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*Of Nouns and Adjectives:
Women's Fiction and Literary
Criticism in Galicia*

The noun is formed by an accumulation of adjectives. They do not say 'moon', but rather 'round airy-light on dark' or 'pale-orange-of-the-sky' or any other such combination.

—J.L. Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," 1941

I

With the example above, Borges gave shape to the particular grammatical logic of the languages spoken in the boreal hemisphere of Tlön, an invented planet. Pointing to a non-existent yet perfectly regulated referent, Borges' matter-of-fact description of these linguistic mechanisms serves to disclose the arbitrariness of what usually passes for common sense. The result was profoundly parodic. Meaningfully, too, the metalinguistic concoctions essayed in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" are echoed in the metaliterary short story "Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain" [An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain], also included in the 1941 collection *El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan* [The Garden of Forking Paths]. Here the invented entity is a literary author named Herbert Quain, now deceased, and his neglected opus, to which the author of the story, the reviewer, intends to do critical (and historical) justice. By creating an echoic text with no verifiable referent, similar in strategy and mood to a pseudo-translation (a translated text that refers to a non-existent original), Borges not only anticipated the demythification of hierarchies that would lie at the centre of postmodernist creativity, but also identified the relationship between writer and literary critic as a fraught space in the field of literary history and disclosed one of its characteristic weaknesses: that it can easily be mimicked.

That the task of a literary critic is of a secondary nature and that its rudiments, removed from the halo of uniqueness with which inspiration endows the creative individual, are often formulaic and can therefore be easily replicated is an enduring view, even after the profound questioning of hierarchies brought about by postmodernist theory. The current proliferation of books that dwell on the notion of the original as a non-entity (from Stanislaw Lem's *A Perfect Vacuum* [1999] to Pierre Bayard's *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read* [2007] or George Steiner's *My Unwritten Books* [2008]) attests just to how much productive tension the playing with such boundaries can still cause. But the relatively benign view of literary criticism as secondary or derivative work has often given way to sourer positions that describe the task as parasitic.

The ascending role and status of literary criticism in the context of a cultural system in flux was among the central worries in Rosalía de Castro's prose. In her "Carta a Eduarda" [Letter to Eduarda], Rosalía speaks of the proliferation of literary critics as a sort of epidemic outbreak (De Castro [1866] 1983, 289). In *El caballero de la botas azules* [The Gentleman with the Blue Boots], she describes a social gathering of writers, editors and newspaper managers with self-distancing irony:

That night a most select and glittering literary gathering was held in town. There, writers pampered by fame were found grovelling over editors, who deigned to tolerate the bright young things as the inexhaustible golden mine of their cheerful prosperity. Newspaper managers, whose social standing was also growing, flaunted their power amid a host of newspaper writers, themselves a very cultivated crowd. These in turn showed the kind of generous modesty that prevented them from noticing that their managers were passing off other people's ideas as their own. (De Castro [1867] 2006: 453)¹

The unease towards critics in Rosalía de Castro's words goes hand in hand with what she perceived as the process of deterioration of literary texts themselves, which were being gradually commodified as objects of rapid consumption, for the further mental enslavement of an expanding female readership. Dissemination, thus, meant contamination and literary critics were

1 All translations are my own unless otherwise stated. The original text reads as follows: "En ella, escritores mimados por la gloria rendían culto a editores, que se dignaban mostrarse amables con aquella juventud, mina inagotable de su risueña prosperidad, y directores de periódicos, cuya posición social era cada vez más respetable, ostentaban su poderío en medio de su *corte* de redactores, gente ilustrada y tan generosamente modesta que aparentaba no notar siquiera cómo su digno director hacía pasar por propios ajenos pensamientos."

among the chief perpetrators of literature's impending submission to extrinsic forces, modernity among them. That Rosalía de Castro's opinion of literary critics was not particularly sanguine was entirely in line with her experience as a woman writer straddling both the Galician and Spanish literary fields. Consistently reluctant to see her work as being part of a cheapened literature, Rosalía wrote on the threshold of new themes and forms, in two differentiated linguistic mediums. The critical reception of her work was often either befuddled or malicious, and inclusion of the work in the relevant histories (Galician literary history, Spanish literary history, history of ideas, etc.) is to this day still qualified by a fairly narrow, repetitive range of adjectives that attest to a century-long episode of critical misunderstanding (mishandling, in the worst cases).

The Borgean languages of Tlön in which nouns *are* formed by adjectives graciously evoke the particular dynamics between literary criticism and literary history. Within this relation, certain exceptional patterns occur if the matter at hand is women's writing. Briefly, I will survey some of those patterns in the context of Galician contemporary fiction.

II

In the Galician context, literary history and literary criticism seem to occupy distinct times and spaces in the total process of literary reception. Literary history is normally the matter of extended monographs, authored by scholars (Galician philologists in recent times, self-taught polymaths in the beginning) with a comprehensive knowledge of the literary corpus and a desire to grant the history of national conscience a sister narrative in the realm of literary creation. Augusto González Besada's *Historia crítica de la literatura gallega* (1887), Eugenio Carré Aldao's *Literatura gallega* (1911), Ricardo Carballo Calero's *Historia da literatura galega contemporánea* (1975), Anxo Tarrío Varela's *Literatura galega: aportacións a unha historia crítica* (1994) and Dolores Vilavedra's *Historia da literatura galega* (1999) or her entry 'Literatura galega' in the *Diccionario enciclopedia do pensamento galego* (2008: 498–519) are all examples of this type of literary history. Taken as a whole, they form a relatively homogeneous body of work whose structure, content and general criteria of selection have remained largely unrevised to date. As regards the time span usually covered by literary history practised in Galicia, there is a tendency to stop short of dealing with more up-to-date phenomena in ways that are not

emphatically marked as speculative (see for instance Vilavedra's introduction to her *Historia da literatura galega*). The so-called Nova narrativa galega [New Galician Fiction], then, said to have developed between the 1950s and the 1970s, tends to be the last *coherent* episode in Galician literary history, while more recent events such as the consolidation of women-authored literature are appended to the historical narrative (anticipating its presumed status in future histories of literature) and diplomatically described as a *fait accompli* (Vilavedra's only reference to the contemporary period in her contribution to the above-mentioned encyclopedia refers in fact to the question of female novelists in Galicia, which she says "is last week's news" [2008: 512]).²

The notion that traditional literary history comprises a body of "merely hypothetical representations" which "help us to see some things more clearly while obscuring others" (Perkins 1992: 14) seems to be delayed in the context of Galician literary studies by the persistent reference to some of its seminal exemplars as "de consulta obrigada" [of obligatory reading] (Vilavedra 2008: 511). Implicit in this view —of literary history as the result of an equitable, impersonal and comprehensive reading of the past— is the view that history does not engage in the more evaluative forms of literary commentary that are usually taken to lie in the realm of criticism. To maintain a clear-cut distinction between the two is, however, no longer possible and it is a telling yet still untheorized condition of the Galician cultural field that the literary historian, critic and creative writer will often be embodied by the same person, as are the cases of Eugenio Carré Aldao, Ricardo Carballo Calero, Arturo Casas and María do Cebreiro Rábade Villar.³ Traditional "literary history," as David Perkins said,

2 In a similar vein, while making a clearer reference to literary criticism, Helena González argued that "Today gendered readings have become normalized. When reviewing a book written by a woman the critic will no longer approach it with a set of negative prejudices (sentimentalism, didacticism, tired or low-quality writing style) but in fact will be willing to receive it as a new and solid product." The original quotation read as follows: "Hoxe o criterio de xénero naturalizouse e o libro dunha escritora non só non infunde sospeitas de feblezas varias (sentimentalismo, didacticismo, estilo reseso ou de baixa calidade) senón que as máis das veces quen le disponse a entendela como un produto novidoso e forte" (González Fernández 2005: 24). While there is no denying that critical reception of women's fiction in Galicia is less prejudiced today than in the past, I will argue that González's position (and Vilavedra's above) are more anticipatory than deductive.

3 On the 6th of March 2008, during María do Cebreiro's residence in Bangor University, a round table discussion was held on the figure of the creative writer/literary scholar, also frequent in the Welsh cultural field. I would like to thank my colleagues in the College of Arts and Humanities for their lively contribution to the discussion and to María do Cebreiro

“is also literary criticism” (1992: 177) inasmuch as history critically places the emphasis on certain events in literary production (usually those which symbolize moments of progressive change in the plot of national-conscience formation) and operates on the basis of a context-specific notion of literary value. However, at a time when the practice of history in Galicia still conjures up visions of a detached, encyclopedic knowledge that does not marry well with contemporaneity,⁴ it is the study of the texts of criticism which helps us visualize certain enduring trends, patterns of topicalization or repeated voids, as they affect contemporary production of fiction in Galicia.

It has become common in metacritical approaches to Galician literary criticism to complain that the practice of criticism displays the vices of an endogamic profession, a protest that has also been extended to the field of literary studies in general (Hooper 2006: 67). On the surface, the charge of endogamy seems to point to the fact that due to limited numbers, agents in the literary field will agglutinate several affiliations (political, institutional, personal) and the result of their cultural practices will tend towards the creation of an apparent coherence (or merely the absence of any perceivable friction) within the collectively construed cultural project. More profoundly, this charge may point to a weakness of the collective project itself, which in its zeal to appear viable eludes the recording of its own heterogeneity and randomness, let alone the treatment of its refuse. Plainly put, as literary critic Héitor Mera stated: “Negative reviews are rare. And I can assure you that many publications deserve them” (2007: 171). In tune with what was already implied in the more systemic approaches to the Galician literary field (Figueroa 2001: 82), negative reviews are discouraged on the grounds that they distract from the shared goal of normalization. But discouragement, the above critic says, may come in the form of outward silencing: “If you write a negative review in this country, some publishing houses may stop supplying you with books on the grounds that such and such literary critic is bad for the *Galician literary system*” (Mera Herbello

for opening it with her reflections on the Galician context. Her introduction is available in both Galician and English at: <http://www.bangor.ac.uk/ml/galician/maria.php> (accessed 18 Feb. 2010).

4 In his review of Sharif Gemie’s *Galicia: A Concise History* (2006), Prudencio Viveiro departs from the apparent truism that “we historians do not have a good close vision” (2007: 113) and positively reviews the fact that Gemie’s study extends from pre-historic times to the *Nunca Máis* movement. However, treating recent events as legitimate historical matter still causes a sense of anxiety, as Dolores Vilavedra acknowledges in her *Historia da literatura galega* (1999: 10).

2007: 173, emphasis in the original).⁵ If I allow myself to reproduce this slightly embittered comment and thus partly echo a position that can be impressionistic or anecdotic (or both), it is because I feel that this critic's vociferousness about this one characteristic of the literary field contrasts interestingly with a thinly veiled fact about that very field, namely that literary criticism in Galicia *is* critical. In other words, negative reviews are indeed written and published, as anyone who reads Galician literary supplements, journals and online reviews would be in a position to attest. If the system is perceived to be so impervious to unfavourable reviews, the pertinent question would then be: according to what criteria are negative reviews actually allowed?

In its evaluative comments, literary criticism in Galicia today largely reflects the criteria that literary history has set up structurally as its basis in its founding texts. Therefore, the linguistic (philological) criterion which dictates that only literature written in Galician should be included in the history is also apparent in contemporary reviewers' tendency to comment on the linguistic correctness of literary texts. Some recent instances of this type of criticism (they are legion) can be found in Olivia Rodríguez's review of Xabier Alcalá's novel (2008: 183) or Héitor Mera's online review of Margarita Rodríguez Otero's *Os documentos Fonterosa*, where the critic protests that "In order to produce a literary work of decent quality you first need to master the language you are using" (Mera 2009).⁶ Criticism in this vein often acquires a degree of acrimony, which shows how intimate the link is between cultural and linguistic normalization in Galicia. Similarly, the criterion that values indigenous critical readings over those from non-Galician contexts is still manifest in literary criticism today. The principle was first laid out by Carballo Calero in his *Historia da literatura galega contemporánea* (1975) and put to practice when commenting on Ramón Piñeiro's study of *saudade* in Rosalía, as follows:

Piñeiro's theory of *saudade* seems to have been made to explain Rosalía. My opinion is, then, that although one can also explain Rosalía through Heidegger, Kunz or Freud, as has been previously attempted, an interpretation of her work springing from a Galician mind and under the light of Piñeiro's own ideas on

5 The critic's original words were: "É moi raro atopar críticas negativas. E dou fe de que hai moitos libros que as merecen"; 'fas unha crítica negativa neste país e hai editoras que che quitan o suministro de libros porque din que tal crítico ou tal medio especializado son nocivos para o sistema literario galego.'

6 The critic's original words read: "Para levar adiante unha obra literaria con certas garantías de calidade, primeiro hai que dominar a lingua que se está empregando."

saudade will at least have the merit of being an out-and-out Galician endeavour [...] It could well be that imprisoning Rosalía in Piñeiro's tower may not be entirely desirable, but she would feel more at home there than inside a Teutonic prison. (193)⁷

The desirability of this *vision from within* has been highlighted more recently by Carmen Blanco (1991: 94) and Francisco Rodríguez (1990: 11), and can be glimpsed in the somewhat mystified tone displayed even today by reviews of academic work done by international scholars.⁸ Implicit in this sort of critical approach is the view that there is a constituent essence to Galician culture not readily available to those who cannot perceive it *from within*. Akin to Teixeira de Pascoães' theory of the untranslatability of the term *saudade*, which he put forward as the surefire proof of its "Portugueseness" (de Pascoães 1988: 17), such view springs from a desired connection between the affective and the intellectual which paradoxically, and for all its *sentimentality*, has done little service to the inclusion and reception of women's writing in the Galician cultural canon. In what remains of this article, I will explain in what way the relationship between women's fiction and literary criticism in Galicia still tells a story of exclusion.

III

We can argue, then, that negative literary criticism is not only possible in the Galician context, but in fact seems authorized when the reviewed piece does not appear to comply with agreed paradigms for a full-fledged national literature. In

7 Carballo Calero's original words read thus: "A teoría da saudade de Piñeiro semella feita pra espricar a Rosalía. Coido, pois, que inda que Rosalía se pode espricar tamén, como se ten feito, á luz de Heidegger, de Kunz ou de Freud, unha interpretación de Rosalía feita por mente galega á luz da doutrina de Piñeiro sobor da saudade, terá polo menos a ventaxa de ser un esforzo galego polos catro costados [...]. Poida que non sexa mester, e mesmo non conveña, encarcerar a Rosalía na torre de Piñeiro, inda que ela se sentiría alí máis na súa casa que nunha prisión teutónica."

8 See for instance María Teresa Caneda's review of Craig Patterson's monograph on Otero Pedrayo, where Patterson, catalogued as "[a] non-Galician critic," is lauded for his ongoing interest in Otero, in spite of the fact that he is "closely linked both in his intellectual and personal trajectory to the international research community on Galician Studies" (2008: 171). For a discussion of the apparently divorced paths that Galician-based *filoloxía* and international Galician studies have followed so far see Miguélez-Carballeira and Hooper 2009.

short, works that do not make competent use of the written Galician norm are scrutinized meticulously in reviews. In the case of academic studies or essays, works published internationally tend to be approached either guardedly or in gratitude. Recent theoretical challenges coming from *within* the system such as Xurxo Borrazás's *Arte e parte: Dos patriarcas á arte suicida* (2007) have been berated at some length (Forcadela 2008: 99–101). A further category in the spectrum of literary works likely to be reviewed negatively is that of fiction authored by women. In a national imaginary permeated with references to a natural link between Galician culture and lyricism, women writers who have turned to prose in their literary trajectories have not been easily accommodated in the canon. First, their selected writing mode subverts the engrained (and hardly exclusively Galician) identification of women with poetry. Rosalía de Castro's prose has been virtually invisible, caught between the resistance to see her Spanish-language work as also of interest to Galician literary history and the widespread view that it was in her Galician-language poetry that her innermost creative spirit (at once so feminine and so Galician) truly flourished (Fernández del Riego [1951] 1975: 98; Carballo Calero 1989: 17, 131). In the shadows of the panegyric tone with which Rosalía's Galician poems are received in Galician literary history is the tacit charge that she was not courageous enough to also write prose in Galician, a choice which Tarrío Varela has seen as unforgivably diglossic:

For a long time, there was the aberrant and irrational belief in Galicia that Galician language, being poetic by nature, would never be fit as a medium for cultural experiences other than the lyrical.[...] Although this sort of position is not so widely held anymore, it can still be detected today. In general, Galician society has never seriously believed that science or prose could be written in Galician. And this attitude harks back to Rosalía Castro or Curros Enríquez, who, having written poetry abundantly in Galician, turned exclusively to Castilian when writing fiction, personal correspondence or journalism. (1994: 123)⁹

9 Originally, the quotation read as follows: “Durante moito tempo existiu en Galicia a crenza aberrante e irrazoada de que a lingua galega, sendo poética por natureza, nunca podería servir para transmitir un tipo de experiencias culturais que non fosen líricas versificadas. [...] Aínda que cada vez menos, este fenómeno pode detectarse mesmo hoxe. Anécdotas non fallarían para ilustrar o que dicimos. En definitiva, nunca a sociedade galega, en xeral, creu seriamente que se puidese facer novela ou discurso científico na lingua do país. E un exemplo preclaro témolo en Rosalía Castro ou en Curros Enríquez, quen, tendo escrito abundante poesía en

Tensions such as this one perhaps inform the fact that the even the recent volume *Rosalía 21* (Angueira 2009), written with the aim of redressing some imbalances in Rosalian scholarship, still includes no reference to her prose.

Francisca Herrera's fiction has undergone a far less problematic process of inclusion in Galician literary history, on the grounds that she wrote both poetry and fiction in Galician. However, critical commentary on her betrays a double standard that praises, on the one hand, the "unique and personal effort, as much stylistic as linguistic" that she made (Carballo Calero 1975: 498) but is relieved, on the other, that her prose did not seem to show any technical prowess and was therefore closer to the spontaneous, lyrical form of expression that befits "a genuinely feminine soul [...], so very tender, affectionate and compassionate" (494). As Carballo put it:

Francisca Herrera's short stories, in prose and in verse, are not devoid of an artistic structure. She probably arrived at this structure intuitively, but it remains nevertheless operative [...]. Luckily, however, Francisca Herrera has preserved the humility of a popular story-teller, and never irritates us with literary reminiscences. (494)¹⁰

The critical moulds described above are still partly in force when the object of study is fiction authored by women, although today they co-exist with a critical apparatus increasingly perceptive in recognizing them. Put simply, Galician literary criticism has been entangled with a curious dilemma when it comes to its treatment of women-authored fiction. For a while, the imbalance between a flourishing corpus of poetry by women and the fact that novels were coming through in thinner numbers was perceived as the expected predicament of several generations of women writers who felt subconsciously compelled to follow Rosalía de Castro's model and thus turned exclusively to poetry (Vilavedra 2007: 146). Such an account is problematic for mainly two reasons. It presupposes on the one hand that Rosalía de Castro's novels cannot form a paradigm from which subsequent women novelists in Galicia can derive a writing selfhood. On the other, it camouflages the fact that Galician women authors have been writing novels all the while, since the so-called *Nova novela*

galego, expresáronse tan só en castelán á hora de elaborar unha novela ou de manter as súas relacións persoais e epistolares ou de facer xornalismo, etc."

10 Carballo Calero's original remark read as follows: "Os relatos de Francisca Herrera, estén en verso ou en prosa, non carecen dunha estrutura artística, seguramente tratada intuitivamente, pero non por elo menos operante. [...] Pero Francisca Herrera conserva felizmente a súa humildade de narradora popular, e nos non enfastía endexamáis con reminiscencias literarias."

[New Fiction] movement and during the Transition (Xohana Torres, María Xosé Queizán, Margarita Ledo, Carmen Panero, Belén Feliu and María Teresa Otero are some examples). They were, however, barely heeded or reviewed mainly in feminist periodicals; their literary endeavours were not granted a space in a cultural national discourse where male voices predominate and which has only recently resolved to cash in on the sense of *eclosión* (146) that the new names are seen to have generated. Recently, then, and as I have argued elsewhere (Miguélez-Carballeira 2007), although the system seems to be more attentive to the voices of women novelists, an interesting oddity has remained: far from acquiring the status of self-standing *nouns* in contemporary Galician fiction, the way, say Manuel Rivas has,¹¹ their names and the titles of their novels continue to prompt a curious dance of adjectives around them. These adjectives tend to betray the set of expectations with which women-authored literature is approached, namely that it will display an instinctual tendency towards autobiographical material frequently related to emotions. The adjective *sentimental* seems to be a point of concentration for the gendered set of biases with which women's narrative (and poetry) will be received. Broadly put, if used without any further qualification, the term will function in supposed self-explanatory fashion as negative criticism. Examples abound of this use in reviews of Galician women-authored prose, where those novels “with an abundance of sentimental elements” [...] betray “their female authorship” (Noia 2004: 196) or where “the only thing that breaks the monotony —and not necessarily for the better— is the sentimentalism the author falls into when describing relationships” (Xestoso 2009: 35). If the review is intended as positive, then the charge of sentimentality often appears with some qualification or as a natural drive which the female author has managed to sublimate. Anxo Sumai's fiction has often elicited such a response, as in the following review of her *Así nacen as baleas*:

One of the common themes in this novel is the clash between family impositions and the children's desire for freedom and self-fulfillment in the context of a family where the parents are trying to have their children follow the same traditional paths that the previous generations had done. The female author engages with this thematic commonplace successfully, despite the risk of falling into the facile

11 I am resorting here to the terminology of morphology not just by way of metaphors. Usually referred to as the real “ambassador” of Galician letters (Bragado 2009) and “our figurehead” (Pereiro 2009: 17), the name Manuel Rivas resounds with a particular significance that seldom requires elaborate qualification.

sentimentalism always lurking underneath this sort of narratives. (Rodríguez Alonso 2008)¹²

This is not the place for a full repository of reviews of women's narrative in this vein, although that would no doubt have to be one of the aims of a *socioanalysis* of literary criticism in Galicia as has been delineated by Arturo Casas (2004), Iris Cochón and María do Cebreiro Rábade (2004). Nor am I saying that some of the novels written by Galician women authors are not sentimental. I am simply drawing attention to the many valences that this adjective (and many others) may have, and to the gendered prejudices it hides as a term which, as feminist scholars have argued, seems "to promote a stereotyped and normalizing emotional responsiveness that both defined the value of feminine discourse and trapped women within it" (Clark 1994: 97). In sum, and to conclude, I have argued here for a greater awareness of how current discursive practices in both literary history and criticism (engaged in interlocking fashion) can immobilize the progress of Galician women's narrative towards equitable critical reception and visibility. As Rábade Villar wrote in a review of Inma López Silva's *Concubinas*: "We need to become increasingly aware of the implications that the use of certain adjectives has when dealing with criticism, in purportedly aesthetic terms, of Galician women-authored narrative" (2003: 120).¹³ As critics, this type of alertness will prevent us from perpetuating the sort of discursive practices which, to invoke Borges's Herbert Quain once again, treat certain artistic products as the stuff of art history but never of art itself. Surely the language of literary criticism, with its wilful moods and lethargies, is a good place to start wondering about this particular disjunction and how it shapes our views on women's writing.

12 The critic's original words were: "Un dos temas tópicos da novela é o choque entre a imposición dunha tradición familiar e a ansia de liberdade e realización propia dos fillos no seo dunha familia en que a nai ou o pai tratan de impoñerlles aos fillos as profesións e formas de vida que a familia veu tendo nas xeracións anteriores. Esta novela inscribese neste tópico, que a autora resolve con éxito, malia o perigo de caer no sentimentalismo fácil, que sempre axexa neste tipo de relatos."

13 The original quotation went as follows: "Das implicacións do uso dos adxectivos [...] na pretendida cualificación estética da literatura de mulleres é importante sermos cada vez máis conscientes."

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