

## PÉREZ-REVERTE AS SEEN FROM A GALDOSIAN PERSPECTIVE

Stephen Miller

For any reader interested in the history and reception of the Spanish novel, the work of Arturo Pérez-Reverte (APR) is noteworthy. The fictive opus now consists of more than twenty titles and its elaboration has propelled its author into the Spanish Royal Academy of the Language, onto world-wide best-seller lists, and had at least five of his novels plus his Alatríste series made into movies or television mini-series. For Galdosian scholars most striking is that more than half of APR's novels are historical. Furthermore, both Galdós and APR are socio-realists who recreate the specific reality of a particular time and place. Their plotting puts their protagonists into the situations and conflicts which typify the respective historical contexts in which their characters move.

The early twenty-first century publication of APR's Spanish War of Independence novels *Cabo Trafalgar. Un relato naval* (2004) and *Un día de cólera* (2007) marked the prelude to the bicentenary of that war and its immediate antecedents. And, as both the author and interviewers noted and sometimes commented, APR's naval story overlapped with Galdós's *Trafalgar*, the first volume of the *Episodios Nacionales*, and his 2007 novel of the 1808 uprising and reprisals in Madrid coincided with the May 2-3 actions recorded in the second episode, *El 19 de marzo y el 2 de mayo*. Moreover, even though the Alatríste series of novels is set in the first half of the seventeenth-century and has provoked no Galdosian comparisons acknowledged by the author or the media, its first-person narrator incorporates Galdosian precedents. This narrator, over six volumes to date, is Alatríste's page and squire Iñigo Balboa. When Iñigo is thirteen his father, Alatríste's friend, is slain in combat and Iñigo's economically-pressed mother puts him into Alatríste's service. Already in *El capitán Alatríste* (1996), the first volume of the six Alatríste titles, the young Iñigo, in true cloak-and-dagger political intrigue, has killed his first man while saving Alatríste's life. Like Galdós's Gabriel Araceli, whose narration of the War of Independence in the First Series of *Episodios Nacionales* includes his first use of deadly force as an impromptu cannoneer aboard the *Santísima Trinidad* at Trafalgar, Iñigo writes a first-person narration in old age. Instead of Araceli's Napoleonic era, though, Iñigo's eventful youth transpires during the period of the Thirty Years War. He relates the personal events of Alatríste's and his lives, as well as their roles in the domestic and foreign intrigues and actions of history-shaping events during the reign of Philip IV. Both Gabriel and Iñigo's love first for a young woman, then for the woman she becomes, has a significant role; their pursuit of her who constantly eludes them simultaneously forwards the inextricably personal/public action of their respective narrations. Finally, both young men have early training in turning life into art, and specifically their lives into their multi-volume narratives. As youths in Madrid, because of their masters' select circles of friends, they have important contact with the foremost artists of their day: for Araceli the likes of Goya, Moratín and Isidoro Máiquez; for Balboa no lesser figures than Lope, Quevedo and Velázquez.

Despite these commonalities, the particular contents of Araceli and Iñigo's stories could not be more different. No matter what happened following the War of Independence, the story told by Gabriel is the epic of a rising time in the history of Spanish national consciousness: victory against a foreign invader, and discovery of constitutional government. Iñigo, on the other hand, tells of a decaying monarchy and declining national fortunes. Despite sometimes glorious episodes, Iñigo writes about what was then the world's super power; its power is declining and taking down its people apace. So it is that Araceli's personal-historical narrative is personally and nationally positive and inspiring while Balboa's is not.

The author of Alatraste has published so far five novels set in the nineteenth century. Four of these works are fully set in and centered by persons, actions and places of nineteenth-century Spain. The first of these, as well as being APR's first published novel, is *El húsar* (1986). In it a third-person, omniscient narrator tells the story of a young Belgian of means, Frederic Glüntz, who joins the Napoleonic hussars. Most interesting for us is the novel's de facto continuation of the action of Galdós's *Bailén*, the fourth volume of the *Episodios Nacionales*. As APR plots it, the young Glüntz enters into his first action in Andalusia in the days following the Battle of Bailén (19-VIII-1808). The novel characterizes the life of the young officer in the light cavalry, contrasts his dreams of glory with the tedium of being in the rear guard and then the horrors of battle, and finishes as Glüntz, exhausted and separated from his unit, is encircled by Spanish peasants.

APR's second nineteenth-century novel, *El maestro de esgrima* (1988), has the same kind of narrator as *El húsar*. Set in Madrid between December, 1866 and September, 1868, it tells the story of the fifty-something Jaime Astarola, the last grand master of fencing in Madrid. In an age of pistols that looks upon training in use of the sword as mere exercise, Astarola makes a modest living that supports an austere single life. However, as the societally-alooft Astarola, through three of his five regular clients, becomes unknowingly involved in the world of pro- and anti-monarchical machinations leading up to the 1868 September Revolution, his swordsmanship, a personal code much like Alatraste's, and luck let him survive. With all his best-paying clients dead or about-to-be jailed, Astarola has an epiphany: he can now finish his long incomplete treatise on fencing. In the climactic duel against his most able pupil, the mysterious, beautiful, treacherous Ana de Otero, Astarola has discovered the perfect movement of body and sword: an unstoppable thrust to the jugular by means of which, with a ball-tipped practice blade, he upset what she planned as her mocking killing of him.

*Cabo Trafalgar. Un relato naval* (2004) and *Un día de cólera* (2007) are the third and fourth volumes of APR's Spain-centered nineteenth-century novels. Their narrative innovation with respect to *El húsar* and *El maestro de esgrima* is that they are told in "the Day" style narratives popularized by Jim Bishop first in his 1955 bestseller *The Day Lincoln Was Shot*. An unnamed, not-described "selector" identifies the notable actors and narrates the significant successive, sometimes simultaneous events of a specific day that has gone down in history. Be that day the October 21, 1805 naval battle off Cadiz, or the May 2/3,

1808 popular uprisings and reprisals in Madrid, or the April 14, 1865 assassination in Washington, D.C., the selector recreates, without commentary, the scenes, words and deeds of the historical actors of the particular day.

Added to these four Spain-centered novels, there is a fifth APR nineteenth-century set novel: *La sombra del águila* (1993). The first difference from the previous four novels is that the action happens outside of Spain. A battalion of Spanish soldiers, stationed in Denmark because of a pact between Godoy and Napoleon, is pressed into the Russian campaign. Following the carnage at Borodino which produced some 90,000 casualties, the 400 Spaniards of the 326th infantry battalion decide their best course of action is to desert to the Russians. As they attempt this in the Battle of Sbodonovo, their actions, in the so called fog-of-war, are misinterpreted by Napoleon and his staff; they think it a valorous attack on the Russians during a stalled offensive. In the end the 326th, whose actions are also mistaken by the Russians, must, in order to survive, fight and kill the very Russians to whom they hoped to desert. The novel ends as the anonymous member of the 326th who had narrated in the first person the campaign itself cedes, without explanation, to the omniscient, third-person narrator of the two-page epilogue. This person relates the return to Spain in April, 1814 of the eleven surviving members of the 326th. The other obvious difference between *La sombra del águila* on one hand, and the other four nineteenth-century narrations on the other is that, like the six volumes of the Alatraste series, it is illustrated. Among the 103 pages of lexical text are intercalated twenty full-page drawings; whereas the Alatraste illustrations are realist, these are satiric, often including caricatures of Napoleon, Murat or the Imperial eagle.

By comparison with the Alatraste series, as well as with the First Series of *Episodios Nacionales*, APR's five nineteenth-century novels offer no aspect of being a series. Despite its setting in the area of 1808 Bailén, *El husar* has no Spanish main or secondary characters, and focuses more on an adventurous individual than on the Napoleonic invasion. Glüntz's dreams and inglorious end could have passed on any battlefield of the period. And while *Cabo Trafalgar* and *Un día de cólera*, because they focus on conflicts and actors from the Spanish viewpoint, can be seen by the reader of the relevant *Episodios Nacionales* as highly interesting and complementary expansions of the Galdosian narrative, two titles do not a series make. As for *La sombra del águila*, while it takes place in the Napoleonic period, the story of the 326th—the collective protagonist—is specifically set in Napoleon's Russian campaign, not in the War of Independence. *El maestro de esgrima*, for its part, has nothing whatsoever to do with the War of Independence or the Napoleonic period in general, and, therefore, has nothing but its nineteenth-century, Spanish setting to associate it with APR's other four nineteenth-century narratives. Its protagonist is a man from another time, out of place in his, who unwittingly becomes enmeshed in the political intrigues of the present in which he otherwise would never have a part. Only because those who would use him have fencing as a passionate hobby do the initiating and concluding actions of the novel take place in Astarola's anachronic world of combat by sword. In this world the plotters are out of their depth and succumb. Indeed Astarola and Alatraste have more in common than does

Astarola with Trafalgar, May 2/3, Bailén or Napoleon's Russian campaign. Marginalized men of a similar, very personal code of valor and honor followed in non-heroic times, neither Astarola nor Alatríste will flee Madrid even though all conspire against them. They point to values APR sees as essentially Spanish, and to the long tradition that forged them.

In a 2007 interview with Javier Rioyo, on the occasion of the fourth volume of the Alatríste series, *El oro del rey*, APR stated his oft-repeated complaint that the Spain of the Autonomies and attack on the Constitution of 1978 is so unsure of itself and so determined to be politically correct that the nation that has been Spain is losing its historical memory of itself, and, hence, its present reality. For APR Spain is the millennial creation of all its peoples: "España no lleva 500 años, lleva 2000 años de memoria a cuestas y cuando se niega la existencia de España como entidad . . . es olvidar nuestra historia y nuestra memoria."<sup>1</sup> APR acknowledges that "España hizo muchas cosas terribles y muchas cosas infames." However he insists upon remembering also the "cosas magníficas": Spain became "lo que nunca más llegó a ser otro país, ni siquiera hoy Estados Unidos." APR's Alatríste, whose drama is that "de muchos españoles en muchas épocas de su historia," has a highly symbolic dimension.<sup>2</sup> APR says Alatríste sees Spain as a tragic country. The tragedy is the possession of the "terrible lucidez de la conciencia de ser de un país con tan pocas posibilidades de futuro que ya se daba en el siglo XVII" (Rioyo). In an earlier interview with Javier Sampedro, while working on what came to be the second Alatríste novel, *Limpieza de sangre* (1997), APR characterized further the series and its symbolic content. Referring to the reign of Philip IV, and, in Sampedro's phrasing, this meant: "El escritor ha querido recuperar 'aquella época' peligrosa e infame, barroca y fascinante que tanto puede explicar de la España actual." In other words, as the author's many and diverse printed opinions about contemporary Spain corroborate, post-Franco, democratic Spain of the Autonomies and siege on the Constitution of 1978 shows itself to be a disintegrating "país con tan pocas posibilidades de futuro que ya se daba en el siglo XVII." APR's novels of nineteenth-century Spain and Spaniards seem only to confirm this pessimistic view, albeit as stops along the seventeenth-to-twentieth century road to less and less national future.

The thematic commonality found in *Cabo Trafalgar* and *Un día de cólera* is the shared valor demonstrated by some military officers and great numbers of common people when circumstances give them a choice: to cut-and-run, or to make the supreme sacrifice against hopeless odds. And just as the second alternative is selected by them, so do Alatríste and Astarola make their stands because of those most Spanish of motivations: "pundonor y vergüenza torera."<sup>3</sup> This is, I think, APR's fundamental view of Spain. That it has been great when the greatest number of individuals and their leaders have staked all on a common, worthy goal. The loss of that unity has produced the increasingly weak participation in national life that can be seen today. The result, for APR, is the loss of a national future. Moreover, there can be no doubt that APR holds the leadership of the country to blame. In virtually all interviews and in his own writing concerning *Un día de cólera* and the bicentenary of May 2/3, 1808, as well as in his role as *comisario* of the exposition "Madrid 2 de mayo 1808-2008. Un pueblo, una nación," APR has made time and again one main

point: beginning on May 4, 1808, May 2/3 has been used by politicians of all stripes to advance their particular political agenda. For the more-than-a-little anarchical APR, though, almost all, if not all politicians, in any Spanish century, are unscrupulous, manipulative individuals whose pursuit of personal gain never cedes to the commonweal. On several occasions he sums up the point by quoting from the *Cantar de Mío Cid*: “Que buen vasallo si oviese buen señor...”<sup>4</sup> This is a condemnation, of which the Alatraste series gives abundant instances, of both secular and religious leadership, and whose reach covers nearly 1000 years of Spanish national life as understood by APR. The “vasallos” are El Cid and his followers, soldiers like Alatraste and Iñigo's father, the officers and sailors of Trafalgar, the common people and low-ranking officers of May 2, 1808 in Madrid, and, perhaps saddest of all, the left-to-shift-for-themselves members of the 326th.

Unlike José Luis Garci who details his debts to Galdós in the making of his May 2/3 1808 film *Sangre de mayo* (2008),<sup>5</sup> APR has little to say about Galdós as precedent, inspiration, or guide to his own work. In an interview by “M.A.V.” on the occasion of the publication of *Limpieza de sangre*, APR explained that with the Alatraste novels he wanted to create “novelas de aventuras,” a genre he likes and thinks lacking in Spain. For him “Galdós es un escritor de aventuras al margen de su visión histórica o política.” In what is probably a wire-service article published in *Canarias*<sup>7</sup> on November 3, 2004, in connection with the publication of *Cabo Trafalgar*, APR is quoted: “Benito Pérez Galdós es la grata sombra bajo la que se pone cualquier libro sobre la batalla de Trafalgar”; and he adds “Galdós es la referencia fundamental. Mi ventaja es contar con una información documental de la que él no dispuso.” The publication of several of his novels, including *Cabo Trafalgar*, in the Punto de Lectura collection, occasioned a long interview with Juan Cruz. There APR stated: “La batalla de Trafalgar ya estaba contada por Galdós. Yo tenía que contar lo que no contaba Galdós.” And this consisted in: “la batalla desde dentro de los barcos, desde el punto de vista de un marinero,” something, it could be easily argued, that Galdós's Araceli does do. APR also tells Cruz that, as in the Alatraste series, he wanted to “contar lo que fue la tragedia de ser español, en manos de los mismos hijos de puta de siempre.” When Cruz asks him “¿Qué le dio Galdós a la hora de escribirlo” (*Cabo Trafalgar*), APR's response, in light of our earlier discussion and some of his own comments, is surprising to say the least: “Galdós fue el que me abrió el apetito. Leído Galdós ahora, con 55 años, ya no es el mismo que fue.” The only specific Galdós-related comment that I have found which the publication of *Un día de cólera* elicited comes in the seven pages of printout in an interview by Antón. APR states: “La historia [of May 2/3, 1808] ya ha sido contada, no voy a reescribir a Galdós—como hacen otros—, sería ridículo.” He then goes on to talk about what he did with no further reference to Galdós.

Given the limits of space, it is not possible to enter into further exposition or discussion of APR's unwillingness to consider the important, yet unacknowledged narratological and characterological precedents in the First Series of *Episodios Nacionales* to the Alatraste series; nor, for that matter, APR's use in *Cabo Trafalgar* and *Un día de cólera* of the hour-by-hour, you-are-there techniques developed by Jim Bishop, a newspaper

reporter and columnist, in his “the Day” series of books of the mid 1950s to mid 1960s. Now no matter what the precedent may be in Bishop to APR, enough has been presented above to see in APR's references and omissions concerning Galdós a very notable case of Harold Bloom's famous “anxiety of influence.”<sup>6</sup> And the ironies involved in APR's theme that Spain is that “puto país de la desmemoria, esa España que da pena” (M. Mora) are too many and rich even to begin to comment upon here. That said, most Galdosians, in all likelihood, do or will enjoy APR's Galdosian-influenced narratives. Moreover, a recent APR interview indicates Alatríste may become a proper (Galdosian, ten-volume) series. The Captain's seventh adventure will appear in December, 2010, and there are “planes para tres o cuatro novelas más” (Intxausti).

Texas A&M University

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This quote, as well as those in the next three sentences, is found in Rioyo. I know of no statement by APR in which he explains Spain as a 2000 year old country. But on several occasions, as part of his attack on Spanish secular and religious leadership of all times, he cites, as in the Demicheli piece, from *El poema de Mío Cid*: “Que buen vasallo si oviese buen señor.”

<sup>2</sup> Another example, among many possible ones, of APR identifying Alatríste, as well as his experience and views, with Spain can be found in M. Mora: “‘Todo español lúcido y medianamente leído cae en la amargura’, añade [APR]. ‘Y por eso la melancolía recorre toda la novela [*Caballero del jubón amarillo*]. Quizá la ponía yo, porque Alatríste, en el fondo, es España. Ese puto país de la desmemoria, esa España que da pena, de curas ordenando quemar a la gente.’”

<sup>3</sup> APR, “Una intifada de navaja y macetazo.” This article, together with his “Cólera de un pueblo, certeza de una nación,” are the definitive statements of the author’s view on the reality and the manipulation of May 2/3, 1808.

<sup>4</sup> This quote is found in Demicheli. For a similar quote see Cruz, “Una mirada propia,” 41.

<sup>5</sup> See Garcí’s “Mi abuelo Benito.” Versions of the article can be found on many web sites, often incomplete and under the title of “Notas del director.”

<sup>6</sup> See my “The Spanish Novel from Pérez Galdós to Marías.”

## WORKS CITED

- Antón, Jacinto. "¡Maldito día!" *EL PAIS.com*. 1 December 2007.  
<[http://elpais.com/articulo/semana/Maldito/dia/elpepuculbab/20071201/elpbabese\\_3/Tes?print=1](http://elpais.com/articulo/semana/Maldito/dia/elpepuculbab/20071201/elpbabese_3/Tes?print=1)>.
- [*Canarias7*]. "Pérez Reverte: 'Mi Premio Nobel es ser académico de la lengua'." *Canarias7. Cultura/Espectaculos*. 3 November 2004.  
<<http://www.canarias7.es/20041103/p.cultura.shtml>>.
- Cruz, Juan. "Soy un lector que escribe libros; si fuera solo escritor estaría muerto." *EL PAIS.com*. 30 September 2007.  
<<http://www.elpais.com/articulo/cultura/Soy/lector/escribe/libros/fuera/solo/escritor/estaria/muerto/elpepicul/20070930>>.
- . "Una mirada propia." *El País Semanal*, Núm. 1.558 (6 August 2006): 40-41.
- Demicheli, Tulio. "El Dos de Mayo es la tragedia de la inteligencia, el enfrentamiento entre la víscera y la razón." *ABC.es* 11-XII-2007.  
<<http://www.abc.es/CommABC/imprimir/index.asp?Noticiaid=1641467835507>>.
- Garci, José Luis. "Mi abuelo Benito." *ABC de las artes y las letras*. Núm. 869. 27 September 2008.  
<<http://abc.es/abcdimprimir.asp?id=10360&sec=31&num=869>>.
- Intxausti, Aurora. "Pérez-Reverte: 'Alatriste me llevó a la Academia.'" *ELPAIS.com* 8-V-2009.  
<[http://www.elpais.com/articulo/cultura/Perez-Reverte/Alatriste/llevo/Academia/elpepucul/20090508elpepicul\\_7/Tes](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/cultura/Perez-Reverte/Alatriste/llevo/Academia/elpepucul/20090508elpepicul_7/Tes)>.
- M.A.V. "Arturo Pérez-Reverte asegura que 'ser lúcido y español siempre provoca tristeza.'" *El País Digital - Cultura*. 8 November 1997, No. 554.  
<<http://www.elpais.es/p/d/19971108/cultura/reverte.htm>>.
- Miller, Stephen. "The Spanish Novel from Pérez Galdós to Marías: Tradition and Nescience, Rupture and Europeanization." *South Central Review* 18.1-2 (2001): 45-65.
- Mora, M. "Pérez-Reverte admite que el desengaño de Alatriste con la patria y sus curas es el suyo." *ELPAIS.es* 18-XII-2003.  
<[http://www.elpais.com/articulo/cultura/Perez-Reverte/admite/desengano/Alatriste/patria/curas/elpepucul/20031118elpepicul\\_5/Tes](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/cultura/Perez-Reverte/admite/desengano/Alatriste/patria/curas/elpepucul/20031118elpepicul_5/Tes)>.
- Pérez-Reverte, Arturo. *Cabo Trafalgar. Un relato naval*. Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2004.
- . "Cólera de un pueblo, certeza de una nación." *ELPAIS.es* 24 January 2008. <[http://www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/Colera/pueblo/certeza/nacion/elpepiopi/20080124elpepiopi\\_12/Tes](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/Colera/pueblo/certeza/nacion/elpepiopi/20080124elpepiopi_12/Tes)>.
- . *Un día de cólera*. Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2008.
- . *El húsar*. Madrid: Akal, 2002.
- . *El maestro de esgrima*. Madrid: Alfaguara, 1999.
- . *La sombra del águila*. Madrid: Punto de Lectura, 2007.
- . "Una intifada de navaja y macetazo." *ELPAIS.es* 20 abril 2008.  
<[http://www.elpais.com/articulo/cultura/intifada/navaja/macetazo/elpepicul/20080420elpepicul\\_1/Tes](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/cultura/intifada/navaja/macetazo/elpepicul/20080420elpepicul_1/Tes)>.

## WORKS CITED

- Pérez-Reverte, Arturo and Carlota Pérez-Reverte. *El capitán Alatriste*. Madrid: Alfaguara, 1997.
- Rioyo, Javier. "Alatriste es un hombre sin fe pero con dignidad."  
<[http://www.capitanalatriste.com/aventuras.html?s=articulos/art\\_sinfe](http://www.capitanalatriste.com/aventuras.html?s=articulos/art_sinfe)>.
- Sampedro, Javier. "Pérez Reverte enfrenta a 'El capitán Alatriste' con la Inquisición." *El País Digital* 13 November 1997.  
<<http://elpais.es/p/d/19970813/cultura/perez.htm>>.