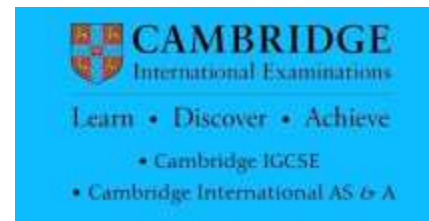


# Home



Welcome to the spring 2020 edition of the Bulletin, after a winter in which Brexit and the formation of Spain's first post-war coalition government were only overshadowed, I'm sure you would agree, by CIE's announcement that it would discontinue the Pre-U after 2023. Uncomfortable news for the academic community – by and large schools had welcomed its rigour and range and will be sad to see it go. At the same time, perhaps it has done its job in changing the A Level landscape. The new A Level syllabuses look more like the Pre-U in offering a range of texts and films.



In this edition author Jason Webster takes stock of where [Spanish politics](#) now stands, with the Left banding together to resist the right-wing surge while seeking a constructive way forward on Catalonia.

The northern winter is a good time to contemplate the warmer parts of the Spanish-speaking world. Robin Wallis returns from the Southern Cone with poignant insights into [Chile and Argentina in 2020](#), debunking the myth that the



former is an unmitigated success while the latter flounders in perpetual chaos.

From there we move to Venezuela, with Susana Justham Bello tracing the [recent history of Caracas](#) and how it went from being a prosperous city to a place where everyone except the political elite is malnourished and

malcontent, with millions fleeing the country.

Staying in the same hemisphere but moving further north, Francisco Compán reflects on the status of [Spanish in the United States](#), which now has the second largest community of Spanish-speakers, coming after Mexico but ahead of Spain, Colombia and Argentina.

Focusing on literature, Nathaniel Gardner looks at Pablo [Neruda's \*Canto general\*](#) and in particular the illustrations of the first Mexican edition of this huge and ambitious cycle of poems about Latin America. Laetitia Hosie has reviewed the novel [Como agua para chocolate](#), a Pre-U Topic text alongside *Las 13 rosas* and *Esos cielos*, and assesses why it is such a popular read. Etta Selim turns her attention to [the fantastic in \*El encuentro\* and \*El Sur\*](#), arguing that the ambiguity of these stories is key to their enjoyment.

From Borges to Cervantes is but a small step, especially given that in his light-hearted and intelligent article on [postmodernism in Cervantes](#) Ben Kara quotes the Argentine master on why we are disturbed to find that Don Quixote has read *Don Quixote* (answer: if a fictitious character can read a real book, maybe *we* are fictitious too).

And from Cervantes, that towering giant of Golden Age prose, we only have to cross the road so to speak to dive into the wonderful world of Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina and Calderón de la Barca – the three greatest Golden Age playwrights. In his contribution Sander Berg shares his thoughts about the challenges of [putting on Golden Age comedies](#) and offers a few solutions.



We will be welcoming contributions to our next edition by the end of May please. New readers are welcome to join our mailing list by using the contact tab above. If you would like to become involved in writing or editing, please also get in touch.

Happy reading!

The BAS editorial team

# A new government for Spain

*Jason Webster*

After two inconclusive general elections in one year and months of often fruitless negotiations, Spain finally has a new government. Pedro Sánchez of the Socialist party (PSOE) reached an agreement with Unidas Podemos to form a coalition, and in January 2020 Sánchez was sworn in as a fully-fledged prime minister, with Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias accepting the role of his deputy.

But the question on everyone's mind is, how long can this uneasy marriage between the parties of the centre- and far-Left survive? Sánchez's government was confirmed in a vote in parliament by a margin of only two votes. Political stability is becoming little more than a memory in Spain; some might say the developments of recent years are more reminiscent of the turbulence leading up to the Spanish Civil War than of the long-lasting administrations of the 1980s and 90s. Fundamental political tensions are coming to the fore and threaten not only the Sánchez administration but the future of the country.



At the top of the prime minister's to-do list is the situation in Catalonia, where the pro-separatist movement has been in the driving seat for several years. An illegal referendum on independence, the questionable imprisonment of Catalan leaders by the Spanish State and numerous incidences of street violence between police and protestors have all made the situation highly volatile. And while it might not always be in the international news, the tension over Catalonia constantly simmers away, always ready to explode once more. The current Catalan leader, Quim Torra, is demanding an agreement on a new – and, this time, legal – referendum, as well as amnesty for his imprisoned comrades. In Unidas Podemos he has something of a sympathetic ear within Cabinet. Yet Sánchez knows that to be seen to be 'giving in' to Catalan separatist demands is electoral suicide. Most Spaniards outside Catalonia are vehemently opposed to ceding any ground: national unity is a passionate subject which makes even normally moderate Spanish voters appear uncompromisingly rigid from an outsider's perspective. Meanwhile, according to a recent opinion poll, pro-independence sentiment

within Catalonia, which had appeared to dip, is now on the rise again and would seem to be approaching fifty per cent.

The situation is a Gordian Knot. Past governments have attempted simply to manage Catalan demands. In the past they were often overshadowed by Basque separatism; now they dominate the political agenda. Catalan society is deeply divided over the issue: marriages, families and friendship groups are all breaking apart over it. If a peaceful solution of some sort exists, no one seems to know what it is. And Sánchez has only a weak grip on power, with no large majority in parliament to strengthen his hand. Meanwhile the various parties of the right-wing opposition favour ever more hard-line measures against the separatists.

Beyond Catalonia, however, there are other serious issues to deal with. Many have been predicting another economic slump, and the truth is that Spain has never fully recovered from the global financial crash of 2008. Jobs have been created in some sectors, but they are often poorly paid. The number of Spaniards living in extreme poverty has increased to over 2.5 million people. An increasing gap between rich and poor has contributed to the sense of a country in the doldrums.



Meanwhile, there is a growing sense of alarm over *'la España vaciada'* – the 'empty' Spain. There has historically been a sharp divide between town and country, but this is increasing as people in rural areas move to the larger cities. Part of the problem is that farming is no longer a viable means of making a living as the amount farmers receive for their produce is frequently less than

what it costs them to produce it. And in a largely agricultural economy like Spain's, this has far-reaching ramifications. Even smaller cities, such as León, are beginning to witness an exodus of residents away to Madrid and Barcelona in search of a better living.

And then there is the rise of the far-Right. At the last elections in November, Santiago Abascal's Vox party won over fifteen per cent of the vote, making it the third largest group in parliament. Anger among some voters both over the Catalan situation and the recent digging up of the dictator Franco's remains from his

mausoleum in the Sierra de Guadarrama served to bolster its position. If truth be told, it was almost certainly shared fear of this party's rise which finally brought the Socialists and Podemos together to form a coalition. Yet while the Left is making a rare (and probably short-lived) show of unity, the political arena as a whole now feels more divided than at any time since the 1980s. Terms like 'fascist' and 'communist' are bandied about within parliament itself as each side accuses the other of being extremist. The middle ground feels as depopulated as the Spanish countryside, which, in a nation with such a long history of ripping itself apart, bodes ill for peaceful and constructive solutions being found for the many difficult problems facing it.

Sánchez may nominally be in power, but he is also in a very weak position. Many voters, even those on his own side of the political divide, find him a difficult person to trust. How long can he remain in power? And what might come after him?

*Jason Webster's latest book, Violencia: A New History of Spain, is published by Constable*



# Identity shift: Chile and Argentina in 2020

By BAS editor Robin Wallis.

Chile the modern, Argentina the muddled – so goes the conventional view of Latin America's two southern neighbours.



We all know which one labours under recurrent high inflation, unmanageable foreign debts and the ineradicable corruption of its Peronist past. Contrast that to its skinny neighbour, whose fruit and wine is prominently sold in western supermarkets and whose minerals power a variety of industries. Chile – outward looking Pacific trader; Argentina – inwardly focused regulation freak, seemingly bent on deterring trade and investment.

There is some truth to these stereotypes. But lift the lid on the two societies, as I did in my February 2020 visit, and a different impression emerges.



I arrived in Santiago on a Friday. Driving me back to my city centre lodgings that evening, my local friends had to spin the car around when it became clear that rubble in the street and brawling protestors made it impassable. The next morning I found workers picking their way through a jumble of crowd-control railings to sweep up broken glass and bricks. Friday nights, it appears, are the main riot nights, but the legacy of the

October 2019 *estallido social* continues to blight parts of Santiago most evenings. Protests are likely to intensify in the lead-up to the April plebiscite on drafting a new constitution.

In the *zona de disturbios* around Plaza Italia I sought out the Violeta Parra museum. This shrine to the Chilean folk hero was not just closed, it was boarded up and apparently abandoned. Returning towards the city centre, I found the Gabriela Mistral arts centre open, even if the tourist information booth outside

was smothered beneath protest posters and graffiti. The centre's theatre performances now start at 5pm rather than in the evening, so that theatregoers can get home safely before the trouble starts. This reflects the wider phenomenon of the city centre increasingly being abandoned to *los indigentes*, many of whom have migrated into the city. The middle class has increasingly relocated to the eastern suburbs such as Providencia, site of Latin America's tallest building, the Gran Torre, and numerous shopping centres.



Indebtedness is a raw nerve for many. Salaries are low and the cost of living is high: the metro fare increase that sparked last October's *estallido* represented a 22% increase in real terms over the past 5 years. However, a veteran journalist tells me that the demonstrations “were not about a 30 peso fare increase, but about 30 years of neglect. People fear getting old and getting ill: either one can mean a slide into poverty.”

“Everything is privatised”, laments Javi, a law student. “Only those who can pay have access to health services and a university education, and even then the education offered is not good. If we want to work outside Chile, a Chilean degree is not sufficient.”



The privatised pensions system pays out only about half the level promised when the scheme was set up, and mostly below the minimum wage. Fewer than half the workforce has consistently paid in contributions. Some analysts doubt the long-term durability of the pension funds.

“Look at the Gini coefficient for the two countries,” says Argentine Professor Nahman-Carlos Escudé, referring to the statistical model used for measuring a country's income and wealth distribution. “Chile's is around 50%: that's high. Argentina isn't exactly a role model for equality, but at around 41% that's significantly better than Chile. The Chilean model has been much touted, but also oversold.”

Chile's discontent extends into the political realm, as the slogan *Evadir no pagar / Otra forma de luchar* implies. Some call the uprising *Chile despertó* – an awakening from a socio-political model fashioned in the Pinochet era.

The violence is presumed to emanate from a loose confluence of anarchists, anti-capitalists and drug gang members. “Many low-grade graduates, in debt and with poor job prospects, gravitate towards such groups,” the journalist tells me. “There’s a lot of nihilism out there. And the consequences of the riots have been dire in many poorer parts of Santiago: people have lost their metro stations (over 20 were wrecked), their supermarkets and their pharmacies.”

President Piñera's vision was starker: ‘*estamos en guerra*’, he declared last October, deploying security forces on to streets now plastered with bitter graffiti denouncing police brutality and government elitism.

The 26 April referendum may release steam from the pressure cooker, but even if the proposal to draft a new Constitution wins (as expected), there will be continuing division over the election of a Constituent Assembly, the two-thirds approval that each item of the new Constitution will require in parliament, and the eventual national referendum to approve it. In the meantime the *estallido* continues to dominate public discourse and to make Chileans – particularly in the cities – feel uneasy about the future.

For once, the Chileans might actually be envying Argentina's political stability. The 2019 Argentine elections produced in Alberto Fernández a moderate president eager to avoid the excesses of his two predecessors, the populist Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and ‘neoliberal’ Mauricio Macri. Both government and opposition are functional. Buenos Aires has been cleaned up, the parks are well maintained and public transport is much improved. Despite the ever-present frailty of the economic situation, there is a sense of well-being in the city. The air is cleaner than in Santiago and the rains have been better. The country's best fruit and wine is consumed in Buenos Aires, not in Europe or the USA. The ‘Leicester Square ticket booth’ equivalent opposite the obelisk offers accessibly priced tickets to a variety of theatre options (mostly performed from Friday to Sunday) – start time 9pm. Tango enthusiasts queue patiently for the free *milongas* held at the Kirchner Cultural Centre opposite the presidential palace.







“Argentina can’t escape populism,” says Professor Escudé. “Economically unsustainable, yes, but it also allows free health care and university education for all.” Some young professionals look with unease at their prospects and dream of making a living overseas, but most would accept the Argentine condition as *un mal menor* compared to the predicament of their *vecinos transandinos*.

# Caracas: A Tale of Two Cities

*Susana Justham Bello, Wycombe Abbey*



*Caracas in the 1960's*

1960s Caracas seems almost unrecognisable from how we know it today; a bustling metropolis encased by a grand valley, busy highways with colourful cars, vibrant avenues embroidered with trees and the glamour that can be expected from what was once the most thriving and oil-rich country in Latin America.

Nowadays, the scene is shockingly different. Instead, we see images of destitution, derelict buildings, streets as empty as the supermarket shelves. Caracas is now a ghost town, a fallen metropolis.

It is estimated that Venezuela's economy has shrunk 47% since 2013, and the Central Bank of Venezuela estimates that the inflation rate increased to 53,798,500% between 2016 and April 2019. Venezuela has one of the highest murder rates in the world, and the population is suffering involuntary weight loss. Around 4 million people have fled the country. The situation in Venezuela is one of an economic, political and social crisis.



*Caracas now*

Democracies are not meant to collapse into authoritarianism. Harvard University political scientist Steven Levitsky says that Venezuela is one of only “four or five” democracies to have turned out this way, of which none were as wealthy nor have they sunk so quickly, and that “in most cases the regime quit before it gets this bad”. The fundamental question is, how did this happen?



*A Venezuelan shop owner before and during the socialist government*

In 1922 the Maracaibo basin in western Venezuela began to pour out 100,000 barrels of oil per day, prompting Gen Juan Vicente Gómez, the then-dictator, to permit foreign oil companies to invest in the country. As a result, by 1928 Venezuela was the world's second biggest petroleum exporter. The combination of the oil boom, and the growth of the capital city Caracas, meant that urban wealth was starting to surge.

It was in 1958 that, after the overthrow of the corrupt regime of the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez, the Punto Fijo Pact was agreed by the three political parties (Acción Democrática, COPEI and Unión Republicana Democrática). This pact conceded the acceptance of the presidential elections, and to agree to uphold the democratic regime. Rómulo Betancourt, “Padre de la democracia venezolana” (the father of Venezuelan democracy), became President. With the birth of a new political system and fountains of oil wealth, Venezuela was a Latin American success story.



*Sabana Grande, Caracas, 1960s*

This success was further seen during the 1970s – 3.8 million barrels of oil were being produced each day in 1970. In 1973 the Arab-led OPEC (Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) embargo against nations such as the US – which were perceived as supporting Israel during the Yom Kippur War – triggered the price of oil to quadruple, a huge benefit to Venezuela. The oil industry became nationalised in 1975 under the presidency of Carlos Andrés

Pérez, forcing foreign companies to give the newly created *Petróleos de Venezuela* a 60% share in the ownership of oil projects.

However, this prosperity was almost too good to be true, and after the “1980s oil glut” and a drop in oil prices, the country was choking in \$33 billion of foreign debt, and Venezuela was compelled to accept an International Monetary Fund bailout. Sharp austerity measures were introduced, prices of consumer goods and public

transport soared, and demonstrations quickly became violent, with dozens killed. A nationwide curfew was imposed and basic constitutional guarantees were suspended for the citizens. This was, without a doubt, a turning point for the country.



*Hugo Chávez*

In 1998 Hugo Chávez's socialist messages such as “ser rico es malo, es inhumano” (to be rich is bad, it is inhumane), and “no permitiré que en Venezuela haya un solo niño de la calle, y si no, dejo de llamarme Hugo Chávez” (I will not allow there to be even one child on the streets in Venezuela, and if not, my name is no longer Hugo Chávez), ensured his victory in the presidential elections. Over the

following years, Chávez, a former lieutenant colonel who had previously led a failed coup in 1992, aimed to tackle social inequality. He wanted to fund “missions” of health, education, food and housing, which in turn made the government more dangerously dependent on oil. He began to sell oil to other Latin American countries and to China at low prices, yet did not focus enough on financing oil facilities, and as a result production began to decline.

In 2000 Chávez introduced a new constitution which made clear his longer-term ambitions, because he could run for office again. This sparked discontent and what can be described as a “counter revolution” occurred in April 2002, in which he was ousted from the presidential palace. The military then helped him restore power and soon he started expanding state television and decreasing the influence of privately-owned ways of communication. Chávez's social policies won him the 2012 election, but when he died of cancer in 2013, he left behind a complicated legacy in a deteriorating country: criminality, inflation, corruption and mismanagement of state resources.



*Nicolás Maduro*

His chosen successor, Nicolás Maduro, has further plunged the nation into crisis by arresting leaders of the political opposition, detaining journalists, censoring the Internet, taking away the power of the National Assembly, violating human rights, and winning an election in 2018 that popular opinion regarded as illegitimate. Whilst he lives in

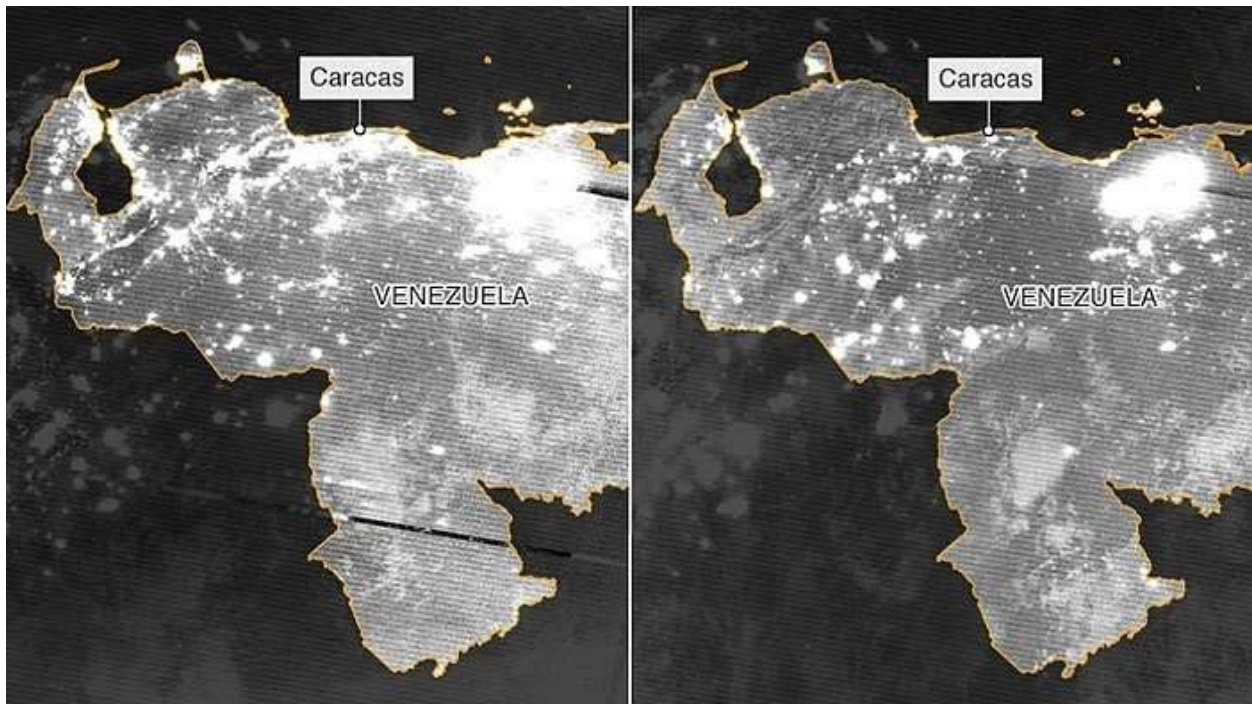


luxury, the country he runs is submerged in poverty, hunger and in the centre of an economic crisis. Venezuela experiences frequent blackouts and a dangerous lack of medicine.



*Juan Guaidó*

Meanwhile, the opposition leader Juan Guaidó, who declared himself interim president in January 2019, is still fighting to topple Maduro's draconian regime. Yet this power struggle remains unsettled, and it is difficult to predict how much longer the country and its people will be able to endure Maduro.



Blackouts: a light map showing Venezuela on the night of 7th March 2019 and then on the night of the 8th March 2019

# El español en EEUU

*Fran Compán, BAS editor*

Cada vez son menos los que consideran el español como una lengua extranjera en los Estados Unidos, y muchos de los que se niegan a convivir con esta realidad pululan ideológicamente en el entorno del actual presidente compartiendo su



ceguera crónica. La presencia histórica del español en América del Norte es anterior a la del inglés en un siglo más o menos, y comenzó con el primer asentamiento español en la Florida que vino de la mano de Juan Ponce de León a principios del siglo XVI. Una rápida exploración del mapa de los Estados Unidos revela nombres de estados muy hispanos como Colorado, Florida, Montana o Nevada, y también de ciudades como San Diego, Santa Mónica, Los Ángeles o San Francisco.

Los más interesados en la historia del país se habrán percatado de que los primeros registros y textos sobre el actual territorio estadounidense fueron escritos en español, y no en inglés, por Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca y Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà en los siglos XVI y XVII.

En la actualidad, los Estados Unidos es el segundo país del mundo con mayor número de hablantes de español solamente por detrás de México. Los cerca de 60 millones de hablantes hispanos se distribuyen a lo largo y ancho del país, yendo mucho más allá de los estados del sur. Ciudades tan al norte como Chicago y Nueva York, con casi un 30% de población hispana, albergan grandes núcleos de hispanohablantes, e incluso tienen dos de las tres sedes del prestigioso Instituto Cervantes en el país (la tercera está en Albuquerque, Nuevo México).

Como quizá se pueda esperar, California y Texas, son los estados con mayor población hispanohablante, pero la ciudad más hispana de todo Estados Unidos puede que se encuentre en Florida, lo que tampoco debería sorprender a muchos. En Hialeah, ciudad ubicada en el condado de Miami-Dade, el 96% de la población habla español como lengua materna, y es en su mayoría de origen cubano, lo que es tendencia en Miami.

Un caso muy peculiar es el de la ciudad de Guymon, en Oklahoma, una minúscula población de poco más de 10.000 habitantes en medio de ninguna parte, revivida por la inmigración mexicana que constituye el 60% de su población, y que ha devuelto la esperanza a la comunidad local. Y es que Guymon se ha beneficiado de los puestos de trabajo creados por inmigrantes de origen mexicano cuyos negocios dan empleo a trabajadores de una gran variedad de orígenes y culturas, convirtiendo a esta pequeña población en un ejemplo de mestizaje.

Por supuesto, más notoria es la existencia de enclaves específicos ocupados por comunidades diferenciadas de acuerdo con su origen: mexicanoamericanos, dominicanos, puertorriqueños, colombianos o cubanos, entre otros. Podría considerarse que grandes zonas de California, Texas, Nuevo México o Miami, así como barrios enteros de Washington, Chicago, Nueva York y otras ciudades son provincias o comarcas delimitadas por fronteras permeables, que forman parte de una comunidad panhispana estadounidense.

Lingüísticamente hablando, el español que se habla en Norteamérica es tan diverso como su población, y con el paso de los años ha emergido una hibridación conocida como *espanglish*. Este término fue originalmente utilizado por el periodista y poeta puertorriqueño Salvador Tió en los años cuarenta para referirse a la lengua híbrida hablada por los mexicanoamericanos, en particular en el sur de California, pero también por otras comunidades hispanas en Nueva York, Miami y Texas.

Además, también puede oírse en Panamá y Puerto Rico, pero, dependiendo de la comunidad en cuestión, las diferencias de un *espanglish* a otro pueden ser sustanciales. Se cree que hay unos 40 millones de hablantes de *espanglish* en el mundo, casi tantos como la población de España, que hablan una variedad de subtipos como el *Dominicanish* (mezcla de español de la República Dominicana e inglés), *Cubonix* (español cubano e inglés) y el más famoso *Tex Mex* (español mexicano combinado con inglés), y que pueden ser difíciles de comprender para hablantes nativos de español o inglés.



El resultado de este mestizaje lingüístico es variopinto. En ocasiones, nos encontramos con ejemplos del uso de verbos en inglés con terminaciones en español, como, por ejemplo, *parquear* en lugar de *estacionar/aparcar*, o *rentar* en vez de *alquilar*. Casos más crípticos como

traducciones literales de ciertas expresiones como *llamar para atrás* (“to call back”) en lugar de *devolver la llamada*, serían ininteligibles para el hablante nativo de español, pero se han convertido en la norma.

No fue por casualidad que la Real Academia de la Lengua Española incorporase el término “espanglish” a la edición de 2014 de su manual, reflejando no sólo el cambio de los tiempos, sino de la presión ejercida por la Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española.

Pero no todos los hablantes de español en Estados Unidos tienen origen estrictamente americano. En el estado de Luisiana, existen todavía comunidades de hispanoparlantes, descendientes de unos 2000 canarios que emigraron a esas tierras a finales del siglo XVIII. La comunidad más destacada de Isleños, como se autodenominan, está en San Bernardo y preserva el uso de un dialecto (quizá deberíamos decir *lengua*) de una enorme riqueza lingüística fruto de la influencia de la inmigración a la zona de gentes de la España rural peninsular y de otras partes del mundo hispano, así como de la existente población francófona de Luisiana.



No hay duda de que el español está ganando peso globalmente, y eso se debe en buena medida a la influencia de los Estados Unidos como país cada vez más bilingüe. En Norteamérica, la riqueza del mestizaje cultural ha trascendido ya ideologías y clases sociales, y cada vez son más frecuentes los eventos en los que se celebra. La actuación de Shakira y JLo en el intermedio de la Super Bowl fue tan

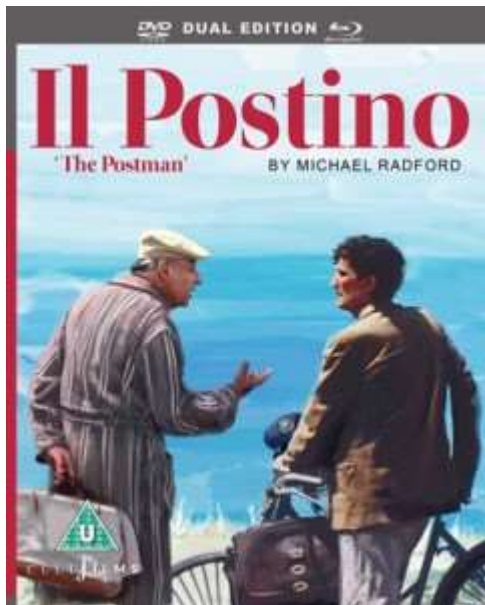
breve como impactante, al convertir un evento icónico con una audiencia de 100 millones de espectadores en una celebración de la diversidad cultural americana con mensaje político incluido.



# Pablo Neruda, Mexican muralists and the first edition of *Canto general*

Nathanial Gardner, BAS editor

As a poet whose work is universally loved and read in dozens of languages, there are few unexplored areas of Pablo Neruda's work. One aspect, however, that still remains relatively untouched is the text-and-image relationships that Pablo Neruda maintained with other visual artists. On several occasions he collaborated both with new and well-established artists in ways that successfully blend his poetry with visual texts. One example of this is the book *La casa en la arena*, which he created with Sergio Larraín, one of Chile's most important photographers. In it they show, as is typical of Neruda, how the ordinary can become extraordinary as they explore the beauty of Neruda's seaside home, the Casa de Isla Negra, using text and image.



A touching moment in *Il Postino* (a film that draws upon Antonio Skarmeta's novel *El cartero de Neruda*, which recreates Neruda's exile on Capri while he waited for an arrest warrant in his native country to be withdrawn) is when Neruda and the protagonist Mario – the postman of the title – listen to a tape sent from Chile in which Neruda's *compañeros* celebrate the poet's birthday in his absence. On the tape, his friends attempt to cheer him up with news of the success of the underground copy of *Canto General* that was circulating throughout Chile. There is a fascinating upside to the fact that political circumstances made it necessary for *Canto General* to be first published in Mexico in 1950

instead of the poet's native Chile. This was that the key Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros had the opportunity to illustrate the first edition of the now famous book of poetry.



While the details are less clear on who created the illustrations – some suggest that that they were done by Diego Rivera, while the style of others suggest they might be Siqueiros's or even possibly someone else's – their role is important. They give a face to a drowsy Inca who appears to doze in the Andes. A priest and a conquistador kneel together on American soil. A Christ-like figure shows us the bounty of the Americas. Workers unite behind a prophet-like figure who holds a scythe in his hand instead of a staff or rod.

A city-scape that could be Guanajuato or Valparaíso suggests where these characters might live; a landscape offers an idea of how they successfully tame the land amidst hardship. The illustrations add a visual dimension that engages directly with the poetry and forms a parallel narrative that is worth studying.



More impressive than the black-and-white illustrations is the mural art that the book includes. These colour illustrations, which we know are by Diego Rivera and Siqueiros, bookend the extensive collection of poems and offer important insights into the narrative and inject it with a visual dimension. Rivera's mural-like introduction to the cycle of poems is true to his usual visual style in which his work narrates the past and present, while suggesting the future. While most of Rivera's best-known murals reflect on Mexican history in his effort to educate the Mexican masses, this piece is similar to his mural in San Francisco called *The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and of the South on this Continent* in that it visualizes Latin America on a much wider scale. In *Canto General*, the Anglo-American element is not present and the visual narrative mirrors the narrative of the collection of poetry, which considers the history of the New World from a Hispanic perspective.

As you read the painting from left to right, you can see that it corresponds to the Latin American continent observed from north to south. The Aztecs, the Mayas and the Incas are all present. American birds and animals such as the jaguar, the deer and the llama are present as are the eagle, the condor and the quetzal. The Latin Americans are industrious. They work as architects and builders, farmers and weavers. They provide the necessities of life as well as constructing great centres of gathering. Their rituals, gods, and religious practices are part of the top centre section of the painting and propose that these great civilizations are harmonious, and that they possess transcendent philosophies that contribute to their cultural background. The vibrant colour present in the images and their peaceful coexistence suggest a land of wonder and beauty as well as Latin America's rich history, just as we find in the written element of *Canto General*.



Siquieros's images are much more sombre in nature. A faceless man leaps up out of the land reaching outward as if he were to spring out of the text. This image is said to relate to 'La arena traicionada' in *Canto General*, which critiques the dictatorships in Latin America. In the image, one can detect links to Siquieros's 1944 mural *The New Democracy* in which democracy, as a woman, bursts forth and appears to leap out of the image and into real life.

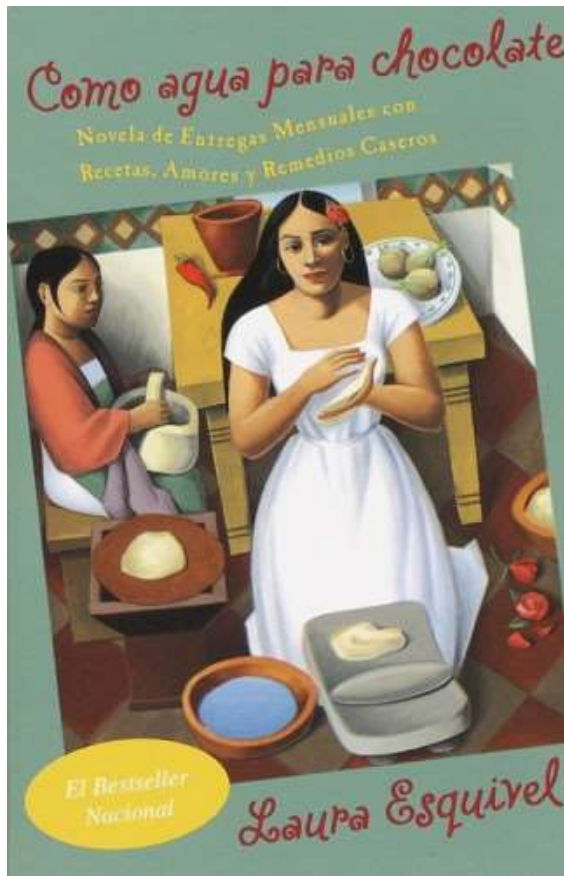
The portrayal of the faceless individual lends itself to two possible interpretations. The man is struggling against the dangerous quicksand of dictatorship, or he is bursting forth out of the sand and we contemplate him as he achieves his freedom and liberty. Looking at the positive tones that predominate in *Canto General*, my mind seems more inclined to the second reading over the first. What is true is that the collaboration with the artists adds to the depth and texture of the series of poems that other editions do not. They reference the Latin American collaborations that were taking place at this period and evidence a positive ethos that contributes to the excellence found in Neruda's work and that of his esteemed colleagues.



# Como agua para chocolate – book review

Laetitia Hosie, Lower Sixth pupil at Westminster School (London)

*Como agua para chocolate*, the 1989 novel by Mexican author Laura Esquivel, tells the story of Tita, the youngest daughter of the De La Garza family, who is forced by tradition to remain single in order to look after her mother, whilst her lover Pedro marries her older sister, Rosaura. But what makes this take on the classic topos of forbidden love so unique? Why has it sold close to a million copies in Hispanic countries and been translated into numerous languages? It would seem that such a familiar plot and recognisable themes might make for something predictable, tedious and unsuccessful, yet *Como agua para chocolate* was the number one bestseller in Mexico for more than two years.



What seems to distinguish *Como agua para chocolate* from other romance novels is the sense of warmth and homeliness running through the entirety of the book. The plot revolves around the concepts of food and cooking; each chapter begins with a recipe for a certain Mexican dish. Furthermore, the kitchen plays a significant role in acting as a kind of safe space for Tita, and the meals she cooks affect the events of the novel. Indeed, her feelings when she cooks seem to magically transfer to the people who consume the food she cooks; for example, those who eat the *pastel chabela* she cries into whilst beating the eggs are overcome with nostalgia and sadness. This sense of magic surrounding the food in the novel quite literally brings the kitchen to life, adding an intimate and cosy quality to the novel. Similarly, the mouth-watering descriptions of dishes are vivid enough for

the reader not only to visualise them but to imagine the smells and textures and temperatures. Food as a whole, in the context of cooking, acts as a bridge between the characters in the novel and the reader. One cannot help but feel somewhat connected or relate in a way; good food is something universally appreciated.



The presence of magic in a broader sense also sets this novel apart from others of its genre – whilst it is certainly not an entirely realistic work, it is not completely abstract either. There are short moments of fantasy, which interlink in a very subtle way with the moments of reality; in this way, these moments of magic realism seem to occur naturally in way that does not startle the reader. Although it might seem as though magic is used to resolve issues in the plot line (for example, one of the characters happens to die of a magically-induced illness at a very convenient moment), it adds a dimension to the story which the inner child in every reader probably appreciates, like the significant presence of food.



The novel is predictable in certain places, and, as a reader, one might feel frustrated at how easily everything seems to work out, but the child-like outlook which the novel naturally brings out in us (created through the use of food and magic) not only makes up for this but allows us to actively engage with it in a positive way – deep down, everyone loves a happy-ever-after. *Como agua para chocolate* is a beautifully-written, touching novel

which explores mature themes in a down-to-earth and relatable way; anyone with a passion for romance novels should read it, and those who tend to prefer other genres would find that it is a fresh and delightful read.

# The Fantastic in Borges – Ambiguity and Duality throughout ‘El Encuentro’ and ‘El Sur’

*Etta Selim, Y13 pupil at Harris Westminster (London)*

## Teetering on the edge of reality

Anyone familiar with Borges’ writing will be aware of the prevalence of the uncanny in his work, the rather intangible experience of something familiar. It can be seen in Borges’ portrayal of the infinite and imprecise texture of time, his bizarre labyrinths, and the oneiric, nightmarish experience of individual moments of conflict. According to Freud, the uncanny arises ‘when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that until now we have considered imaginary’.<sup>[1]</sup> Certainly, when I read my first Borges short story (‘El Encuentro’) a year ago, it was precisely this teetering on the edge of reality that captured my attention. As I was propelled through the story, gripped by the slowly retreating banality of the ‘asado’, I was quite unprepared for the story’s chilling conclusion; throughout the duel between the drunk Uriarte and Duncan, the daggers, not the men, had fought each other. I was captivated by this supernatural inversion of agent and instrument, the daggers using men as their weapons, but what most stood out to me was Borges’ style. More particularly, what captivated me was the curious veneer of uncertainty that lacquers his words. From his continuous qualification of ideas with adverbs such as ‘tal vez’, to narrators who – more often than not – are ignorant of the characters’ motives, this gap between reality and fantasy is made all the more ambiguous.

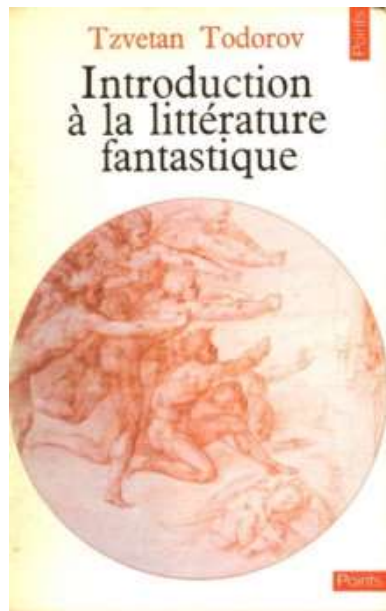


## Borges and the uncanny

This pattern can be traced throughout many of Borges’ stories. For example, in ‘La muerte y la brújula’ the reader, just like Lönnrot, is tricked into believing that there must be a Borgesian twist to the narrative, an underlying layer of labyrinths, esoteric references, Jewish symbolism and geometrical patterns, yet the story ends up being one of revenge, an ironically common motif in detective stories.



Similarly, in 'El Sur', the protagonist's psychological trauma from his time in a sanatorium is eerily echoed as the narrative continues, supposedly away from the clinic. However, situating these instances of the uncanny in the so-called fantastic genre, defined by Chris Baldick as 'a mode of fiction in which the possible and the impossible are confounded so as to leave the reader (and often the narrator and/or central character) with no consistent explanation for the story's strange events'[1], is a lot more difficult. Sure, at first glance the typically Borgesian fluctuation between the physical and the metaphysical fits the description. However, Todorov, in his *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970), argues that fantastic narratives involve – crucially – an *unresolved* hesitation between the supernatural explanation available and the natural or psychological explanation offered. This more specific definition inevitably poses a series of questions about Borges' literary corpus. Given Borges' focus on the pitfalls of memory, can the supernatural reading of his stories be fully accepted? Furthermore, does the narrator – or the reader – definitively decide upon a material or a metaphysical explanation? Borges provides motives to believe either explanation throughout his stories, obfuscating any narrative certainty. Of course, a single article would not suffice to explore the complete resonance of these threads, but I hope that by tracing the uncanny in 'El Encuentro' and 'El Sur' it can at least outline the relevance and breadth of Borges' relationship with the fantastic.



## Dual narratives

As we embark upon this task, it might be best to consider the idea of a dual narrative. In most of the Borges stories that I have encountered, he crafts a narrative in which the supernatural and the natural are woven together – our first hint of the fantastic. To start with 'El Encuentro', where the comradely ambience of an 'asado' is changed into a bitter duel between two men that ends in death, Borges provides rational motives for the duel between Uriarte and Duncan. The narrator initially assures us that their fight must be the result of an old rivalry, and that they have both drunk too much. Yet, despite the seemingly reasonable explanation, in various instances the narrator describes the uncanny feeling of powerlessness that overcomes him and everyone present. One of my favourite lines describes how 'un remolino, que nadie era capaz de sujetar, nos arrastraba y



nos perdía' (a whirlwind, that no one was capable of holding down, was dragging us with it and causing us to be lost); at the end of the story, this foreign presence is reified, as the narrator decides that the daggers were the agents of the duel, not the men – 'las armas, no las hombres, pelearon'.

This duality is furthered by the uncertainty of the narrative voice. The intradiegetic narrator is, by this very definition, limited, unable to present an aloof or unbiased account of the story. Yet, as is Borges' customary style, the story's retelling is plagued by heightened destabilisation. In the very first paragraph, Borges writes that 'no es raro que ya nadie recuerde, o recuerde como en un sueño' (it is not odd that now no one remembers, or remembers as if in a dream), undermining the narrator's subsequent recollection of the events and tainting it with unreliability. Even the setting of the knife fight is, to a certain extent, imagined. The narrator asks the we, as readers, 'pensemos en uno de esos pueblos del Norte' (let's imagine one of those towns in the North), with the jussive command 'pensemos' creating doubt as to the topography, thus furthering the uncertainty.

Throughout the duel itself, the narrator is surprised that 'pude seguirla, o casi seguirla, como si fuera un ajedrez' (I could follow it, or nearly follow it, as if it were a game of chess). However, the immediate qualification 'casi seguirla', undercuts the logical efficiency and clarity of the chess simile. In fact, immediately following this phrase, Borges writes that 'los años [...] no habrán dejado de exaltar o de oscurecer lo que vi' (the years won't have stopped exalting or dimming what I saw), furthering this lack of reliability with a conscious recognition of memory's malleability. The narrator excuses any possible misremembrances as the products of 'las inevitables varaciones que traen el tiempo y la buena o la mala literatura' (the inevitable variations that time and good or bad literature bring), and he tentatively suggests that there were 'dos o tres botellas tiradas' (two or three bottles thrown) on the ground, before wondering if this is merely a false memory, intimated by 'el abuso del cinematógrafo' (the abuse of the cinema, i.e. having seen too many films). Finally, Duncan's dying words are 'todo esto es como un sueño' (all this is like a dream), rather recalling one of the opening lines of the story ('recuerde como en un sueño') in an ironic subversion. This brilliant series of qualifications creates a more prominent ambiguity between the two narratives. Which one is authoritative? This is certainly a notable feature of the fantastic.

## **Vacillating between the supernatural and the natural**

Ultimately, however, to ascertain the presence – or not – of the fantastic, we must consider whether any of the parties involved (including the reader him/herself) make a decision that overrides their vacillation between the supernatural and the natural. According to Todorov ‘the fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty’<sup>[1]</sup> – it is evanescent. The story will either give us a naturalistic explanation or a supernatural one, at which point the fantastic dissolves into the fantastic-uncanny or the fantastic-marvellous. In fact, he argues, ‘the fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event’.<sup>[2]</sup> In ‘El Encuentro’, this specific definition is vital to understanding the story’s place within the fantastic, since the narrator appears to make this decision. The story ends with the assertion that ‘las armas, no los hombres, pelearon’ (the weapons, not the men, fought), thus enacting ‘el fin de otra historia más antigua’ (the end of another, more ancient, story). The certainty of this sentence, especially given the preterite, indicative verbs, compared to the hypothetical subjunctives that have dominated the narrative thus far, suggests that the narrator has definitively decided in favour of the supernatural. Of course, this is immediately followed by the idea that the weapons ‘acaso se agitaron al despertar’ (might have shaken when they woke up), where the tentative adverb ‘acaso’ appears to undermine this certainty. However, the narrator uses this hypothesis to justify his own, empirical knowledge of the events – ‘por eso tembló el puño de Uriarte’ (that is why Uriarte’s fist trembled) – providing his own reasoning about the events to arrive at this complete embrace of the supernatural. Most importantly, the narrative ends with the solemn ‘las cosas duran más que la gente’ (things last more than people), and the surmise that perhaps the daggers ‘volverán a encontrarse’ (will meet again), which doubly compounds this notion that the narrator no longer hesitates between the material and the metaphysical, thus placing the story in the realm of the fantastic-uncanny.

## **A fitful cloud of ambiguity**

Nonetheless, even if the story’s protagonist has surpassed the fantastic by Todorov’s standards, is it true that everyone involved in the story has made a decision? It is here that the reader’s own autonomy provides a significant challenge to the fantastic; yes, the narrator might have decided to accept a supernatural explanation of the events, but the reader is still left with a constant uncertainty and ambiguity that throws their personal choice into doubt, even as the narrator reaches his own realisation. The sheer weight of qualification and the

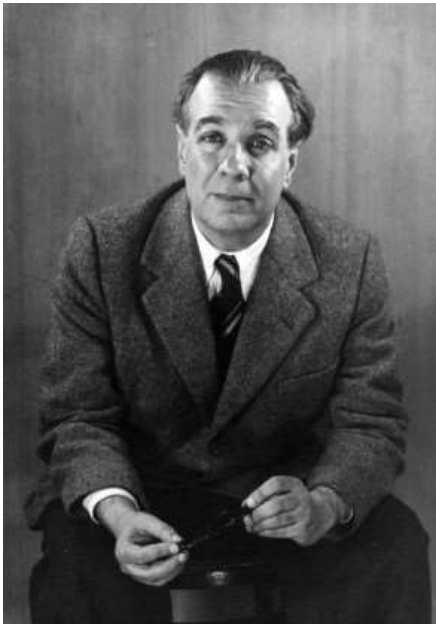
continuous hints at faded memory, propagated by Borges' consciously playful style, render the reader's own emergence from this fitful cloud of ambiguity almost impossible. Given the narrator's limited cognisance, as well as his own uncertainty about the events, how can the reader distinguish between the real and the fabricated, let alone the veracity of this supernatural conclusion? It would appear, then, that while the protagonist's own conclusion diverges from a typical construal of the fantastic, the reader cannot escape the uncertainty of the narrative. Perhaps 'El Encuentro' is fantastic in nature, after all.



### **Borgesian alarm bells**

This binary split between 'real' and 'fantasy' can also be seen in 'El Sur', where the story is – I would argue – more clearly fantastic in genre. To follow the 'natural' reading of this *cuento*, Juan Dahlmann is released from a protracted and excruciating treatment for septicaemia in hospital and resolves to visit his *estancia* in the South. Along the way, a bunch of farm hands decide to taunt him and he eventually becomes so riled at this behaviour that he decides to confront them. A mysterious 'ecstatic' gaucho in the corner of the *almacén del campo* throws him a knife, and he exits to the 'llanura' thinking: if he could have chosen or *dreamed up* his death, dying whilst defending his honour in a duel is the death he *would have chosen*. Borgesian alarm bells should start ringing at this

pointed qualification, and this is not the only instance in which subtle inconsistencies distort the narrative, roughly from the point at which Dahlmann leaves the hospital. To mention a few: Dahlmann describes the sensation that he is travelling not just to the South but to the past and that he is entering a world of conjecture, as if he were two men at the same time. A conversation with the ticket inspector, which Dahlmann doesn't understand or even try to hear, is utterly omitted, apparently because 'el mecanismo de los hechos no le importaba' (he didn't care about the mechanism of events). Dahlmann appears to recognise the owner of the *almacén*, but confusedly realises that he must have mistaken him for an employee of the sanatorium. This unknown *patrón* then addresses Dahlmann by his name, beseeching him to ignore the *muchachones* and their insults. But how does he know his name if Dahlmann has never set foot in his *almacén*? It is an odd inconsistency that Dahlmann doesn't even question. As the gaucho throws him a knife, Dahlmann laments the situation – they would never have allowed this to happen in the sanatorium, he thinks. All of these events allow Borges to hint at another ending, another explanation: perhaps Dahlmann never left the hospital and dreaming his own death is his only way to escape from the torment of the sanatorium. The fantastic once again makes its mark.



### The apparent genius of Borges

It is here that the genius of Borges is apparent. As we can see in both stories, the initially natural mode of the story descends into an ambiguity characteristic of the fantastic: the introduction of the supernatural into the story is never strong enough to override the events of the story completely, but it still poses a strong current of discord in the narrative. Yet, where the narrator in 'El Encuentro' continuously struggles with this binary split between the natural and the supernatural, in 'El Sur' even an awareness of this split, or a possible conflict between truth and dream, is at first glance utterly removed. One of my favourite symbols throughout this story is the 'enorme gato que se dejaba acariciar por la gente, como una divinidad desdeñosa' (huge cat that let itself be stroked by people, like a disdainful deity). Dahlmann encounters this cat while in a café near the train station as he waits for his train to arrive and it prompts him to start thinking: 'pensó, mientras alisaba el negro pelaje, que aquel contacto era ilusorio y que estaban como separados por un cristal, porque el hombre vive en el tiempo, en la sucesión, y el mágico animal, en la actualidad, en



la eternidad del instante' (he thought, while he was stroking the black fur, that that contact was illusory and that they were as if separated by a window pane, since man lives in time, in the succession of events, and the magical animal, in the moment, in the eternity of the instant). Every time I read this, I start thinking about



Schrödinger's cat, a connection that, whether Borges was aware of this resonance or not, exemplifies this story's ambiguity between states. While Schrödinger's cat is in the box with the radioactive substance that might kill it, it hovers between life and death and is, in a sense, both alive and dead. It is only when one opens the box that it assumes either form. In 'El Sur', it is Dahlmann who is shut into a similar box: the closed system of Borges' literary world. He does not seem to be aware that there is an underlying choice between the supernatural and the natural, but enacts events with continuous qualification that inevitably continues the binary thread of these two different plots. This would appear to situate the story more firmly within the realm of the fantastic.

## Dahlmann's choice

Arguably, however, Dahlmann does make a decision – he decides to completely embrace the natural explanation. Similarly to 'El Encuentro', the final sentence culminates with an acceptance of this chosen narrative: 'empuña con firmeza el cuchillo, que acaso no sabrá manejar, y sale a la llanura' (he firmly grips the knife, that perhaps he will not know how to handle and walks out into the pampas). Although Dahlmann is limited to the bounds of his narrative, and does not – as in 'El Encuentro' – question the significance of the events that he experiences, the sudden, vivid present tense of this phrase, in contrast to the determined past tense of the entire story, appears to enact an acceptance of the natural account, as Dahlmann wholly absorbs his fate and squares up to his possible (likely) death. Yet once again, the reader will become aware of these adjacent paths, these parallel narratives, if they read the story again, which seasoned readers of Borges' stories know always pays off. The destabilising narrative of an imagined death, an imagined liberty, become all the more intoxicating and all the more ambiguous by virtue of the series of hints and teasers that Borges leaves. As in 'El Encuentro', then, the reader is left with the full weight of the fantastic – a fresh ambiguity, that leaves them teetering on the edge of the supernatural.



### Crucial ambiguity and narrative ingenuity

As we have seen, Borges' conscious moulding of memory and truth, as well as the story's intradiegetic limits, situate both 'El Encuentro' and 'El Sur' firmly within the realm of the fantastic, as the supernatural and natural blend almost indistinguishably. At first glance, in both cases, the protagonists appear to accept one of the forking paths of the narrative (the supernatural and the natural, respectively), leaving the story within the realm of the uncanny. Yet the reader's own entrapment in the story's ambiguity poses a challenge to such a decision. It would be perfectly possible for them to make a decision either way, to accept wholeheartedly that the duel in 'El Encuentro' was the product of a supernatural dagger rivalry, or that Dahlmann never really left the sanatorium. However, to refer to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who coined the phrase 'suspension of disbelief' to describe a reader's 'voluntary withholding of scepticism [...] with regard to incredible characters and events'<sup>[1]</sup>, the reader can still accept this story's basis in uncertainty without having to decide either way – they can enjoy the narrative on its own terms. Perhaps, then, the fantastic is what has made Borges' stories such paragons of narrative ingenuity. As tempting as it might be to assume one plot arc,

the fantastic in Borges allows us to grapple with our own subjectivity as humans, to sway dizzyingly on the edge of reality; if we can understand that this ambiguity should be left precisely as such, then we can engage in a more fruitful experience of Borges' stories and the world that surrounds us.

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# Don Quijote, postmodernism and postmodernity

Ben Kara (OW), former pupil of Westminster School (London)

In the fifth episode of Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon's *The Trip to Spain*, halfway through one of the several lunch sequences that comprise the episode, *Don Quijote* happens to come up in conversation and Coogan says the following in praise of its author: 'Effectively, [Cervantes] was "postmodern" before there was any "modern" to be "post" about.' Although the show suggests that Coogan's words served primarily to impress the lady sat next to him at the table, they resonated with me nonetheless.



*Don Quijote*, widely considered to be the first modern novel, has an unmistakable freshness to it that many have endeavoured to describe over the years. Indeed, some put it down to 'partial magic' (\*cough\* Borges \*cough\*). I myself, however, am more inclined to agree with Steve Coogan on this one – that *Don Quijote*'s dazzling originality lies in its postmodernist features. My intention is to take a closer look at how these manifest themselves, so that by the end we might have a clearer idea of what Cervantes' postmodernism ultimately brings to his *magnum opus*.



Before diving in, it might be useful to remind ourselves of the stylistic conventions of postmodernist literature. In essence, it is characterised by the use of irony and pastiche, 'double coding' (otherwise put as the playful mixing of aesthetic registers) and metafiction.

So, now that's out of the way, let us begin with irony and pastiche. A very particular ironic attitude is one of the most palpable features of postmodernist literature. Far from being pointed and satirical as in modernist literature, postmodernist irony is of an unmoored sort, where what exactly is being mocked is not always clear. Of course, what you all must be thinking is: errm, doesn't Cervantes *literally* tell us at the beginning of *Don Quijote* that his intention is to show the chivalric romance for what it is – a daft genre? Well, what I say to you is this: Cervantes may have lied. Rather than setting out to directly satirise the tropes of chivalric romance, I am inclined to believe that it is in fact harder to tell what – or indeed whom – Cervantes is really mocking.



Consider the iconic episode of the galley slaves, for instance. On the one hand, you could read it as Cervantes openly laughing at the stupidity of the chivalric code and, by extension, Don Quijote himself. I mean, what sort of ridiculous code would sanction the liberation of such a rabble of drunkards, murderers and lechers; and, more to the point, what sort of imbecile would voluntarily subscribe to such a code? That is

certainly one way of looking at it. The other way, of course, is like so: what sort of daft criminal would beat up their own lawyer? Why bite the hand of the only one who gives a damn about *habeas corpus* and the only one willing to put his neck on the line for his fellow man? Who's the joke on now? I'd say it's hard to tell.

Of course, the other argument against *Don Quijote* being straight satire is the sheer number of references made to the famous titles and characters of the chivalric romance genre: *Amadís de Gaula*, *Orlando furioso* and *La chanson de Roland* to name but three. As a matter of fact, I remember reading whole chapters wherein Don Quijote would minutely detail the *many* titles he adored and *exactly* why. Cervantes sure knew a lot about chivalric romance for someone who claimed to hate it so vehemently... Indeed, those pages have coloured my successive perusals of *Don Quijote* and I am now more inclined to see Cervantes' evocations of chivalric romance less as mockery and more as homage; a sort of pastiche that Frederic

Jameson, author of the seminal *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, would call 'blank parody'.



But enough about irony and pastiche, let us now turn to 'double coding'. In my view, the clearest (certainly the most visual) explanation of postmodernist double coding can be found in some of the architecture of the 80s and 90s. Take New York's AT&T building, for instance.

Designed by architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee and completed in 1984, this skyscraper, with its combination of playful extravagance and classical evocations (where Bauhaus meets Baroque) is the epitome of the postmodern belief that art need not be uniform in register.

As anyone who has read even the smallest part of *Don Quijote* can attest, 'double coding' can be found everywhere, with 'high' Petrarchan sonnets often recited within earshot of the bawdy, night-time shenanigans taking place at the various inns that accommodate Don Quijote and his trusty squire along their journey. That said, in my view, the funniest and most iconic example of 'double coding' is the juxtaposition between the respective lexicons of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza. Throughout the novel, we, the readers, have the great privilege of listening to our two heroes process, discuss and often dispute whatever it is that they come across. Some of the novel's most entertaining moments consist of the often absurd dissonance between Don Quijote's lofty and chivalry-saturated speech on the one hand and Sancho's earthy and proverb-heavy wisdom on the other. You could listen to those two talk for hours...



Last but not least, we have metafiction. Perhaps the most notorious of postmodernist qualities, metafiction is a form of fiction that emphasises the artificiality and constructed nature of itself. To give a non-literary example, consider this famous sequence from Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* where Mia Wallace breaks the fourth wall and quite literally draws a square onto the windscreen of Vince Vega's red 1964 Chevy Malibu.



In *Don Quijote*, the cheekiest example of metafiction takes place in the second part of the novel. It also happens to be one of the favourite moments of the Argentinian proto-postmodernist writer Jorge Luis Borges too, but I'll get to that in due course. So here goes. Not long after having defeated a ferocious lion in single combat and duly changing his title from 'Sir Knight of the Woeful Countenance' to 'Sir Knight of the Lions', Don Quijote and Sancho come across a Duke and Duchess who generously receive the pair with much pomp and ceremony. Having been beaten up and robbed more times than they might care to remember, so splendid a reception seems strange to our two heroes. Soon enough, the reason behind the Duke and Duchess' generosity is revealed. Why, of course! They have read the first part of *Don Quijote* and are themselves a couple of superfans who have just met, if you like, their favourite reality TV stars. Needless to say, in keeping with the conduct of all other hosts hitherto encountered by the knight and his squire, the Duke and Duchess soon run out of generosity and instead begin to use Don Quijote and Sancho for their own savage amusement – but that's another story.

To use some highfalutin terminology, the moment outlined above is an example of metalepsis – a technique used frequently by postmodernist writer Thomas Pynchon, author of such novels as *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. In short, metalepsis occurs when boundaries between two or more 'worlds' are overrun or violated, what Pynchon calls 'a kiss of cosmic pool balls'. In this case, the two 'worlds' in question are: **a)** the real world, in which *Don Quijote* can be read and enjoyed by real people like you and me, and **b)** the world of the novel, in which are contained the *fictional* Don Quijote, Sancho Panza, Dulcinea del Toboso, Ginés de Pasamonte/Ginesillo de Parapilla – you get the idea. By having people from world **b)** do something that ought only to be possible in world **a)**... Well, the implications are greater – or indeed graver – than you might first think. But don't take my word for it. Here's Borges' take on the matter:

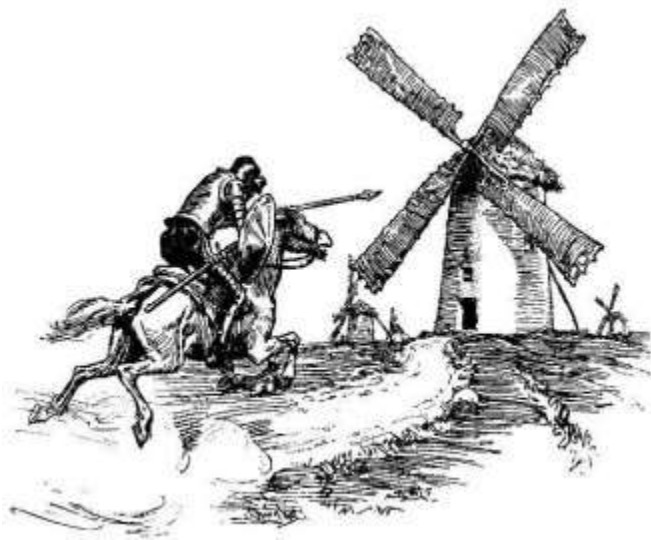
"Why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the Quixote...I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious."  
(*Labyrinths*, Jorge Luis Borges)  
Food for thought, eh?

To finish up, although we've spoken a little about certain instances of postmodernist aesthetics in *Don Quijote*, there is still something to say on the topic of ideological overlap. To return to our friend Frederic Jameson, he defines postmodernism as the aesthetic reaction to the conditions of 'postmodernity'. And what is 'postmodernity', you ask? According to Jameson, postmodernity is the age



of the end of traditional ideologies, brought about by late-stage capitalism. Now, though I do not even begin to entertain the notion that Cervantes could somehow have been a 17<sup>th</sup>-century proto- & crypto-Marxist, but I think it is fair to say that he lived in and wrote through a time of great change in Spain's history.

Indeed, one of the most fascinating examples of this change as reflected in the text is the episode treating Sancho's governance of the island of Barataria in the second part of the novel. It is plausible that it might well have served as Cervantes' attempt to satirise the colonial practice of gifting *encomiendas* to conquistadors as a reward for their loyalty and assistance. Although Sancho doesn't do a completely awful job as governor, it's certainly not without chaos and endless faff; and more to the point, it is a testament to the fact that the Spain of Cervantes could now see a low-born like Sancho (or indeed Francisco Pizarro ...) turn into a *de facto* king.



In many ways, I believe Don Quijote's iconic 'Golden Age' speech to be Cervantes' most explicit reference to the change Spain was undergoing at the time. What else could Don Quijote's lamenting the passing of a time when people 'ignoraban las dos palabras tuyo y mío' signify other than the death of traditional ideologies? Like the postmodernists, I don't think Cervantes was particularly interested in searching for coherence in the face of change, but rather release through the

acceptance of its inevitability. But even so, when we watch Don Quijote charge valiantly at the impersonal face of modernity and its slowly revolving blades, and we see him inevitably fall flat on his arse, though the fall is doubtlessly funny, it can be difficult to know whether to laugh or cry.

# Putting on Golden Age comedies

Sander Berg



A few years ago I taught a number of excellent thespians who also happened to be good Hispanists. Or maybe it was the other way round, I can't remember. In any event, it seemed too good an opportunity to miss. So I decided to put on a Spanish play. An obvious choice might seem to be Lorca. After all, his rural trilogy is a kind of evergreen on Spanish syllabi and they are powerful, poetic plays. But – and this is a big but (think Kim K) – I have a personal aversion against am-dram interpretations of Lorca, and of tragedies in general. Many a good play has been spoiled by shouty overdramatization. And to image a precocious teenage girl with ivory skin playing a tough, leathery, spiteful or intensely frustrated older woman like Yerma, or the Madre in *Bodas de sangre*, or – God forbid – Bernarda Alba. Yikes!

I thought about other modern plays such as *Historia de una escalera* or *Bajarse al moro*, but all I could remember from the latter is that it involves a woman smuggling dope in the reproductive bit of her anatomy. Perhaps not so suitable. Then I thought about *La muerte y la doncella* by Ariel Dorfman, best known perhaps in the film version by Polanski with Sigourney Weaver and Ben Kingsley. But again, the play is a little on the serious side. Plus, there is little action: it hinges entirely on the psychological tension created when the husband of a former victim of Pinochet's fascist regime brings home a man whose car has broken down and the wife thinks she recognizes his voice as that of the man who



tortured and raped her in prison while she was blindfolded and he listened to the Schubert string quartet that gives its name to the play.

And so I turned to the era I know best: the Spanish Golden Age, a period that bursts at the seams with comedies. Melveena McKendrick, a well-known scholar and expert on the matter, estimates that there are as many as 10,000. Not all of them brilliant, to be sure, but some of them really are superbly funny, witty and fast-paced. A few years ago in London there was a short-lived renaissance of some of these plays and I remember going to see *Fuenteovejuna* (where the audience had to pelt the Comendador with water balloons – such fun!) as well as *Los locos de Valencia*, *La dama boba*, *El castigo sin venganza*, all by Lope de Vega, and *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* by Tirso de Molina. I considered putting on one of these plays but eventually settled on a comedy by Calderón de la Barca called *La dama duende*.

This play is a classic cloak-and-dagger comedy (*comedia de capa y espada*) and was first performed in Madrid in 1629. Like most plays of the period the plot revolves around a love interest and honour. There are the usual confusions and misunderstandings and the play features a *gracioso*: a comic, irreverent character, usually a servant. It tells the story of Doña Angela, a beautiful young widow, whose honour is jealously guarded by her brothers Don Juan and Don Luis and who lives in a secret alcove. One day she sneaks out to go to the theatre, wearing a veil. She is spotted by her brother Don Luis who runs after her. Not that he has recognized her – that would have spelled her death. He is just intrigued by this mysterious veiled lady who seems keen to avoid him. As she runs away from him, she asks a random stranger, Don Manuel, who has just arrived in Madrid, for help. Don Luis almost catches her up but Don Manuel stops him. Swords are drawn, allowing Doña Angela to make her escape. In the middle of the duel, Don Juan, the other brother, enters the scene only to realise Don Manuel is his old comrade-in-arms. Don Manuel is invited to stay in their house and is given the room next to Doña Angela's – of course! While Don Manuel is out, having ostentatiously locked the door, Doña Angela enters his room through a hidden entrance, leaving the room in a mess and a letter for its occupant (I love a zeugma). His servant Cosme is convinced this is the work of a hobgoblin or house sprite, in other words: a *duende*. Don Manuel, however, is intrigued and starts a correspondence. Eventually Doña Angela boldly invites him for a tryst, tricking him into believing he is in a different house, even though he is in fact in his old room. More confusion ensues, with Cosme believing he has been abducted by the *dama duende* and causing a hullabaloo. There follows another duel between Don Luis and Don Manuel and it is rounded off, like all *comedias*, with the classic nuptial ending.



In putting on this play I had two problems to solve. Two challenges. One was time. I could not see even very talented pupils learn enough lines for a full-blown comedy. Not to mention the audience having to sit through a good hour and a half of Spanish when they might not even speak the language. I had to find a way to reduce the play to about twenty to twenty-five minutes, also because I had made a deal with the school's director of drama to incorporate *La dama duende* into a European Drama festival alongside a German (*Der Besuch der alten Dame*) and a French play (I can't remember, a weird and modern piece about a museum and people changing into fish, or something). That created the second challenge.

Assuming not everyone in the audience would understand Spanish, how were we to involve them? How to keep the audience interested and entertained? The performance was to take place outside, in a garden, so having surtitles or something like that was not a realistic option. And anyway, that is too complicated – it can only go wrong. A more practical and funnier way had to be found. So I introduced a narrator-slash-commentator who would break through the fourth wall. After the whirlwind of the opening scene, one actress, who had been sitting on a log on stage throughout, gets up, theatrically claps her hands next to her head like a flamenco dancer, whereupon the actors freeze. Then the narratrix says to



the audience: 'Are you as confused as I am? Let's rewind a little'. The actors run backwards as if we are watching a film being rewound, then freeze again. 'Let me explain what is going on... This here (walking towards Doña Angela) is Doña Angela, a beautiful young widow...'. You get the idea. Thus punctuated, the play made sense even for those unable to follow (all) the Spanish. And the actress was brilliant at communicating with the punters.

That was the solution to the second problem. The first was solved by condensing the play. I got rid of a few minor characters and a subplot and struck many scenes. A few short exchanges survived in the original form, but all the long ones were drastically cut and often 'sewn' back together with a few of my own lines or words. In the process, I decided to keep some of the early modern Spanish to give it the right flavour. This meant: lots of *vos*, *decís*, *sois*, *estáis* and *Válgame-el-cielo*'s. It also meant a for modern Spanish ears unusual word order sometimes ('Si excusa buscas, espera'). But the aim was that a Sixth Form pupil would be able to follow (most of) it. Difficult (*amparar*) and out-dated words (*agora*) or words that no longer mean the same (*bizarro*, meaning elegant, *industria*, meaning trick) were replaced by modern Spanish.



The play was directed by a pupil who also starred as Cosme, the *gracioso* (*graciosa*, in her case) and it was a roaring success. I can encourage anyone who is interested in putting on a Spanish play to mine the rich vein that is Golden Age comedy – you'll find a true Potosí of plays. Some *comedias* to consider are Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna*, *La dama boba* or *Los locos de Valencia*, mentioned above, or

El *perro del hortelano*. Then there are Calderón de la Barca's *La dama duende* or *El galán fantasma* as well as Tirso de Molina's *Don Gil de las calzas verdes*, which I hope to put on this summer: a hilarious comedy with lots of cross-dressing and mistaken identities.

To give some idea of how I went about reducing the full play to a twenty-five minute mini-comedy, compare the original opening scene with the condensed version. Underlined are the bits that survived in some form or other.

**Original version**(694 words)  
(Salen don MANUEL y COSME, de camino)

Don MANUEL    Por un hora no llegamos  
                    a tiempo de ver las fiestas  
                    con que Madrid generosa  
                    hoy el bautismo celebra  
                    del primero Baltasar

COSME            Como ésas, cosas se aciertan  
                    o se yerran por un hora:  
                    Por una hora que fuera  
                    antes Píramo a la fuente,  
                    no hallara a su Tisbe muerta  
                    y las moras no mancharan  
                    porque dicen los poetas  
                    que con arroyo de moras  
                    se escribió aquella tragedia.  
                    Por una hora que tardara  
                    Tarquino, hallara a Lucrecia  
                    recogida, con lo cual  
                    los autores no anduvieran,

sin ser vicarios, llevando  
a salas de competencias  
la causa, sobre saber  
si hizo fuerza o no hizo fuerza.  
Por una hora que pensara  
si era bien hecho o no era  
echarse Hero de la torre,  
no se echara, es cosa cierta,  
con que se hubiera excusado  
al doctor Mira de Amescua  
de haber dado a los teatros  
tan bien escrita comedia,  
y haberla representado  
Amarilis tan de veras  
que volatín del carnal  
—si otros son de la cuaresma—  
sacó más de alguna vez  
las manos en la cabeza.  
Y puesto que hemos perdido  
por una hora tan gran fiesta,  
no por una hora perdamos  
la posada, que si llega  
tarde Abindarraez, es ley  
que haya de quedarse fuera;  
y estoy rabiando por ver  
este amigo que te espera  
como si fueras galán  
al uso con cama y mesa,

sin saber cómo o por dónde  
esta dicha se nos venga.

Pues, sin ser los dos torneos,  
hoy a los dos nos sustenta.

Don MANUEL Don Juan de Toledo es, Cosme,  
el hombre que más profesa  
mi amistad, siendo los dos  
envidia ya que no afrenta  
de cuantos la antigüedad  
por tantos siglos celebra.  
Los dos estudiamos juntos  
y, pasando de las letras  
a las armas, los dos fuimos  
camaradas en la guerra.  
En las de Piamonte, cuando  
el señor duque de Feria  
con la jineta me honró,  
le di, Cosme, mi bandera.  
Fue mi alférez y después,  
sacando de una refriega  
una penetrante herida,  
le curé en mi cama mesma.  
La vida, después de Dios,  
me debe. Dejo las deudas  
de menores intereses;  
que entre nobles es bajeza  
referirlas. Pues pos eso  
pintó la docta academia



al galardón una dama  
rica y las espaldas vueltas,  
dando a entender que, en haciendo  
el beneficio, es discreta  
acción olvidarse de él;  
que no le hace el que le acuerda.  
En fin, don Juan, obligado  
de amistades y finezas,  
viendo que su majestad  
con este gobierno premia  
mis servicios y que vengo  
de paso a la corte, intenta  
hoy hospedarme en su casa  
por pagarme con las mismas.  
Y, aunque a Burgos me escribió  
de casa y calle las señas,  
no quise andar preguntando  
a caballo a dónde era,  
y así dejé en la posada  
las mulas y las maletas,  
yendo hacia donde me dice.  
Vi las galas y libreas,  
e, informado de la causa,  
quise, aunque de paso, verlas.  
Llegamos tarde en efecto,  
porque...

(Salen doña ÁNGELA e ISABEL, en corto tapadas)

Doña ÁNGELA Si como lo muestra

el traje, sois caballero  
de obligaciones y prendas,  
amparad a una mujer,  
que a valerse de vos llega.  
Honor y vida me importa  
que aquel hidalgo no sepa  
quién soy y que no me siga.  
Estorbad, por vida vuestra,  
a una mujer principal,  
una desdicha, una afrenta,  
que podrá ser que algún día...  
¡Adiós, adiós; que voy muerta!

(Vanse)

COSME           ¿Es dama? ¿O es torbellino?

Don MANUEL   ¿Hay tal suceso?

COSME           ¿Qué piensas hacer?

Don MANUEL   ¿Eso me preguntas?  
¿Cómo puede mi nobleza  
excusarse de estorbar  
una desdicha, una afrenta?  
Que según muestra, sin duda,  
es su marido.

COSME           ¿Y qué intentas?

Don MANUEL   Detenerle con alguna  
industria. Mas si con ella  
no puedo, será forzoso  
el valerme de la fuerza  
sin que él entienda la causa.

COSME            Si industria buscas, espera;  
                      que a mi se me ofrece una.  
                      Esta carta, que encomienda  
                      es de un amigo, me valga.

(Salen don LUIS y RODRIGO, su criado. Retírase don MANUEL)

Don LUIS           Yo tengo de conocerla,  
                      no más de por el cuidado  
                      con que de mi se recela.

Don RODRIGO    Síguela, y sabrás quién es.

Condensed version (201 words)

DON MANUEL    Date prisa, Cosme, por favor.  
                      No quiero perder las fiestas  
                      con que se celebran hoy  
                      el bautismo del príncipe Baltasar.

COSME            Sí, pero dime, ¿quién es  
                      este amigo que te espera?

DON MANUEL    Don Juan de Toledo es,  
                      uno de mis mejores amigos.  
                      Los dos estudiamos juntos  
                      y pasamos de las letras  
                      a las armas; los dos fuimos  
                      camaradas en la guerra.  
                      Me va a hospedar en su casa.

(Salen DOÑA ÁNGELA y ISABEL en corto tapadas.)

DOÑA ÁNGELA   Si como lo muestra  
                      vuestro traje, sois caballero,  
                      ayudad a una mujer en apuros.  
                      Es muy importante,

que aquel hidalgo no sepa  
quién soy yo, y que no me siga.  
¡Adiós, adiós, que voy muerta!

(Vase.)

COSME           ¿Es dama o es torbellino?

DON MANUEL   ¡Hay tal suceso!

COSME           ¿Qué piensas hacer?

DON MANUEL   ¿Eso me preguntas?

No me queda sino una opción

Este que viene ahora,

sin duda es su marido.

COSME           Y ¿qué intentas?

DON MANUEL   Detenerle con alguna excusa.

COSME           Si excusa buscas, espera,  
que a mí se me ofrece una:  
podemos usar esta carta que tengo.

(Sale DON LUIS.)

DON LUIS       Yo tengo que conocerla,  
no más de por el cuidado  
con que de mí se esconde.



