolished and the false authority conferred by habit is shown to be meaningless.

³ There is remarkably little humor in the Peruvian novel, especially when compared with much other contemporary literature, in Latin America and other continents. Both novels of urban realism and those of *indigenista* inspiration (the two main currents of Peruvian literature today) tend to be uniformly serious and grim, in style as well as subject matter. Notable exceptions are José Adolph's *La ronda de los generales* (Lima 1973) and Manuel Scorza's *Redoble por Rancas* (Caracas 1977) and even them both are fundamentally tragic books and the humour recedes considerably as the narrative progresses. There is much more humour in the Peruvian short story, but neither here nor in the novel is humour usually linked with literary or linguistic innovation (with the exception of Carlos Thorne's *Mañana Mao* (Lima 1974)). The most audacious innovator in Peru, where structure is concerned, is undoubtedly Vargas Llosa, but he would be the first to agree that he values tradition more than innovation, and that until the composition of *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* (Barce-

other Latin American countries (mainly Mexican prose fiction written since *Mundo*), so its presence alone would not suffice to situate the book in the literary vanguard, although there is a distinctly modern flavour to many of the stylistic features which provide the source of the humour in Bryce's novel. The ubiquitous satire of the book would indeed tend to reinforce its conventional aspects rather than its modernity, since to satirise may be seen as one of the traditional functions of the novel. Although satire has a liberating and revolutionary effect, it implies a level of social realism, and a moral dimension which are generally absent from contemporary experimental fiction. Although recent *avant-garde* novels in Latin America often do show social awareness, the trend of such works, more especially in Europe, is to produce self-contained artistic compositions, whose purpose and achievement is circumscribed by the text. The experiment is purely literary, prompting us to reflect on problems of narrative technique rather than social injustice, and it would be inappropriate so subjects such works to the ethical criteria applicable to everyday reality.

Yet this novel does not just succeed admirably in fulfilling the time honoured functions of entertaining or of providing a perceptive and critical analysis of society; it also stimulates our pleasure and our intellect through its originality. Examination of the text suggests that this originality lies in the freedom and sureness of touch with which the author has combined certain features of the traditional novel (an action which develops chronologically around a fixed group of easily-recognizable characters) with other, more innovatory techniques, such as continual shifts of narrative viewpoint, a predominantly oral and non-literary style and, above all, the cultivation of language as the protagonist.

Language for Bryce, is not just the medium of communication, a mirror of reality, it creates this reality; the characters the situations and the satire are in no way separable from the language which expresses them. Events are always presented to us through the language of one of the characters; furthermore, they often arise from the use of words, so that the language ceases to be a passive medium, at the service of the action, and becomes a dynamic element of the structure. It provides a comment on the attitudes it represents, and word-play

Iona, 1976) humour had been almost entirely absent from his work, since he had felt that the presence of humour detracted from the necessary tension in a serious novel. (Remark made in a lecture given at Cambridge in February, 1978; cf. his interview with L. Harss in *Los nuestros*, Buenos Aires, 1966).

replaces or precipitates the action. This active role of language is one of the most noticeable features of the contemporary experimental novel, whether in Latin America or Europe, and in this way Bryce, at first sight a traditional storyteller, belongs to the literary vanguard.

It is principally through the vivacity and versatility of the style that the reader is involved in the narrative. Although Bryce's explicit intention has been defined as that of telling a story, or that the novel's scope can be adequately conveyed by a summary of the action. There is in fact no plot as such; the narrative is comprised of various anecdotes centering around Julius between his fifth and eleventh years and the people in his microcosm. Nor are these events momentous or traumatic, apart from his sister's death near the beginning of the book which, profound though its repercussions are, is not treated in much detail. Episodes focus mainly on the neutral and repetitive actions of daily life (such as traveling to school or listening to the servants) or adventures on a child's scale, like visiting a building site or going out to tea. Although the reader is curious as to the outcome of each anecdote, it is evident that the plot is unimportant; it is not even unified, except through the presence of Julius, his family and the servants. The real source of interest lies in the manner of presentation; in the way in which the author manages to invest these commonplace situations with dramatic, social or psychological significance.

Description of the furniture or of routine affairs like mealtimes are never two-dimensional, designed to convey factual information and subordinated to the main action in *Mundo*; they become dramas in their own right, presented through the speech of the actors: «además había un columpio, con su silletita colgante para lo de toma tu sopita Julito... una cucharadita por tu mamá, otra por Cintita» (p. 13). Similarly, the description of a ceremony (in this instance Julius' first communion), instead of concentrating on a purely external description of objects or surroundings, perhaps alternating with comments by a third-person narrator about the character's thoughts, is transformed into a vivid re-enactment of the scene through the simultaneous evocation of objects, gestures and the character's preoccupations: «en la mano izquierda la vela que ojalá no se me apague con el viento» (p.161). A statement which advances the action likewise becomes a comment on the characters' attitudes, through the incorporation of a qualifying cliché: «partían felices rumbo a Ancón... donde siempre hay baile esta noche» (p. 251).

The presence of significant events is thus replaced by a circumlocutory style which, though its grammatical functions is to qualify ob-

jects of factual statements, is verbal rather than strictly adjectival, dynamic rather than static, lending animation to the narrative through a continual allusion to action. Through this imitation of the spoken word, the style enlivens the details of mundane activities and suggests both the importance they have in a child's worlds (thus fulfilling a descriptive function) and the social undercurrents beneath the trivia which assume a such significance for the leisured class Bryce is describing (thus fulfilling a critical function). A children's party, although the scene of considerable bustle, serves mainly as a pretext for entertaining the reader through the parody of the conversations:

Su hermana... había venido a ayudarla a controlar a tanta fierecilla. Y tanta fierecilla comía ahora su torta, *cake is the name*, que era imposible terminar con todo lo de es hijo de fulanito, de menganito, el diputado, tan buenmozo como era, últimamente ha envejecido mucho, igualito a su mamá. (p. 37)

The vocabulary and syntax here, as elsewhere, suggests the speech pattern of an entire class, its abuse of Anglicisms and diminutives, its clichés and the importance it accords to proper names, to nouns denoting profession or family connections, as subjects of conversations (as opposed to ideas or feelings):

Era un trome el mago, había trabajado en la televisión y todo, su *partenaire* no se cansaba de decirlo, un espectáculo de primerísima calidad por los niñitos del Perú y Sudamérica, un espectáculo de calidad en honor de Rafaelito Lastarria cuyo onomástico celebramos hoy día, un aplauso para él (Martín, por supuesto, cero). (p. 42)

The breathless imprecision of «y todo» and the vigour of the slang «trome» might seem to represent the excitement of the youthful audience, but the coyness, pomposity and forced enthusiasm of the style, reproducing the advertising pattern of the wizard's helper, maintain the critical distance necessary for satire, and indicate that the adult reader's detachment is shared by Julius, who refuses to be impressed by anything relating to the Lastarria cousins. Though ostensibly addressed to the children, the language shows that this introduction is really aimed at the parents, to whose vocabulary «niñitos», «*partenaire*» and «onomástico» belong, indicating that the performer's pretentiousness matches that of the parents, whose pride in being seen to supply the best counts for more than the children's amuse-

ment. That the quality of the performance may be inflated by the words, and not borne out by the evidence, is suggested by the tedium implicit in «no se cansaba». The final parenthesis designated the presence of a watchful audience, quick to note someone who does not even pretend to be impressed by the oratory.

The rapidity with which the viewpoint can be changed, to express the reaction of a whole group of participants, reproduces the liveliness of conversations or stage dialogue; the characters are involved in the scene predominantly through the words they use and hear («Susan que se moría de pena en inglés»). Moreover, the flexibility of free indirect speech, as opposed to straightforward dialogue, permits the narrative to be diffused with irony without losing its directness, since the selection and exaggeration implicit in this mimetic process embody an authorial comment. This is also possible through the swift transitions from dialogue to inner monologue:

—«¿Un whisky, *duchess*?» así la llamó su primo Juan. «Sí darling, con una pizca de hielo». Pobre darling, se casó con Susana, la prima Susana y descubrió que había más todavía, *something called class, aristocracy*, ella por ejemplo, y desde entonces vivía con el pescuezo estirado como si quisiera alcanzar algo, algo que tú nunca serás, darling» (p. 41)

As well as providing a comment on the speaker's attitude, the way insignificant episodes are animated by the style stresses the importance of language as the source of experience, not just the means by which the experience is communicated. Bryce thus shows how Julius' world is being created for him, and simultaneously recreates it for us, through the words in which Julius becomes aware of it, and it is significant that Julius experience most things aurally. (His brothers call him «orejitas», because of his sticking-out ears, and the physical detail reflects the moral.) One might argue that the reader's participation in a fictional world is invariably through language, but whereas many novelists simply substitute description for action, or translate a visual impression into words, Bryce, makes his protagonist form his impressions principally through what he *hears*: («la madre de Julius, a quien la servidumbre criticaba un poco últimamente, porque diario salía de noche y no regresaba hasta las mil y quinientas» [p.16]).

When Julius' school opens its new buildings, for instance, any description of the site, or of the boys' reaction to it is confined to two lines; the narrative dwells mainly on the linguistic exchanges prompted by the occasion. These include the Mother Superior's

speech to the boys about the importance of treating the premises well:

Sin llenarse toditos de tierra como antes. ¡Cuidadito con los baños!... ¡nada de escribir en las paredes!, ¡no olvidarse de jalar la cadenita cuando terminen de hacer sus cositas!. (p.177)

Bryce's parody of the use of diminutives, so frequent in Latin American speech, here indicates the mockery the children feel towards the euphemisms and forced familiarity of the grown-ups, whose pose is revealed by their style—so different when they are expressing real reactions, like anger. The omission of a description of the new buildings or an account of any other events that day, in favour of the insertion of this speech, indicates the extent of the impression made on Julius by the language (as opposed to the message or the environment)—as well, of course, as revealing the author's own fascination with words, which generates the narrative. Likewise, the boys' attitude to the buildings is expressed, not by describing the use they make of them, but the words they employ to talk about them: «Ahora sí que se podían cagar en cualquier otro niño uniformado porque mi colegio es más grande que el tuyo» (p.174). The imitation here of the grown-ups' speech (the use of the condescending diminutive and obscenity to show strength) quickly gives way to an incarnation of the experience in one of the chanting insults which play such an essential role in group definition—rendered absurd here because of the parody of childish language—but it is implied that for adults, too, identity and excellence are a question of possessive pronouns, not of intrinsic worth.

On one or two occasions Bryce specifically draws attention to the way in which the episode acquires its significance for Julius through the words which symbolize it:

La pena que tú nunca olvidarás, Julius... ella y él siguiendo hartos una escena que no debió ser triste, que sucedió para que escucharas esas palabras tipo Nilda, de mi voluntad, de mi voluntad niño, y ella terminaba de abrirte el paquete... de mi voluntad, Julius, ésas son tus palabras y otros nunca conocerán tú significado para esas palabras en una suite del Country Club, un día de tu santo... mientras Arminda te entregaba el regalo y tú no sabías qué decirle porque era un par de medias amarillas... y nunca podrías usarlas por horribles, cuando cogiste de su mano el pomo con el agua azul... que fue cuando la voz de mierda de Juan Lucas, allá en el baño, pronunció la palabra estoque, dijo se ha anticipado, y las letras que tú no querías que te dijeran nada, te habías defendi-

do hasta ese instante, las letras fueron palabras y tuvieron sentido para ti, de mi voluntad niño, de mi voluntad niño, de mi voluntad niño. (pp. 286-287)

This passages indicates that the experience does not achieve its full pathos until it is defined by words. The words, too, fulfil a double function, the plebeian expression summarises a social class and the inappropriateness of its presence in the Country Club, among elegant people like Julius's mother and stepfather; but this contrast points to another, since «de mi voluntad» stresses Arminda's genuine desire to give pleasure to Julius, literally going out of her way to remember his birthday. The juxtaposition of this scene, and the description of the aged Arminda's struggles across Lima by bus, with an earlier one, emphasizes Susan's lack of good-will. (There is irony too in «se ha anticipado», ostensibly referring to the inappropriateness of giving after-shave lotion to a child, but pointing to his mother's lack of anticipation):

Como siempre... Julius había comido solo en la suite y luego había esperado un rato más, hasta que por fin lo venció el sueño sin que mami supiera que mañana es mi santo. [El día siguiente] mami lo asfixiaba a punta de besos y de hablar de regalos que le iba a comprar esta tarde misma. Le pedía una lista, urgentemente se la pedía, quería llenarlo de regalos... quería hacerlo feliz inmediatamente, quería que supieras que te adoro. (p. 279)

Through his use of vocabulary and syntax, then, Bryce enhances both the entertainment value and the critical dimension of his novel as well as demonstrating the possibilities of language by the very fact of using it to expose the inadequacies of speech. The parody of the characters' speech releases the potential drama of a situation and the manner in which the participants verbalize an experience endows it with significance. The reader is involved less through his curiosity about what will happen, than his amusement as the way in which people talk about situations, whether drawing on memory or fantasy.

This is particularly apparent in Bryce's treatment of the temporary disappearance of six-year old Julius. The author does not approach it as a psychological drama, attributing fears or ambitions to his protagonists; there is no attempt to imitate the adventure story, by making exciting events befall our hero, or to create suspense by hiding from us his whereabouts. We are treated instead to an account of Julius's tranquil afternoon, spent exclusively in a long conversation with an

itinerant painter, in which they talk about the people and scenes which compose their respective worlds, each being fascinated by the other's life («Insistía con sus preguntas, quería saber más, pero empezó a notar que se excitaba demasiado» [p. 81]). But meanwhile «en casa había ardido Troya» (p. 83); the situation is turned into intense drama, involving three casualties, when the servants express their distress not by taking any practical steps to recover the child, but —by exciting themselves with dire speculations and hurling insults (and more tangible objects) at each other, in true burlesque tradition:

—Usted tiene la culpa por zamorra, por andar putean... No pudo terminar... La Selvática dijo que los mendigos ésos... eran gitanos y que a lo mejor se lo habían robado a Julius...

—Tal vez algún día vuelva a aparecer trabajando en un circo, pero ya estará nacionalizado gitano, ya ni se acordará de su familia.

—Después empezó a decir que no, que lo que había pasado era que el pintor, el gringo ése seguro que era un maricón, degenerado, se había raptado a Julius, lo había violado, ya lo había matado. La interrumpieron los alaridos de Vilma enloquecida, lanzándose contra las paredes, maldiciendo su suerte... ¡ella nunca había coqueteado con nadie!, ¡que la perdonaran!, ¡solo había querido que le tomaran unas fotos!... Nilda también gemía, asustada por sus propias palabras; los mayordomos ya no tardaban en imitarlas. (pp. 84-86)

So far we have seen how the sequence of a unified plot is replaced in *Mundo* by a series of anecdotes, presented through the words in which Julius' universe is being created for him; words signifying the values of the speakers and crystallizing the experience for Julius and for us. It is not of course only central episodes which are highlighted by his focus on linguistic idiosyncrasies; the role of language in this book is far more radical and pervasive. All the narrative elements, the actions which form the framework and advance the story, as well as the many details particularising it, linking the structural nodes, are indissolubly merged with the style in *Mundo* to a far greater extent than in the traditional novel. Obviously it is through the style that events are narrated, characters defined and a viewpoint conveyed in any book. But in the traditional novel the style tends to subordinate to these functions; the language is chosen for the aptness with which it will describe a situation or develop an argument existing independently of it. In the case of radical novels, the fiction only comes into being through the words, since linguistic associations provide the impetus for the narrative and replaces the development of a logical

sequence of ideas. Even in *Mundo*, where the traditional mimetic function of the novel is paramount, the details of this imaginary world are inseparable from the language which creates them. This shift in emphasis from language as a medium to language as protagonist is apparent in the carious dislocations of syntax or figures of speech through which the style draws attention to itself.

The reader is struck from the very beginning of the narrative by the habit of introducing characters by a particular adjective, or little phrase, which is repeated whenever they make an appearance: «horrible y feliz con su mantilla la tía Susana» (p. 162), «la tía nuevamente al mando de todo horrible» (p. 36). At first, this seems to be merely an amusing stylistic device, creating humour through repetition and incongruity (since the adjective jars with the general tenor of the description); then it may startle us by its juxtaposition with a verb, where we would expect an adverb, thus emphasizing that this is not a specific action which is being modified but an entire way of life which is being qualified: «Susan besaba lindo a su prima» (p. 106) or «Linda vino a decirle bájate darling, el tiempo de los indios pasó» (p. 477). But as often happens in *Bryce*, something which may have started as a game, and which increases the comic effect, serves a wider function.

These adjectives instantly evoke the impression each character makes on the others; it is universally accepted that Susan always acts with grace and that her cousins —whose children are referred to as «los primos Lastarria, esas mierdas»— is ghastly, whatever she does. The label is analogous to the comments of a chorus, or to a mask worn by a pantomime character, which is precisely how they are intended to appear to Julius and to us. They have neither the psychological depth of personages in a conventional novel, nor the perpetually fluctuating identity of those in a contemporary text. They belong to the dramatic or oral tradition, in which the characters perform according to clearly-defined roles, instantly recognizable to the spectators, emphasized by a musical refrain accompanying each entrance. The driver «pone en marcha el motor con cara de suchofer, Madama, casi-su-zambo» (p. 251), and «el arquitecto de moda... venía con su novia anunciando próxima boda» (p. 225). That the marriage of this personage, always referred to generically as «el arquitecto de moda» and whose *novia* is designated as «una Susan bastante disminuida» (until she becomes «la Susan disminuida que aumentaba» [p. 403]) is yet another of *Bryce's* stereotyped events, is conveyed by the use of the present progressive and the

omission of a possessive adjective before «boda», turning a neutral statement into an ironic observation.

In addition to providing entertainment and satire, this device further transcends the static role of description by indicating the manner in which the character will be integrated into the action. For this is a society in which roles are rigidly defined, and each character is expected to adopt the language and behaviour appropriate to his part, or mask. Susan's beauty and elegance are felt to be an adequate excuse for her shortcomings, and the indulgence they inspire diverts certain minor catastrophes. But beauty is an upper-class prerogative, and that of Vilma, Julius's nursemaid, precipitates disasters, although at first it seems to be only the pretext for another verbal refrain:

Su mamá que era Linda, decía la chola, debe descender de algún indio noble, un inca, nunca se sabe. La chola que podía ser descendiente de un inca, sacaba a Julius cargado en peso de la carroza... y no lo soltaba hasta llegar al baño. (p.11)

The label initially serves to parody a Peruvian cliché about eugenics, and to show how this impression impresses the infant Julius, for whom Vilma will henceforth be the descendant of an Inca, simply because the idea was put into words in his hearing. (It is also an illustration of the dramatization of a daily routine-Julius's bath-by the style, which confers identities beyond the prosaic on the actors; the events become a sequel, with an ironic reversal of roles, to Julius' daily show of dominance, when he shoots all the servants with a toy pistol, consciously acting out the cowboys and Indian motif on his bedroom walls, and unconsciously echoing the repressive behaviour of his parents' class towards the indigenous population). When Vilma («Hermosa la chola») meets Victor («era guapo el cholo»), the amorous banter called forth by the verbal masks leads Vilma to neglect her duties, and Julius gets lost (a drama mirrored and magnified by the later episode involving the photographs). Finally, the presence in the house of a pretty servant is inevitably taken advantage of by the eldest son («La chola es guapa y ahí tienes... así es», declares his stepfather), and Vilma is dismissed. This episode acts as catalyst for Julius' awareness of the problem of social injustice, crystallized for the reader in his obsession with a linguistic point: «¿qué quiere decir tirar?» The question, like any refrain, particularly one which exploits the themes of naivety and sexual curiosity, occasions several amusing exchanges. But it indicates a deeper and more criti-

cal use of language; obsession with a word here, as so often happens, covers up a wider anxiety which has nothing to do with the meaning of the word itself, but with a whole context of behaviour that it implies. Through the situation when Julius first hears «tirar» used in this sense⁴ he becomes preoccupied with the dual standards of morality applied to rich and poor, men and women. Language, therefore, in this instance as in the memory perpetuated for Julius by the words «de mi voluntad niño», both symbolizes the experience and, through the speaker's inability to express the real issues, reflects critically on the inadequacy of daily speech and invites us to clearer definitions.

This simultaneously creative and critical activity of language, whereby the author's use of words urges us to examine the scope and limitations of language, a process which has become such a predominant feature of the radical novel, is everywhere apparent in *Mundo* with the difference that, whereas this constitutes, among deliberately innovatory writers, an experiment which is itself the center of the work, for Bryce it simply represents the natural way of treating his subject. The verbal acrobatics of *Mundo*, since they form an integral part of the narrative both creating its impetus and receiving their *raison d'être* from it, are therefore on the whole less obtrusive and more diverting, though no less stimulating when one stops to analyze them, than the linguistic pyrotechnics of, say, Cabrera Infante's *Exorcismos de esti(l)lo* (1976), which have the explosive but incomplete value of self-contained word-games, not immediately applicable to anything beyond language (which is, of course, intimately connected with literature and society, but readers will make the association less readily than with Bryce.)

The verse and ingenuity of Bryce's style are not, then, gratuitous, nor do they slow down narrative. The humour comes from the characters' own use of language, but the author often integrates this into the action by repeating a linguistic idiosyncrasy in the dialogue and making it the subject of a piece of third-person narrative, relating action (a device already glimpsed with «tanta fierecilla» and «pobre darling»):

-Es Julius, el menor de mis hijos.

-Caballerito ilustre...

⁴ In fact, a later episode, when Julius' second brother discovers Vilma in a brothel; however, it is all part of the same narrative thread as far as the reader and Julius are concerned.

Caballerito ilustre, furioso, notó que la mano... se acercaba para posarse sobre su cabeza y se anticipó introduciéndose un dedo en la oreja, saltando... y sacudiendo la cabeza para botar el agua que se le había metido hasta el cerebro de tanto bucear; le salpicó la guayabera a Pericote, que en ese instante retiraba la mano sin haber logrado tocar nada. (p. 259)

A non-event (a meaningless encounter between two characters, prevented by one of them from reaching its completion) is thus animated through emphasis of a verbal response, whereby a figure of speech is metamorphosed into becoming the protagonist of subsequent action. This essentially active role of figures of speech is also apparent in passages which might seem at first to be gratuitous metaphor: «Entonces los hombres uniformados de elegancia e interés común, recogieron vasos de whisky de los azafates adivinadores de tus deseos y se lanzaron a mirar» (p. 299).

The facetious adjectival phrases do not just act as baroque ornamentations; the humour of repetition implicit in the mass movement of hands to glasses and eyes to a pretty girl, brought out by the vocabulary and zeugma, underlines the mindless predictability of those present. The relation of action («los hombres... recogieron... y se lanzaron a mirar») is reduced to a secondary role; it acquires significance only through the apparently otiose figures of speech which express the all-important sub-drama of half concealed motives, ambitions and antagonisms not dissimilar to the *sous-conversation* brought to the surface by Nathalie Sarraute.

Remarks which seem to be asides representing the author's opinion or simply his delight in epigram illustrate again how language is inseparable from situation since both creates and reflects it. «Cano metía su pobreza en diversas situaciones igualito como se mete la pata» (p.188) might seem to be an authorial comment but the zeugma which establishes a similarity between two basically unconnected phenomena indicates that this is probably the view of the upper-class parents for whom poverty represents above all a lack of tact. The attitude pre-exists the statement but it is crystallized very forcibly for the reader by the figure of speech.

Although such interjections are supplied by a witty observer partly through sheer delight in the versatility of language, they nonetheless illuminate the central theme and are integrated into the action to a degree that mere wit or description are not. Moreover, this process of integration is essentially verbal, inherent in the use of irony, which stresses the gulf between motive and gesture more instantly and subtly than would be possible in the visual media; «Partía en su

Mercedes, previa Coca-Cola helada más pastilla verde estimulante» (p. 188). The ritual nature of the action, doubly ludicrous because the purpose of such journeys is to help the good ladies of the parish distribute food to the poor, and also because Susan sees herself as transformed by a social conscience into abandoning frivolous pleasures, is exposed by the simple omission of the article and the use of «previa». Heroism is here deflated by the casualness of the tone, stressing the automatism of the behaviour. But it can also take the form of inflation through mock-heroic language, when the choice of linguistic register simultaneously discloses the character's fantasy models and their inadequacy. Julius' attempt to champion Cano, the classmate mocked for his poverty, therefore becomes hilarious, evoking our indulgent mockery instead of admiration:

Julius... acercándose más bueno y justiciero que el Super Ratón en último número de Historietas... Super Ratón página trece y se lanzó sobre la Mirada y paff otro golpe... sangre en mi mano y paff otro golpe, me quema la nariz. (p. 142)

The importance accorded to subject matter in the traditional novel has been displaced in favour of a text which contains its own verbal momentum and in which the language conveys the intensity of the characters' participation (and hence the reader's) in actions trivial in themselves. The structural distinction between actions or statements which are pivotal and those which merely constitute peripheral details (sometime difficult to establish even in conventional novel) is therefore blurred.⁵ This is a feature of many innovatory novels, as far back as Proust or even Flaubert. In these writers, as well as in Butor, Sarraute and Borges, each sentence tends to be a microcosm of the whole work, providing a fresh illustration of the complex central theme, which is developed in a circular (or spiral) fashion, rather than through a linear plot or argument. For this very reason, no section of the narrative can be considered of greater structural importance than any other, and apparent embellishments of style are often as dynamic as actions. The emphasis is different in other, more contemporary ex-

⁵ Although I am obviously alluding here to the useful distinctions made by Structuralist critics, I have deliberately avoided using their terminology, which I find less satisfactory. See R. Barthes, «Analyse structurale des récits», in *Poétique du récit*, Paris, 1977, and J. Kristeva, *Le Texte du roman*, The Hague, 1970; also J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, London, 1975 (especially pp. 189-205) and T. Todorov, *Littérature et signification*, Paris, 1967, and *Poétique de la prose*, Paris, 1971.

perimental writers (Córtazar and Robbe-Grillet among the more established, Jorge Enrique Adoum or many young Mexican writers among the newcomers), although the result —the abolition of a structural hierarchy— is identical. With these writers the fiction develops piecemeal, through a series of false starts and gradual approximations, in which all material is potentially significant and so none is rejected *a priori* (or so the novelist pretends), ending with an invitation to further effort, which may involve discarding all the abortive attempts which the text represents.

This is not entirely the case in *Mundo*, since there is some sort of progression in Julius' awareness of the world, linked with the chronological sequence of events. The style does not exist in isolation, it is called into being by the needs of a perfectly coherent narrative. Nor is there any revision or recapitulation: the text always moves forwards. However, this conventional framework is deceptive. Although new events are constantly occurring, apparently causing the action to advance, neither the events nor their sequence is really significant; they could all be replaced by others, or could occur in a different order. The narrative could be prolonged indefinitely, either in time or by providing further anecdotes about the people we have already met, for there is no firm distinction between major and minor characters, events of greater or lesser importance. Although each anecdote has a shape, and a conclusion, although the book as a whole does provide a coherent universe, with thematic unity, Bryce claims that there was no predetermined plan, that the novel grew spontaneously out of a short story of ten pages.⁶ The reader's impressions confirm that this evolution of a structure dictated by the demands of the fiction itself, not imposed in advance by a guiding principle, is at least plausible, in spite of one's inevitable reservations about the total spontaneity of any published text.

The self-generating role of images and the abolition of distinctions between crucial events, or scaffolding, and the description of activities which seem to have no relevance to the central action (until we redefine it as theme) can be seen by the delighted detail with which author and protagonist dwell on minimal activities (like going through doors or getting into cars) which usually only serve the structural function of linking two scenes:

⁶ This is at least what Bryce claims; see Luchting, *op. cit.*, pp. 16, 103-104 and 118.

Tal vez porque un exceso de facilidades en la vida lo estaba dulcevitando y los placeres escaseaban ya en su placentera vida, o simplemente por hijo de puta, Juan Lucas había descubierto un nuevo juego... siglos que no viajaba y ahora en el hotel quería sentirse viajero constantemente... realmente gozaba teniendo una maleta a medio cerrar sobre su cama... las dejaba horas así como descansando. Las vaciaba y las mandaba limpiar. Le encantaba salir del hotel rodeado de botones uniformados y pendejos, que depositaban momentáneamente sobre la vereda sus maletas de cuero de chancho como los asientos de un Rolls Royce [sic] y esperaban sus órdenes para introducirlas, ésta al lado de ésta, sin golpearla contra los bordes, pues hijo, en la maleta del Mercedes o del Jaguar. (p. 252)

This obsession with possible arrangements and rearrangements of objects, replacing the role of adventure and giving rise to endless word-play is another characteristic of contemporary experimental novels (one thinks particularly of Beckett and the *nouveaux romanciers*), but in these writers it usually betrays ontological anguish and is associated with a feeling of insecurity, whereas in Bryce it is a source of relaxed humour. In all these writers the concentration on the actual and potential location of objects is matched by the compulsive search for definitions, the desire to name objects and feelings. This, too, is usually a source of comedy rather than anguish in Bryce, since it is the very inadequacy of definitions, suggested by the characters' unselfconscious use of cliché, that fascinates him, and the narrative is built up round the spontaneous misuse of language, through generalization, rather than the manical quest for the *mot juste*. However, although the process is diametrically opposed and the tone very different, the belief in the power of language and the urge to possess the universe through words is identical and this is made explicit in one passage in *Mundo*:

Cano no solo tocaba las cosas, sino que además les ponía un nombre que no era precisamente el que les correspondía. Ni más ni menos que si estuviese reinventando el mundo ... Tocó la macetita ... y la llamó perrito ... llenecito de rosas el rosal y Cano empezó a tocarlas toditas y a toditas las iba llamando mamá, mamá y Julius observando, recordando que Cano era huérfano, y Cano contemplando una rosa medio marchita, arriba ... y llamándola abuelita ... había una araña y la tocó ... Fernandito ... la llamó mientras la aplastaba. (pp. 414-415)

This creation of a universe through words obviously mirrors the activity of the writer, and the vast majority of modern experimental

novels offer a text which is incessantly commenting on the process of literary creation through the games played with styles and narrative techniques and the presence of a character within the fiction who is engaged in writing a book. This is much less obviously the case with Bryce but it is nonetheless a significant feature of *Mundo*. Firstly, it is evident that the continual shift of narrator makes us conscious of the question of viewpoint; we must be constantly alert to the changes of register, suggesting who the speaker is since the traditional indications of narrative voice are absent. More significantly, there are also moments when we are reminded that the word-play (without which the episode would be no more than an event of no import for the characters and of no interest for the reader), is brought into existence precisely by the narrative act, for the benefit of an audience:

—Tenemos en casa al mejor cocinero de Lima.
 —Cocinera, —se le escapó a Julius, tal vez descubriendo la homosexualidad, tal vez pensando simplemente en Nilda.
 —¡Darling! —exclamó Susana, mirando aterrada a Juan Lucas.
 —Este tipo no va a vivir aquí, mujer. Sólo va a venir a cocinar... *Anyhow do you think he would dare?*

Y Julius, ahí parado, que era primero de su clase en inglés.

Al día siguiente... Carlos comía encantado porque ya tenía a quien batir durante una temporada, si se amarga la loca lo sueño. Abraham cocinaba encantado porque el chofer, negrote y con el bigotito así, era vivir la tentación en casa. Arminda no se daba cuenta de esos detalles. Se iba completando el servicio pero ella no captaba los matices que enriquecían la historia. (p. 401)

We are thus reminded that the printed page is an invitation to share in an embellishment of the situation, rather than a pretence at an objective copy or reality. Each episode in *Mundo* is recounted to a specific listener or listeners and so the allusion to the narrative act is constant, although less insistent and literary in flavour than in more radical novels. The importance of narrating is ubiquitous in *Mundo*; not only are we being told a story but the characters' function as a critical or admiring audience is emphasized. Julius is always anxious for a listener to whom he can recount the latest instalment of his life, and he in turn listens spellbound to the stories told him by Nilda "la Selvática" and the other servants, Peter the itinerant painter and his sister, whose style is faithfully reproduced by the narrator:

Y era (Julius escuchaba atentísimo) porque quería mucho pero mucho a una señorita que no era de su condición y que era pianista, que tocaba

lindo el piano. Mamita dice que pobre, que humilde, en fin, ya parecía que Julius iba entendiendo y no debería preguntar a todo ¿por qué?, sino más bien escuchar y dejar que termine la historia. (p. 32)

The fascinated audience is often doubled by another, more critical circle: «Susan les estaba contando de Europa... miraban con sonrisas nerviosas hacia la puerta donde Juan Lucas, Santiago y Bobby, recién llegados del Golf, seguían la escena irónicos, burlándose» (p. 100).

This ironical attitude of the characters to each other and of the author and reader to all of them permeates the narrative, accentuating its humorous rather than didactic intentions (see note 2). One sees here how Susan's rare appearance in the nursery is treated ironically both by the author and the rest of the family, so that the reader will not take seriously her temporary role of fond mother and employer («Susan decidía amarlos a todos un ratito» [p.98]). It is made quite clear that she adores Julius in the same way that she adores Coca-Cola; properly served, at certain times of the day and brought in by the maid when you ring for her. She turns her charms on the servants because she is unable to turn it off and has, momentarily, no other audience. Narrating is, therefore, shown as a necessary enrichment of life, animating the vacuum between activities and prolonging the adventure by reliving and structuring it.

The need for an audience, the need to communicate, to grasp the meaning of experience through words, is manifestly not in *Mundo* the febrile obsession it is for Beckett's characters, or Onetti's for the narrator of every *nouveau roman*, or even for Fuentes and Cortázar (where the sense of urgency is, however, disguised by humour), although it expresses as deep a need for Bryce and is certainly responsible for the book's existence.

This feature of Bryce's narrative technique, like so many of the others, results principally from the oral style of the novel, from its origin in conversation, recounted anecdote and pastiche. It is part of the book's spontaneity, and does not constitute a self-conscious discussion of the role of literature, any more than the allusions in *Mundo* to techniques and material of a non literary nature, such as the stage or cinema, familiar figures of popular art like comics or TV serials, the clichés of advertisements, colloquial speech, dreams or hallucinations indicate an avowed intent to challenge our definition of literature. With Bryce, this indiscriminate use of literary and non-literary inspiration simply reflects the fact that the author's world, like that of Julius or the reader is composed of many heterogeneous elements. The effect created enhances realism and naturalness more

fully than in resolutely innovatory writers, where the desire to abolish the boundary separating art from daily life, in itself a move towards greater realism, sometimes produces a rather artificial result, because the obligation to innovate takes precedence over the requirements, or even the existence, of the subject matter.

Mundo, at first sight is a book which is refreshing because it makes no claims to shatter our assumptions about the novel and because it responds to the time-honoured demand for a story and for a mimetic world, is also an original book. It is modern in form because of the mobility of the narrative viewpoint and the dynamic role accorded to language. It is modern in spirit because of the writer's lucid and receptive attitude, allowing the narrative to shape itself in response to inner exigencies. But it is above all original because it does not try to imitate modernity. By retaining many features of the traditional novel, while taking advantage of the greater flexibility afforded by recent innovations, Bryce simply takes the total versatility of the novel for granted.

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