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# Reception, Narration, and Focalization in Azuela's *Los de abajo*: Constructing and Reconstructing Azuela's Text

Nineteen ninety-six commemorates the eightieth anniversary of the first printing of *Los de abajo*.[1] Now, eight decades later, Mariano Azuela's novel of the Mexican Revolution is clearly one of the most important and representative works of the era. Luis Leal calls it "Azuela's masterpiece and one of the great Mexican novels", acknowledging Azuela as "Mexico's foremost novelist" (459).[2] Fittingly, the novel has since been widely analyzed by literary critics. In fact, John Brushwood notes that *Los de abajo* is "one of the most written-about books in the history of Spanish American Letters" (20). Still, despite the novel's critical popularity over the last eighty years, only Dick Gerdes has attempted an in-depth study of Azuela's narrative technique. Furthermore, while Gerdes' article offers several perceptive insights on point of view in *Los de abajo*, it avoids addressing one prominent, "innovative" facet of Azuela's narration, that of focalization. To this effect Gerdes writes:

> ...[R]ather than argue that the internal viewpoints of the characters within the novel create objectivity [the disappearance of the author], let us instead consider a "kind of omniscient stance in which the reader himself is placed at the —often shifting— narrative focus."[3] This new stance permits a justified tug-of-

> war between summary narrative (telling) and immediate scene (showing), between exposition and presentation, between narrative and drama and, as Friedman states, between idea and image. From this perspective, it does not appear that the story is *told* by the author or even by a character in the story, but rather that it is *seen* by the reader. What I hope to show, then, is that a "composite" visual point of view, similar to the effect produced in film, is created from some precise point, whether from the viewpoint of a character or not, that is, from the viewpoint of a person, either from inside the story or situated at some other particular stance. (557)

In other words, Gerdes really proposes that his readers heed Wolfgang Iser's invitation to scrutinize *Los de abajo* through the glasses of Reader-Response Criticism and Receptive Theory[4]— rather inventive ideas fifteen years ago when Gerdes chose to apply them to this novel. Still, Gerdes errs when he chooses to disregard the considerable role that focalization plays in creating the same cinematic effect in *Los de abajo* that he is attempting to account for in his article.

Reception Theory traces its roots back to the European camps of phenomenology and hermeneutics (Eagleton 54-90) associated with thinkers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and E.D. Hirsch. It has continued into post-modernity with important works such as Roman Ingarden's *The Literary Work of Art* (1973), Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading* (1978) and Umberto Eco's *The Role of the Reader* (1979), only to name a few. Receptionists, as implied in Iser's quotation, seek to explain the reasons an individual reader interprets a text the way he or she does. It logically follows that Reception Theory is intimately

connected with the modern field of Narratology which studies the narrative process, since both it (Narratology) and Reader-Response Criticisms scrutinize the reader's role in interpreting or reconstructing the text by building from the author's written outline while simultaneously merging it with the reader's personal repertoire in order to achieve an actualized treatment of the work.

In "Point of View in *Los de abajo*", Gerdes begins by exploring the sensation of completeness and direction an reader feels while studying Azuela's novel. Furthermore, he suggests that a definite focal point is discernible in and attributable to the narrator. However, in asking us to disregard the hyponarrative[5] level of the text (i.e., "the internal viewpoints of the characters within the novel" [557]), Gerdes essentially asks that we forget these obvious links between modern Narratology and Reception Theory. He also diminishes a leviathan portion of Azuela's artistry, ignoring many of the complex narrative structures that entitle *Los de abajo* to *artistic* and not just to *historical* criticism.

Reading is anything but a facile labor, and an author's using fiction to relay a thematic message to his reader is conceivably the most rhetorically circuitous mode of communication short of gossip. In fiction, the message filters through a long succession of narrative go-betweens. First, the author assumes a persona or demeanor for the particular work (an *implied* author [Booth 70-76]). Next, he invents a narrator and charges him with relaying the story (or *histoire* [Genette 71-76]) to the reader. The narrator in turn often delegates certain narrative tasks to specific characters within the text (*narration/focalization* [Rimmon-Kenan 94-95]). A reader begins with the aggregate of these narrative processes and reconstructs both the text and the author's message, passing them

through a complex web of personal knowledge and experience (*transformation* [Rimon-Kenan 10]) and arriving at his own reading or interpretation of the work (the *récit* [Genette 71-76]).[6]

Obviously, an author must compose a work meticulously if a reader is expected to come close to recovering the original message. For that reason, a reader may assume that the author has consciously decided to employ even seemingly insignificant details within the piece. Since Azuela chooses to employ multi-leveled narration in *Los de abajo*, each of these levels should be addressed in any explication of how a reader's vantage point becomes much like that of a movie viewer's. In "Point of View in *Los de abajo*", however, Gerdes confines his study only to the first narrative level, disregarding the deeper or hyponarrative plane and its effect on the receptive pole of the narrative process, where the author-reader informational exchange takes place. Beginning then with the reader and working backwards toward the author, Narratology helps us to notice some limitations inherent to Gerdes' evaluation of this novel.

First, Gerdes says he hopes to show that "a 'composite' visual point of view, similar to the effect produced in film, is created from some precise point... either from inside the story or situated at some other particular stance" (557). In a general sense, the narrator *always* supplies this focal point for the reader by definition: "[a] narrator [is] one who tells, or is assumed to be telling, the story in a given narrative. In modern analysis of fictional narratives, the narrator is the imagined 'voice' transmitting the story" (Baldick 146). In summary, the narrator provides a rhetorical framework for the account. In *Los de abajo* specifically, the narrator resorts to a deeper narrative level, allowing characters to describe as well as to show the action. Azuela's narrator

does this both implicitly (diegetic explication shown through the eyes of the characters but related by the narrator) and explicitly (mimetic use of the Dramatic Mode [*cf.* Gerdes 562] where characters both focalize and narrate the action). And, even though he delegates certain narrative duties to other characters in the novel, the narrator ultimately passes all information on to the reader from *his* vantage point because *he* mediates all discourse. In other words, following Gerdes' cinematic metaphor he acts as the director. In this way, the narrator becomes the "prime focalizer" at the diegetic or textual level, showing the action to the reader from his (the narrator's) rhetorical position— which is precisely the point Gerdes makes in his article. But both Gérard Genette and the American critic, Seymour Chatman, persistently contend that this panoramic feature of the narration is not the only possible viewpoint in the text but rather one of many. In fact, since this level is practically inevitable because of the narrator's role as spokesperson for the other participants in the story, many critics downplay this level of focalization categorizing it as "telling" the story (narrating), the simplest way of conveying the author's message, rather than "showing" it (focalizing). Gerdes, on the other hand, bases the work's overall effect on narration alone, mistakenly attributing the reader's response to the narrator's point of view and completely disregarding the importance of focalization to this narrative.

If one endorses Genette's tenets, this would be Gerdes' second inaccuracy (and also Norman Friedman's, upon whose work Gerdes bases his observations), for there is "an obvious confusion between the focal character and the narrator" (Genette 188). Genette notes that "most of the theoretical works on this subject (which are mostly classifications) suffer from a regrettable confusion between what I call

*mood* and *voice*, a confusion between *Who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?* and the very different question *Who is the narrator?*" (186, italics are Genette's). Chatman adds, "Point of view does *not* mean expression; it only means the perspective in terms of which the expression is made. The perspective and the expression need not be lodged in the same person" (153)— which is exactly what Gerdes attempts to do:

> I have sketched the variety of narrative viewpoints employed by Mariano Azuela in *Los de abajo*. These narrative stances produce a dramatic story with emotional impact.... Unlike almost all of his contemporaries, Azuela lets the reader experience parts of the novel in what Friedman calls Neutral Omniscience, Selective Omnipresence, and the Dramatic Mode. In effect, Azuela has integrated theme and narrative with amazing sophistication. He shifts from one point of view to another smoothly yet dramatically. (562)

Gerdes oversimplifies Azuela's artistry. Textual analysis of several segments from *Los de abajo* reveals that many forces operate concurrently with the narrator to furnish the reader with this feeling of intimacy toward the overall text. In chapter VIII of Part 1, for example, Azuela's narrator entrusts a large part of the narrative focalization to Camila and Luis Cervantes: "Luis Cervantes, otro día, apenas pudo levantarse. Arrastrando el miembro lesionado, vagó de casa en casa buscando un poco de alcohol, agua hervida y pedazos de ropa usada. Camila, con su amabilidad incansable, se lo proporcionó todo" (28).

In this episode, the narrator is evidently both showing and describ-

ing the tale very diagetically. Through his eyes we scrutinize Luis and Camila and by his omniscience we discover not only what Cervantes seeks (alcohol, boiled water, and scraps of rag), but also how he secures it. However, when we next see the two characters sit on the bed, the narrator begins to show the action from Cervantes' perspective. Later, he again alters his narrative style, resorting to the mimetic Dramatic Mode (by using dialogue) while Camila focalizes on Luis and his efforts to clean and sterilize his wounds. The reader, on the other hand, continues perceiving the actions from Cervantes' vantage point, watching Camila as she interrogates him regarding the task at hand:

> —¡Oiga, ¿y quién lo insiñó a curar?... ¿Y pa qué jirvió la agua?... ¿Y los trapos, pa qué los coció?... ¡Mire, mire, cuánta curiosidá patodo!... ¿Aguardiente de veras?... ¡Ande, pos si yo creiba que el aguardiente no más pal cólico era güeno!... ¡Ah!... ¿De moo es que usté iba a ser dotor?... ¡Ja, ja, ja!... ¡Cosa de morirse uno de risa!... ¿Y por qué no le regüelve mejor agua fría?... ¡Mi' que cuentos!... ¡Quesque animales en la agua sin jervir!... ¡Fuchi!... ¡Pos cuando ni yo miro nada!.... (28)

The reader cannot help but "hear" the echo of Camila's feral jargon just as Luis would, yet the focus has changed since we are seeing the action through Luis' eyes and not the narrator's. The reader further recognizes this variation when the narrator once again intercedes, briefly resuming responsibility for focalization: "Camila siguió interrogándole, y con tanta familiaridad que de buenas a primeras comenzó a tutearlo" (28).

This break is especially apparent because the narrator's previous imitation of Camila's language blatantly contrasts both his and

Cervantes' more educated, mellifluous styles. Later, when the narrator reenters the scene, diction and narrative style shift once more from staunch mimesis (the mimicry of Camila's country argot) to his eloquently diegetic tongue. Finally, the distinction is reiterated when the narrator again changes back to a mimetic, hyponarrational style, focalizing through Luis Cervantes:

> Retraído a su propio pensamiento, Luis Cervantes no la escuchaba más.
> "En dónde están esos hombres admirablemenhte armados y montados, que reciben sus haberes en puros pesos duros de los que Villa está acuñando en Chihuahua? ¡Bah! Una veintena de encuerados y piojosos, habiendo quien cabalgara en una yegua decrépita, matadura de la cruz a la cola. ¿Sería verdad lo que la prensa del gobierno y él mismo habían asegurado, que los llamados revolucionarios no eran sino bandidos agrupados ahora con un magnífico pretexto para saciar su sed de oro y de sangre?..." (29)

In juxtaposing Cervantes' and Camila's dialects we immediately see the striking disparity between Luis' educated usage and Camila's "country bumpkinisms." This contrast lets us "hear" Camila just as Luis would. The narrator's intervention bolsters this effect, reaffirming that Luis indeed is the focalizer: "Luis Cervantes no la escuchaba más" (29). Later, Azuela underscores this focalization by permitting *el curro* to slip into an interior monologue (set off by quotation marks), which again marks a change in both the narrative style and the focalization. Azuela artfully manipulates the account to highlight this focalization— while

the narrator's omniscience allows us to enter Cervantes' mind, we still perceive the story's action from Luis' vantage point. Finally, the same contrasts that helped to make Azuela's reader aware of these subtle changes in narrational style later help us to become more cognizant of the irony accompanying Camila's naively simple critique of Cervantes' medically modern treatments.

Progressing on through the chapter, we sense another shift in the narrative approach when Luis becomes so captivated by his own thoughts that he unwittingly thinks aloud:

> —No, lo que es ahora no me he equivocado— se dijo para sí, casi en voz alta.
> —¿Qué estás diciendo? —preguntó Camila—; pos si yo creiba ya que los ratones te habían comido la lengua. (29-30)

Camila focalizes on Cervantes while he recovers awareness of his surroundings. The narrator reappears, leaving the dialogue behind and returning to a third-person style of narration, though still focalizing through Luis who in turn watches and derisively describes Camila: "Luis plegó las cejas y miró con aire hostil aquella especie de mono enchomitado, de tez broncínea, dientes de marfil, pies anchos y chatos" (30).

As the narrator draws back, the secondary focalizers shoulder the burden of advancing the story: Camila while watching Cervantes walk away, and María Antonia while observing Camila. If this were a staged performance, the diegetic narration would be entirely unnecessary because the audience could easily witness for themselves the events which the narrator is describing:

> —¿Oye, curro, y tú has de saber contar cuentos?
> Luis hizo un gesto de aspereza y se alejó sin contestarla. Ella, embelesada, le siguió con los ojos hasta que su silueta desapareció por la vereda del arroyo. Tan abstraída así, que se estremeció vivamente a la voz de su vecina, la tuerta María Antonia, que fisgoneando desde su jacal, le gritó:
> —¡Epa, tú!... dale los polvos de amor... a ver si ansina cai...
> —¡Pior!... Ésa será usté...
> —¡Si yo quijiera!... Pero, ¡Fuche!, les tengo asco a los curros... (30)

Crediting the omniscient narrator with focalizing the characters' specific actions in this segment would be akin to attributing it to the author himself— perhaps a valid observation, though neither wholly accurate nor singularly weighty in exploring the work's effect on the reader. If Reception Theory is adamant about anything, it is the reality that all elements in the text perform together jointly and in conjunction with the antecedents a reader brings to the reading. Genette would reject Gerdes' suggestion that we exclude the characters' viewpoints and would emphasize the role that examining the unfolding action through their eyes at the work's hyponarrative level plays in supplying the reader with a superior sense of holistic cognition toward the story. Focalization is indispensable in Azuela's aesthetic creation and a component that makes transforming the material more "reader-friendly" by avoiding "he said, she said" narration and thereby allowing Azuela's readers to rely more on their own imaginations while interpreting the work.

But focalization in *Los de abajo* is responsible for more than merely allowing the reader to experience movie viewer-like participation in the work. Azuela punctiliously crafts a focal hierarchy which helps the reader to recreate the group's intrinsic social arrangement along with its ingenerate rules and codes. Generally, Azuela only allows the characters in the story to point out the flaws and deficiencies in personages with equal or lesser station in the group than they hold themselves. Meanwhile, the use of focalization helps the author to develop each of the individual characters more fully, introducing the reader to the other characters' conceptions of them. La Pintada, for example, represents the paragon of social slag— violently perverted womanhood. She focalizes on Camila, her equal in the band and her rival for Demetrio's affection. Likewise, she shows the reader el güero Margarito's rape of Cervantes' infant "fiancee," applauding her contemptible cohort's misconduct: "Ahora sí... ¡Cómo quiero yo a este güero!" (88).

On the other hand, Luis Cervantes spends excessive time in autofocalization— an extension of his own selfish interests in the Revolution. Although Luis is credited with introducing ideals to the ring, Azuela capitalizes on his condescending demeanor and opportunistic acts toward his unlettered, uncultivated *correligionarios* to paradoxically demonstrate Cervantes' hypocrisy and to ultimately make him a repugnant personality for the reader.

For her part, tender Camila draws the reader's attention to injustices executed by the revolutionaries: El Güero's continuous torment of the federal soldier, Cervantes' emotionally abusive assaults against her, the troops' unjustifiable plunder of the widower's provisions— illustrating that no single member of the group is entirely virtuous.[7]

Demetrio, like Camila, is given the specific assignment of studying the depravity of Luis and the other military officials. He likewise frequently looks inward, reflecting the circular nature of his character and paralleling the circular constitution of the entire work (*cf.* Leal 459-460; Brushwood 21-22) as his reason for fighting deteriorates from one of self-defense to a gluttonous search for fortune, power and position, then back to a more caring, humanistic viewpoint as he watches each of his original soldiers slaughtered in unnecessary battle.

Furthermore, the narrator (as the prime focalizer) shows a panoramic view of the *bola*'s widespread pollution as it moves away from the ideal and toward thoroughly immoral Pandemonium. In doing so, he allows the reader to watch each character's participation in this snowballing corruption, implicating every one taking part in the scene and therein calling into question the validity of the Revolution's "morality."

Of course, this power mapping within the group is not completely faultless. For instance, when Demetrio continues fighting without aim in Part III and therein shows his own moral degeneration, Azuela permits the wayward general's underlings to criticize their leader openly— something that only Valderrama, the crazy poet freed from social protocol by his own madness, had dared to do in previous chapters. Furthermore, Cervantes frequently takes advantage of his favored status[8] to lessen the customary distance between General Macías and his subordinates. Even Camila occasionally uses Demetrio's fondness for her to bridge this gap. Interestingly, Azuela is always very conscientious in not allowing these deviations from the norm threaten the group's internal order. The reader instinctively notes that these occurrences are exceptions to the rules, not amendments to them, and

directly attributes the anomalies to the general deterioration of the cause.

Finally, Azuela's orchestration of focalization at the narrative and hyponarrative levels of *Los de abajo* helps to present the work's main theme, best expressed in the final exchanges between Macías and his wife:

> —¿Por qué pelean ya, Demetrio?
> Demetrio, las cejas muy juntas, toma distraído una piedrecita y la arroja al fondo del cañón. Se mantiene pensativo viendo el desfiladero, y dice:
> —Mira esa piedra cómo ya no se pára.... (137)

The narrator makes this thematic assertion from a structurally ambiguous viewpoint: it is unclear whether it is the narrator, Azuela's implicit author or Demetrio Macías who has passed final judgement on the perpetual, profitless continuance of a Revolution that has failed to alter the destiny of *Los de abajo*, the so-called "underdogs." Azuela charges that regardless of Demetrio's end ("Demetrio Macías, con los ojos fijos para siempre, sigue apuntando con el cañón de su fusil..." [140]), the Revolution has little benefited him or the other men who have forfeited their lives in promoting the most recent *caudillo*'s rise to tyranny.

Leal designates *Los de abajo* as Azuela's "most carefully planned novel.... [In] *The Underdogs*, the reader finds an internal, organic order in which there are no loose scenes, no actions without a proper function in the apparently dissonant whole. As an organism, the novel is characterized by its dynamic essence, not only in the plot, but also in the style, in the painting of nature, and in the violent quality of the scenes"

(459-60). The narrative technique of focalization that Gerdes so painstakingly discards is in fact indispensable to presenting and to receiving both the story and Azuela's critique of the Revolution's relative failure to empower the peasantry. Moreover, focalization contributes to the novel's internal order, characterization, and tone. Azuela's artistry is evident in his deliberate narrative construction of *Los de abajo*. His attentive transitions between the narrator's point of view and the perspectives of individual characters within the text show the precision with which the author crafts his work in an effort to allow his readers to experience the cinematic-style intimacy with the story, the key to understanding Azuela's narration. Careful analysis shows that narrative point of view in fact merges with focalization —and a multitude of other techniques— in achieving a successful and satisfying reading of Mariano Azuela's literary classic, *Los de abajo*.

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## Notes

[1] Of bibliographical interest to those who study the novel of the Mexican Revolution in general and *Los de abajo* specifically: recently, Azuela's family has asked that Luis Leal assist in compiling an extensive bibliography of secondary sources for *Los de abajo*, something that should be eminently useful in future studies of the novel.

[2] "If at first Azuela was not heard [with *Los de abajo*], he eventually became the foremost Mexican novelist. Azuela's novels have been widely read and his influence on subsequent generations of fiction writers has been considerable.... Since Azuela was the first Mexican writer to be widely read outside of his own country, he paved the way for acceptance of future Mexican novels as well as for those from other Latin-American countries. Due to his persevering innova-

tions and unrelenting efforts, the Latin-American novel today occupies a prestigious place in the world" (Leal 463).

[3] Here Gerdes quotes (but fails to cite) Morrissette 25-31.

[4] "...a text can only come to life when it is read, and if it is to be examined, it must therefore be examined through the eyes of the reader" (Iser 3-4).

[5] *cf.* Rimmon-Kenan; Bal 59-85. Paraphrasing, the diegetic level of narration is the first level of narration— the narrator's recounting the story. The hyponarrative level would be the next, deeper ("hypo" = "under") level of narration, a character's narration of certain events within the story.

[6] This concept is by no means a singularly "narrative" process. While the language used to describe this delivery of information from the artist to his or her public may vary, the idea is directly transferable to other, more poetic modes as well.

[7] Incidentally, Carlos Fuentes praises the book's innovation for having introduced ambiguous characters to the Latin-American novel: "los héroes pueden ser villanos y los villanos pueden ser héroes" (15).

[8] Demetrio looks up to both Venancio and Luis Cervantes because of their literacy. Although they are by no means more desirable characters because of their educations, they do enjoy a higher status within the group because they can read.

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