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## Capítulo 18

# LOS MUNDOS DE ALFREDO BRYCE ECHENIQUE

Nuevos textos críticos



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*Los mundos de Alfredo Bryce Echenique (nuevos textos críticos)*

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# Narrative Access to *Un mundo para Julius*

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*Un mundo para Julius* (1970),<sup>1</sup> first novel of Alfredo Bryce Echenique, belongs among the contemporary literary works which are structured from the temporal and spatial contours of Lima. But Bryce's literary space consists of the *limeño* world of the very wealthy (*la oligarquía criolla*), and all other segments of the social order are seen in their relationships with the privileged class. Thus Bryce extends the boundaries of urban realism, which occupied so many Peruvian writers of the 1950's and '60's, in order to deal with different patterns of reality which also reflect the crisis of present day society.

Julius, the central character of the novel, moves within this rarefied world from age five to age eleven. As he matures, his developing consciousness absorbs the social distinctions around him, and gradually he begins to touch the borders of existence in those positioned lower than his family. The title, *Un mundo para Julius*, poses many questions: Is this a world for Julius? How will this world affect him? Will he remain in it or, retaining his sensitivity, will he find a better one, with more social justice and more human concern? Although Bryce insinuates answers—which in turn may be open to varying interpretations—he allows the reader to form his own opinions.

The respect that Bryce displays for contemporary narrative concepts puts him in complete agreement with Mario Vargas Llosa's

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<sup>1</sup> *Un mundo para Julius* (Barcelona: Barral, 1970). All quotations will be taken from this edition. Alfredo Bryce Echenique was born in Lima in 1939. He has published three collections of short stories: *Huerto cerrado* (1968); *Muerte de Sevilla en Madrid* (1972); and *La felicidad, ja, ja* (1974). His second novel, *Tantas veces Pedro*, appeared in 1977.

statement that the authenticity of a fictional work, does not depend upon its story line but on the way in which this is incorporated into the writing and into the structure.<sup>2</sup> Bryce begins with rigorous symmetry in both external and internal structure. Externally, the long novel is divided into five chapters, each with a varying number of divisions, Chapter I, «El palacio original», introduces the members of Julius' family in the elegant mansion in the suburb of Orrantia. Chapter V, «Retornos», a counterpart of the first chapter, presents a new family portrait six years later and set in their modern *palace* in Monterrico. Architecturally planned, the two chapters stand as pillars of the novel's structure, and each home functions as extensions of the people living in them. Between are three chapters that focus on details of Julius' life outside his home: Chapter II, «El Colegio»; Chapter III, «Country Club»; Chapter IV, «Los Grandes» (again in the *Colegio*, but Julius is now one of the *grandes*).<sup>3</sup>

Internally, the symmetry continues, particularly between the first and last chapters. A birthday party is the center of the second division of Chapter I. Here Cinthia, Julius' beloved ten-year-old sister, suffers a sudden hemorrhage, an unmistakable signal of the disease which will soon claim her life. In Chapter V, part of the first division is filled with a graduation party where many of Cinthia's former classmates are present. To Julius and his mother it seems for a moment that Cinthia is with them again. (Others who *return* are Julius' brother Santiago, who studies in the United States; Nilda, the former cook; and even Vilma, Julius' childhood *ama* who returns in memory via the news of her *profession*). In this final chapter Julius removes Cinthia's picture from the night table next to his bed and places it at the far end of his room, symbolic, perhaps, of his distancing himself from childhood (Or from his world?).

Time, so essential to contemporary novelists, moves principally in personal chronological order, centering on Julius from age five to eleven. (In the initial pages, however, there are brief memory flashes of scenes in his life before the age of five). The lineal progression is not steady, but often accelerated or retarded, with segments missing or merely implied. There are no references to specific time periods,

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<sup>2</sup> See «En torno a la nueva novela latinoamericana» in *Teoría de la novela*. Germán y Agnes Gullón Eds. Madrid: Taurus (1974): 115.

<sup>3</sup> This symmetry is strikingly similar to the arch form (ABCBA) so prevalent in contemporary music.



whether present of historical, and faithful to the child's perspective, no current military or political figures disturb his world.<sup>4</sup>

The recurring of events in related forms makes use of associated rather than cyclic time. In Chapter I, for example, Santiago abuses the servant Vilma, and in Chapter V, a younger brother repeats the action with her replacement. More complex are Susan's memories which mingle the long ago meeting with her first husband and the repetition of those circumstances in another meeting she has just witnessed between her second husband and «la sueca». Associated time frames serve to extend the death and burial of Arminda, the laundress, which occurs in the new mansion. Bertha was taken out hastily through the servants' door, although Cinthia managed to arrange a little ceremony to bury a few of her belongings. Julius, in the Monterrico palace, goes farther in proclaiming her feelings as he manipulates the funeral attendants into removing, Arminda's body through the principal door. Bryce himself commented later: «El entierro de Arminda no es más que la prolongación triunfal del entierro de Bertha».<sup>5</sup>

In ordering the world of his creation, Bryce has adopted a narrative viewpoint and a consequent perspective which must be accepted in order to enter fully into the veracity of the novel. Therefore, the identity of the narrator must be established. Is he an author-narrator? A narrator-witness? A narrator-character? Julius himself? Julius as an adult-narrator? The reader's initial contact with the flow of the text does not immediately determine the narrating voice. It is someone with intimate knowledge of these materials, someone who easily identifies with the characters, particularly with Julius, and with the world in which they move, and who admits the existence of the reader and his free entrance into the spatial context of the novel. Although aspects of one or another type of narrator are applicable, the author-narrator is the most satisfactory. Narrator and author can be separated, particularly if adhering to Oscar Tacca's restriction of a narrator who informs and an author who questions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Luchting thinks that the years were vaguely between 1956 to 1962. He bases this on several details, for example, that TV came to Lima in 1958. *Alfredo Bryce: Humores y malhumores*. Lima: Milla Batres (1975): 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Ib.*: 36.

<sup>6</sup> «Toda pregunta, aunque aparezca indistinta en el hilo del relato, no corresponde, en rigor, al narrador. Bien vista, puede siempre atribuirse al autor, al personaje o al lector». *Las voces de la novela* (Madrid: Gredos, 1973): 67.

The actual proportions in the mixture of autobiographical and invented parts becomes unimportant in the overall development of the novel.

Without multiple narrating voices, or changes in narrator, a single narrating voice in a contemporary novel must have great flexibility and range. In *Un mundo para Julius* the narrator often imitates the manner of speaking of others, and frequently assumes their points of view. Thus multiple concepts reach the reader indirectly:

Julius nació en un palacio... un palacio con cocheras, jardines, piscina, pequeño huerto donde a los dos años se perdía...; con departamentos para la servidumbre, como un lunar de carne en el rostro más bello, hasta con una carroza que usó tu bisabuelo, Julius, cuando era Presidente de la República, ¡cuidado!, no la toques, está llena de telarañas, y él, de espaldas a su mamá, que era linda, tratando de alcanzar la manija de la puerta. (9-10)

Sólo Julius comía en el comedorcito... Aquí lo que había era una especie de Disneylandia... Los espaldares de las sillas eran conejos riéndose a carcajadas... ¡Ah!, además había un columpio, con su si-lletita colgante para lo de toma tu sopita, Julito (a veces, hasta Juliuscito), una cucharadita por tu mamá otra por Cintita, otra por tu hermano Bobicito y así sucesivamente, pero nunca una por tu papito porque papito había muerto de cáncer. A veces, su madre pasaba por ahí... (13)

The first voice appearing through the objective third person narration is probably that of Julius' mother, and in the second example, the voices of one or more of the servants. The «ah» in the latter passage comes from the narrator commenting personally on the scene he is describing.

The oral tone of the novel, which is sensed immediately, is continuously reinforced by a narrator who enters directly to break the third person omniscience. Using, either *yo* or *nosotros*, or occasional conversational expressions like *parece que*, *hubiera podido pasar*, the narrator deliberately calls attention to himself:

La muy idiota tenía que dejar a sus dos hijos en cama antes de salir a cualquier parte, y él abajo, fumando más de la cuenta y esperando que terminara de arreglarse, para qué, no sé, mientras Susan y Juan Lucas recibían... (106)

En fin, ya de eso se encargarían las crónicas sociales con «inimitable mentecatería», según Juan Lucas. Hablaría de su viaje sin que ellos lo quisie-

ran. (Ya por ahí no me meto: eso es algo que pertenece al yo profundo de los limeños; nunca se sabrá;...) (97)<sup>7</sup>

¡Susan se había comprado cada juego de té! ¡Para qué les cuento! Definitivamente le dio por las cosas viejas. (182)

In variation, the narrator occasionally addresses the *destinatario* directly with the *tú* form:

ya después vendría la camisa de seda italiana, luego lo de escoger la corbata, ninguna mujer sabía hacerlo, cosas de hombres... Poco a poco iría quedando listo para un día más de hombre rico. En otro baño, uno que tú nunca tendrás, hollywoodense en la forma, en el color... (119)

Si, por ejemplo, en ese momento, te hubieras asomado por el cerco que encerraba todo lo que cuento, habrías quedado convencido de que la vida no puede ser más hermosa... (146)

The author's own explanations of his narrating procedures, given to Wolfgang Luchting in 1972,<sup>8</sup> stress the spontaneity and the oral qualities of his work. According to Bryce, he saw himself seated in a café on the Jirón de la Unión conversing naturally with his longtime friend Alberto Massa. Bryce's desire to emphasize the lack of literary pretension is understandable, but his insistence that he never corrected his manuscript is farfetched. The careful structuring of the novel and the skillful use of contemporary narrative techniques belie the pretense of complete spontaneity. But the oral aspect, already caught by the reader, provides the final key for capturing the unique tone of this novel. Now the narrator becomes someone seated in a public café, telling his story directly to a listener. Perhaps the tale is overheard by other listeners who may not be directly involved in the conversation but whose presence is felt by the speaker. Possibly he even embellishes a few details for their benefit! The concept fulfills Tacca's division: «Entre el autor y lector (siempre virtual) se sitúan el narrador y su destinatario (o lector ideal)».<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> When Wolfgang Luchting asked Bryce who said the words in parentheses, Bryce answered: «Digamos que lo piensa el autor y lo dice un segundo autor que se sale del texto mediante el paréntesis» (op. cit., 47). In other words, a separation of author and narrator.

<sup>8</sup> In a letter from Paris, and in an interview (1971-1974); op. cit., 17 and 105.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., 67.



Autor	Emisor	Destinatorio	Lector
Bryce	Narrator	A. Massa	Reader
Echenique	B. Other	listeners	

Alberto Massa, like Bryce himself, belongs to Julius' privileged class; any other listeners in the immediate vicinity would have varying degrees of familiarity with this world. Only the anonymous reader, then, may not have ready access to Lima's rigid social structure. Bryce's complete confidence in the use of the *limeño* speech of the upper classes, coupled with this imitation of the manner of speech of the lower classes (re-created from the perspective of upper social stratum to lower) adds to the oral tone of the novel. In addition, the representative speech patterns and the nuances of Peruvian language and vocabulary help to orient the reader in his hierarchal ambience. The use of tag words, such as «Susan linda», «Susana horrible», reinforces the effect which the narrator wishes, and also heightens the intimate relationship of narrator and internal-external audience (listeners plus readers).

On another narrative level, there is the complicated relationship between narrator and characters. There are no purely narrator-character combinations, but the narrator telling the story of Julius and his world has an intimate bond with Julius, and the novel's perspective often blends with that of the child. Therefore, we closely follow Julius' maturing concepts of his reality, and we form many of our own attitudes toward his world through his perceptions and observations. Other characters are seen from without, and are often distinguished by narrative tone, by manner of expression (direct or indirect), or, occasionally, by the narrator's comments.

Exceptions to both the selected perspective and the oral tone occur in relatively brief segments dealing with Arminda and with Susan. In the case of the laundress, on two occasions there is doubt as to whether the thoughts expressed are her own or whether they are being described by an omniscient narrator. The resulting linguistic confusion aptly parallels Arminda's own confused and exhausted mental and physical state. This occurs the first time on the long bus ride which she must take in order to deliver the family's laundry to the country club. The second time is immediately before her death:

... siempre el sol la cegó... El agua estaba ahí, en un extremo de la tabla de planchar; pestañeó... no le molestó quedarse sin ese trocito de pasado para siempre. Hay agua. Enchufar la plancha... la vio venir, sí, sí, detrás



de todas las chispas la vio venir, cómo no lo supo antes para no abrir los ojos... (483-84).

Five pages of stream-of-consciousness (318-323) —or «el fluir psíquico» as Anderson Imbert prefers<sup>10</sup>— emanate from Susan's mind. Blotting out the reality of the careening car, and the reason for her husband's speed, Susan's jumbled flow of thoughts and memories reveals previously unknown portions of her past and present:

¡mío! ¡mío; ¡mío; ¡soy feliz!, nadie se mete conmigo... iré a verte en cuanto pueda, Susan, gracias, mil gracias, linda tu carta, eres un amor, daddy, los negocios me obligan a ir postergando el viaje, Susan, y me corté el pelo más chiquito, te mando cinco fotos, «I love you», daddy, tu madre reclama tus cartas, Susan, no me provoca escribir, no hago nada, no tengo tiempo para hacer nada, soy feliz, David, déjame abrazarte, Susan, no quisiera que nadie se meta conmigo, quisiera sentirme siempre libre, David, ¿son todas las peruanas como tú, guapa? ¿crees, David?, los más bellos dieciséis años, guapa, diecinueve, David, mentirosa, eres una peruana guapa y mentirosa... (318-319)

It is obvious that the attitude of an oral narrative, maintained carefully throughout the novel, momentarily dissolves during Susan's flow of thoughts, as well as in the shorter segments referring to Arminda. Puncturing Bryce's posture of pure spontaneity, these passages offer fleeting variations of perspective, time, and oral tone. On other occasions, where subjective levels take over, the oral tone is muted but not lost completely. An example of this modification occurs in the passages where an anxious Julius loses himself in daydreams in which he becomes Cano (a schoolmate in very different social and economic circumstances, whom he is going to visit for the first time):

Esa misma noche empezó Julius el largo camino hasta la casa de Cano... Sintió pena y frío... No era tan peligroso ni tan solitario regresar por las calles... eran mucho menos inhóspitas que esos pampones donde a menudo se cruzaba uno con mendigos y raptos de niños... Abuelita se había acostumbrado a que llegara a una hora determinada... Era la única manera de evitar que abuelita se muera y de encontrarse solo en el mundo. En cambio, si eres un niño bueno y llegas siempre puntual a tu casa, abuelita podrá vivir tranquila hasta verte hecho un hombre... Pobre Julius, las palabras de abuelita lo conmovieron de tal manera que empezó a correr

<sup>10</sup> See «Formas de la novela contemporánea» in *Teoría de la novela*, 153.

como loco para llegar a tiempo y encontrarla viva. Tenía miedo de perderse pero cómo se iba a perder si él era Cano. (418-419)

Eduardo Mallea stresses that order must be regulated by a sense of proportion among all parts of a creative work —whether a work of art or a judgment of people or life—. And he points out that to obtain this proportion a subject must be positioned at the correct distance from both the creator (author) and the observer (reader).<sup>11</sup> In the positioning of Julius, it should be noted that Bryce places him at a distance which allows him to be seen clearly within his own environment. (Where Bryce momentarily loses this exquisite positioning —as in parts of Chapter III— the pages become cluttered with too much rhetoric wasted on nonessential characters). Furthermore, in spite of the close bond between author and principal character, Bryce has placed Julius outside himself, thus permitting him his own existence. This is accomplished in part by the distancing of memories or, put another way, by the long view provided by memory. Wolfgang Iser refers to what he calls «the proliferation of memories»<sup>12</sup> in the novel, but, in my opinion, it is the selection and rearrangement of memories, augmented by imagined happenings, which lessen the author's personality and increase that of Julius.

Julius functions on a personal level, and perhaps on a symbolic level if he is to be taken as a transitional figure or an end product of his class. In any case, the reader knows a great deal about Julius. Above all, he knows that Julius was born into a privileged *limeña* life of great wealth, that his care has been given over to the servants (who adore him), and that he spends much of his time alone. It is difficult to produce real feelings of compassion for a child born into such wealth (the usual reaction is irritation), but the narrator exposes Julius' authentic suffering. His father died when he was still a baby; his sister, the only person who really loved and understood him, died when he was five; his frivolous mother has no time for him; his stepfather considers him rather peculiar; his older brothers ignore him completely. Only the servants offer affection. In common with other young protagonists in recent Peruvian literature (for example, Ernesto of *Los ríos profundos* and Cuéllar of *Los cachorros*), Julius is an outsider. Different from the other members of his family,

<sup>11</sup> See «Importancia del punto de vista en la vida y en las letras (o de la justa distancia)». *Teoría de la novela*, 133-144.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., 16.

he is out of place within his own familial world, and he cannot really fit into the world of the servants. The resulting insecurity causes him to strive constantly to be pleasing and well-liked by everyone.

Gradually Julius begins to explore beyond himself. First he ventures into the servants quarters. On one occasion he rides with the chauffeur to the laundress' house (but once inside, he is sickened by the conditions). He is curious about his piano teacher's brusque behavior and her sparsely furnished studio. He admires the construction workers who exhibit such skill (and he outdoes himself to gain their respect). In his school he is fascinated by Cano, an inhibited scholarship student with odd gestures of dejection, and the only one without a chauffeur. He observes his brother's callousness and, with growing awareness, their debauchery and viciousness, which distress his spirit.

Through Julius we come in contact with the privileged, egoistic, and self-indulgent world surrounding him. Indifference toward others, rather than actual cruelty, characterizes this environment, and the attitude extends in all directions. The servants, so essential for the smooth functioning of the household, hover outside the protective covering of this indifference. Even Cinthia reaps its grim results when her tuberculosis, not taken seriously, leaps over the barriers of wealth and privilege. Frivolity must always be cultivated, as evidenced by Juan Lucas' displeasure with the sporadic sallies of his wife (Susan) into charitable endeavors. Life is to be filled with incessant partying, with world travel at whim, with gorgeous living conditions, with incredible extravagances. Elegance, money, and the right family name are tangible values.

The collective sin of this *limeña* class is its social irresponsibility, which appears even more shocking against the extreme economic poverty that exists in Perú. But there is no overt social protest in *Un mundo para Julius*. Rather, the author-narrator allows the social milieu simply to exist. It is the reader who must decide its worth. Bryce himself, who belongs by birth to this select group, has been marked by his background; yet, at the same time, he appears anxious not to remain within its ambience. Referring to these attitudes toward his original environment, and that of Julius, Augusto Tamayo Vargas writes: «... sentía una mezcla de complacencia y de repugnancia que se sublimiza en humor».<sup>13</sup> It is the same frivolous, ironic humor with which the *limeños* have responded to life since colonial times, and

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<sup>13</sup> *Literatura en Hispanoamérica* (Lima: Peisa, 1973): 470.



which characterizes much of their literature. Peculiarly suitable to the oral tone of this novel, it substitutes for bitter social criticism. The light, unforced quality of the humor incorporates a certain air of tenderness when it touches Julius, which in turn serves to build congeniality between author and reader (or between narrator and listener).

There is a natural tendency to compare any contemporary Peruvian prose with that of Vargas Llosa, Peru's most highly acclaimed novelist. To Bryce's credit, he has formed his own creative novel and his own social statement, without slavish imitation of Vargas Llosa's narrative techniques. At the same time, much of a traditional novel remains, particularly because Bryce permits the reader to become very familiar with this young boy—to see him at play, to watch him eat, to feel his sadness—before he actually begins to explore his solitude and his complex reality. As a result, there is a very human texture, and an attachment to the central character, which are not usual in the contemporary novel.<sup>14</sup>

*Un mundo para Julius* is marked by the congruity between narration and the manner in which it is narrated, and by the coherence of narrative viewpoint and social statement. The emotional quality of the work serves to lessen the great distance between most readers (as opposed to interior *destinatarios*) and the privileged world of the *limeña* oligarchy. Memory does not flow freely merely to entertain or tell a story, but to reveal the world enveloping Julius. This retrospective adult memory, only a partial device, meshes with the confrontation of a child moving forward into an unknown adult world. Bryce's handling of narrative viewpoint and perspective makes possible a consideration of the questions implicit in the title. Because Julius is placed between this world and the reader—because access to this *limeño* world is through Julius—the world becomes static and Julius dynamic. Thus Bryce is relieved of overt protest against the anachronistic social structure which surrounds Julius in favor of focusing on one sensitive, caring individual who must make his way through his experiences in this world. Bryce follows Julius up to age eleven, close to the end of innocence, and then opens a door in

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<sup>14</sup> Mercedes López Baralt feels that the friendship which exists between author and reader is a derivative of the 19th century novel: «Pero hay un cambio cualitativo que agradecemos: el lector no se siente dirigido, sino más bien compañero y cómplice del autor, aunque de otra manera que en la típica novela experimental». She credits Bryce's use of the diminutive and the adjective as augmenting author-reader relationship: «Otra forma de complicidad entre el autor y sus lectores: Alfredo Bryce Echenique y *Un mundo para Julius*». In *Sin Nombre* 7 (1976): 52-53.



from of him —and the reader. «Por fin pudo respirar. Pero entre el alivio enorme que sintió y el sueño que vendría con las horas, quedaba un vacío grande, hondo, oscuro. Y Julius no tuvo más remedio que llenarlo con un llanto largo y silencioso, llenecito de preguntas, eso sí» (591).

As an adult, will Julius be capable of shedding the indifference and the emptiness of the world which has formed him? Especially if he remains in Peru? For each reader the answer depends upon his view of the force of social conditioning. Bryce Echenique's narrative concepts leaves Julius free to find his own path.

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