

Narration and Identity in Iberian Galician Literature

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### Recommended Citation

Vilavedra, Dolores. "Narration and Identity in Iberian Galician Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.5 (2011): [<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1908>](http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1908)

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**Volume 13 Issue 5 (December 2011) Article 10**  
**Dolores Vilavedra,**  
**"Narration and Identity in Iberian Galician Literature"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss5/10>>

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 13.5 (2011)**  
Special issue ***New Trends in Iberian Galician Comparative Literature.***  
**Ed. María Teresa Vilariño Picos and Anxo Abuín González**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss5/>>

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**Abstract:** In her article, "Narration and Identity in Iberian Galician Literature" Dolores Vilavedra discusses the contribution made by Galician narratives to the process of codifying models of a supposedly Galician identity. She shows how the development of literary narration has not always been gradual and that it has undergone stages of stagnation. Further, Vilavedra discusses how the narrative genre itself has gradually altered the prime objectives of its own development according to the apparent need to impose certain paradigms. She proposes that this process is closely linked, on the one hand to the process of language standardization and, on the other, to the gradual consolidation of an autonomous literary system.

**Dolores VILAVEDRA**

### **Narrative and Identity in Iberian Galician Literature**

The history of any narrative genre can be defined in terms of a dynamic that is evolutionary. As Wladimir Krysinski argues, "the evolutionary states of the novel are concurrent, correlative, at times contradictory" (84; unless stated otherwise, all translations are mine). In other words, it is not always possible to appreciate "progression," understood as the incorporation of the advances and findings of the genre as regards its most characteristic concept, i.e., "the question ... of rapport between narration, its operators and their object-referent. This rapport activates the progressive or regressive dimension of the novel" (Krysinski 51). If we accept that "the history of the novel is a history of ways in which the self can be told, a history of universal types for particular identities" (Brown 159), then we are in a position to interpret the process of configuration of the genre from the point of view of its contribution to the codification of Galician identity(ies).

The history of the Galician literature is one of evolution from a unitary to a diverse and diversified cultural and literary system (see, e.g., Morán; Vilavedra). The progressive consolidation of the autonomous literary system in the last two decades has enabled Galician literature to reach a point where it expresses a diversity resulting from social fragmentation. This allows it to slowly distancing itself from any globalizing codification projects used for purposes of integration and as means to provide a structure to support an almost totally fragmented society by certain sectors of the Galician intelligentsia. If we accept that minority languages pass through similar stages in the process of elaboration of a standard model and if we add urbanization and aesthetic creation to this processes of cultural modernization (see Joseph), then it becomes obvious that the process of the development of the Galician language determines the evolution of the narrative genre. The existence of a standard allows the elaboration of registers which codify social plurality and that enable diversification of themes and it is the standard that functions as a framework of reference for correction, and, above all, innovation and stylistic subversion (see, e.g., Figueroa).

*Maxina ou a filla espúrea* by Marcial Valladares Núñez (1880) is a bilingual work in which only the townspeople speak in Castilian. Scholars and critics often consider it an achievement that the narrative voice is expressed in Galician and that the novel transcends the exclusive attribution of this language to laborers and uneducated people. In my opinion this can be explained by the fact that the voice is used as a clear image by the author, who in an introductory note explained his basic aims: the exaltation of the Galician language in defence of the common worker. Both aims are coherent with the regionalist ideology of Valladares Núñez and also with his life-long activities as a grammarian, lexicographer, and collector of folk songs and sayings. Although Valladares Núñez was committed to such ideological views, he never went beyond the restrictions imposed by realism: the novel is the result of his particular idea of reality — Valladares Núñez rejected radical monolingualism as he never considered the coexistence of Galician and Castilian as problematical — and the text's enunciative organization contributes to the narrative codification of the social conflicts it depicts. However, I consider it mistaken that this explains the repeated setting of Valladares Núñez's stories in a past sufficiently remote for it to appear realistic and that the characters and narrators express themselves in Galician. I think that the reason for his choice has little to do with a prior linguistic decision, but, rather, with traditional ideology and more specifically with his aims of a past that is valued as the essential foundation of the present: "our people, our temples, our monasteries, our castles, our buildings, our written monuments, our institutions ... constitute the pages of our history in which, as the Roman orator states, we should look for the witness of ages, light for the truth, teaching for life and communication from past generations" (Barreiro Fernández 14). The conviction that this was one of the fundamental objectives of literature was common among Galician intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century, as reflected in Alfredo Brañas's statement that "the role of poets is no less

important: to evoke the illustrious characters of heroes, record ancient customs, paying tribute to the political organization of the town in previous ages ... little by little they exalt dormant patriotism and contribute to forming the regional character, often lost through the harmful influence of foreign elements on town life" (xiv).

The function of the identity configuration assigned to narrative discourse is demonstrated here. However, a problem soon arises in relation to the partiality not only ideological but also social — that can be identified in most of the narratives written at the end of the nineteenth century. In this respect, we ought to consider Francisco Álvarez de Nóvoa who complained in his introduction to *Pé das Burgas* of the limitations posed on the subject matter by the lack of registers: "can nothing be written in Galician except idle doings, traditions, the concerns of emigrants, misunderstood regionalism?" (42). Moreover, Álvarez de Nóvoa perceived these limitations as not derived from the language itself, but, rather, from the rustic narrative model that prevailed and that he believed projected a distorted image of Galician reality. Thus he wondered "are there not in this blessed country things to talk about such as the beautiful countryside, the never-ending ocean; are there not mothers, women, loves, envies, despairs, complaints, disgraces, madneses, aches, agonies, in one word, hearts; do the rich not suffer like the poor, do they not ache in the same way, love, hate, do they not have memories, religion, doubts, weaknesses, triumphs, glory, hell?" (43). Álvarez de Nóvoa's use of narrative brought an end to the clichéd idea regarding the impracticability of Galician for dealing with certain topics, thereby obliging an implicit redefinition of what Alfredo Brañas called "regional character" confronting a large part of the Galician intelligentsia with many of their contradictory ideas. This explains the lack of sympathy for the author among the official defenders of Galician cultural and language of the time, who subjected him to marginalization and who unfairly ignored his work, particularly those who, according to Brañas, "thought that your story is not Galician because you do not talk about a spree, a *lacoada* [a typical Galician meal], a corn husking, a romance, scrutching [removal of straw from flax], threshing or a *muiñada* [festive gathering in mills while the grain was being milled]" (xiv). However, what in Álvarez de Nóvoa were the insubordinate attitudes of an "outsider" would develop a fundamental role in the cultural program of the *Irmandades da Fala*, in which special attention was given to the development of Galician fictional prose and within which various collections of short novels were produced. The aim of these short novels in which the technical and thematic arrangement was within the grasp of the average reader was to create in the public a habit of reading in Galician. Thus, Victoriano Taibo declares in 1917 that "it was literature, with writing of such coarseness ... which was the victim of and suffered with resignation the poisoned taint of so many writers armed with cloth cap, drawers and cart stake ... This insulting and vulgar literature is dead and it our duty to bury the dead" (5).

The above issue concerns a new concept from a theoretical perspective: there is no longer the need to point out the clichéd impracticality regarding the limitations of the Galician language or the bias of an exclusively rural narrative. Nowadays, intellectuals consider that literary discourse projects a particular image of the community, an image that the community itself will take into account in the process of its self-configuration. The founder of the *Lar* publishing house, Leandro Carré, captured the idea that "fictional texts can be viewed as social-symbolic acts, as representations of possible selves and societies" (Carré qtd. in Brown 143). After achieving in a short time a degree of linguistic development thanks to their commitment to scientific prose (see Santamarina 73), Galician intellectuals would apply the development of literature as part of the heritage that a community must possess to be considered as a nation, a heritage that is none other than the prevailing culture, transmitted in a particular language. Thus, one of the great novelties offered by the narratives of Galician authors is the presence of humor (see, e.g., Becerra Suárez). Humor was included because it was one of the essential features of the Galician voice (in contrast to the declamatory tone of Castilian) and proof of the intellectual capacity of the Galician people. Humor was used as a criterion for distinguishing Galician from Castilian and was thus a legitimizing factor for contemporary literary

discourse connecting it with the Middle Ages, the golden age of Galician civilization. Furthermore, humor implies the open condition of the message and makes the cooperation of the reader essential for the semantic possibilities of the text to be fully realized and for decodification of the enunciative, symbolic, axiological, etc., strategies contained within. The same interpretation of the use of humor is applicable to Vicente Martínez Risco Agüero (see Lugrís 45). However, Risco Agüero's contribution to the modernization of the Galician narrative would be decisive as regards another question: his work implies a positive step towards opening up the discourse to the plurality of other social voices by the use of the indirect free style while also allowing for the addition to a borrowed discourse irony and humor (i.e., in the context of Bakhtin) in order that the narrative voice may exercise a strong enunciative control for a particular parodic or critical aim. Thus, the systematic use of indirect free speech in Risco Agüero's *O porco de pé* (1928) constitutes an advance towards a more open concept of enunciation in so far as it is an individual act.

The narrative of Ramón Otero Pedrayo is a further example of how the process I am describing is not linear, but subject to regressions and contradictions. In my opinion, the supposed modernity some scholars and critics attribute to his work is debatable, especially as regards the style structures employed, marked by the dialectic between tradition and modernity. Carlos Baliñas described this dialectic as follows: "as a writer he will relive it all as a memory ... on telling the story of these changes he will pay more attention to the decline of the disappearing class — the rural nobility, than to the upsurge of the ascending class — the urban bourgeois. In general, in the choice between the past and the future, he will always favor the past" (174). It is for this reason that some aspects of the Otero Pedrayo's narrative cannot be strictly classified as modern and belong to the nineteenth century, which, far from being a fault, should be valued as proof of coherence between life and art. Indeed, this innovative drive would not be necessary for Otero Pedrayo if we accept, with Anxo Tarrío, that "if the twentieth century novel introduced into its narrative as many novelties as are recognised, it was ultimately because of the need to adapt the literary language to new realities and to new visions of the world, new ways of life — material and spiritual — new ideologies and existential and dialectic relationships between man and his surroundings" (25). Why then should Otero Pedrayo modernize his narrative discourse? If he did not feel the need to connect with these new realities, it was neither a priority nor essential for him to renew his literary language in order to execute his objectives how to write. It is because of this that the dialectic between tradition and modernity that constitutes one of the axes of his narrative is not resolved by dialogue, but by the application of a unitary ideology and the strict use of monologue which excludes from discourse all social voices that could bring into question the author's axiological system and vision of the world.

Next, I discuss how the interruption of the literary discourse during the Spanish Civil War and the post-war period affected narration in Galician. Juan Ignacio Ferreras's reference to Spanish narration is pertinent to Galician narration: "with most broken cultural traditions and with an all-powerful state that attempts to make its own culture, the new novelists must begin almost at zero ... Because of a lack of information and education, they must ignore many of the methods used in and achieved by the national and foreign novel. And thus it sometimes appears that they try to connect with the characteristic nineteenth century tradition of realism" (32). This is exactly what occurs with *A xente da Barreira. Novela* (1951) by Ricardo Carballo Calero, the first novel published in the post-war period. The lack of contemporary references and the urgency to restore links with a past led the novelist to bridge time and connect with the nineteenth century with the aim of finding the roots of Galician literature and to avoid having to start at zero in the process of reconstructing a Galician fictional prose: "thus, when we were reconstructing Galician culture, when we began to lift our heads after the destruction of the civil war, we had to reconsider the problem of our literary politics, and we all agreed that we already had a consolidated tradition of lyric poetry and this gave many of us who met together at that time the idea that what we needed now was prose, and from this conviction arose *A xente da Barreira*" (Carballo Calero qtd. in Blanco 248). This explains the choice of his subject matter

(the breakdown of the old rural nobility besieged by the new urban classes) already over-used in Galician writing and explains also the use of an overly simple narrative technique. A yet another example is the writing of Alvaro Cunqueiro whose innovative value is found in that Cunqueiro was the first Galician narrator who situated himself radically "against the predominant system of literary codification, and in opposition to the rules imposed by literary history, to reject them as principles for interpretation and to revise them" (González-Millán, *Álvaro Cunqueiro* 21). Cunqueiro produced writing that was fundamentally dialogical and aimed at subversion not so much at an ideological level but at a metaliterary level in so far as it changed the traditional, conservative, and consecrated use of intertextual methods. Because of this, his literary projects were judged as escapist and the proposed means of confronting the limitations imposed by society were thus misinterpreted. Although different, the narrative of Eduardo Blanco Amor, along with that of Cunqueiro, was the beginning of an innovative trend that found ways of transcending conventional realism by technical experimentation and/or ideological subversion.

The Galician novel of the 1950s and 1960s also shows a preoccupation associated with traditional forms of narration: aspects such as the difficulty in identifying an enunciative subject, the instability of the narrative voice, and the questioning of identity, as well as the lack of implicit presence of the author remained matters authors of the new Galician narrative were concerned with. On the other hand, this new narrative is often accused of being elitist and its relevance to the development of the Galician narrative at that time in history is questioned. This perception is correct if we consider to what point the texts of the new Galician narrative developed a program of reading that requires a reader willing to cooperate fully, something that was rare at the time. Nevertheless, we must not underestimate the innovative function of the narrative project of this group of authors. In the 1970s, the technical innovations these authors introduced were at the stage of assimilation. On the one hand, there was a decrease in the rather gratuitous experimental excesses of novels, excesses we must interpret as the price the genre had to pay for modernization. On the other hand, this period saw the emergence and renovation of a genre fundamental in the restoration of the postwar narrative, namely sentimental novels. In such novels the narrative discourse incorporated traditionally marginal voices such as those of children, while at the same time it allowed codification of a critical revision of the past. However, this occurred because of the drive of the new narrative style that many of these writers — particularly Blanco Amor, Xoan Torres, Carlos Casares, and Anxo Ballesteros — used strategies of enunciation as codifying formula for the social instability and the profound changes that Galician society was about to experience. This process is summarized in an unsigned note in *Grial* entitled "Carlos Casares, Premio Galaxia de novela": "if the author wishes to reflect the new reality in which we live, he must create a new language, a new technique, a new style and a new structure to meet the new needs. Describing the present day reality with the old models of the nineteenth century novel is as absurd as if a painter wished to function as part of the vanguard while stuck with the aesthetic canons of Renaissance painting" (517). In this sense, the death of Franco did not bring about any radical change in the genre: the relationship between cause and effect in the evolutionary dynamics of cultural systems are never immediate and, in my opinion, the beginning of the new legislature had more importance in terms of bringing about a self-perceived identity and the creation of a new legal and institutional framework.

At the beginning of the 1980s Galician narration underwent a renewal and that was accompanied by an interest in long novels and considered to be challenging by many authors. This phenomenon may be associated, on the one hand with the need of the genre to demonstrate its maturity at a time when poetry was recovering its traditional condition as a canonical genre. On the other hand, this was also affected by the need to fill certain gaps in Galician literature perceived as deficiencies by readers and critics and which served as arguments to those who insisted in the second-rate status of Galician literature. By the middle of the decade and with these objectives fulfilled to a certain extent, the idea of the long novel began to become less important and the literary environment began to favor short

formats, thus more in keeping with the social and ideological fragmentation implied by the establishment of democratic pluralism and capable of satisfying the demand of an ever more varied readership. However, it must also be taken into account that those involved in developing the short format were not unaware of the economic risk associated with the publication of long novels. Victor F. Freixanes's 1981 *O triángulo inscrito na circunferencia* is of interest because of its heterogeneity (the critics classified it in its day as symbolic, mythical, prophetic, lyric, fantastical, magical, etc.) and because it was presented as an ambitious proposal of collective identity formation. In this sense we can view the novel as a continuation of Xosé Luis Mendez Ferrín's 1971 *Retorno a Tagoen Ata*, which in its day represented the generation of a new narrative form understood as a strategy of nationalist politics in so far as it was presented as expressing "an anti-history as a strategy for recovering words and the collective memory" (González-Millán, *Silencio* 20). However, the proposal of Freixanes differed from that of Mendez Ferrín's because in the former the narrative voice fuses different discourses to construct an alternative symbolic representation of past and future Galicia thereby acting as a cognitive and interpretative filter. Here transtextuality is not a legitimatizing resource in the author's discourse (as in the novels of Otero Pedrayo), but a method of representing the plurality of society — to which the novel attempts to respond — and the depth of history within which this is produced in contrast to the seductive symbolic of national salvation expressed in Mendez Ferrín's narrative. Both public and critics also found *Polaroid* (1986) by Suso de Toro difficult to define in terms of genre: "is it a novel? A series of texts? Various stories? Everything he has written in these years arranged together?" (XGG 6). However, the work of de Toro is just the opposite of Freixanes's *O triángulo* and does not aim to produce any symbolic proposals which might define the identity of a group, nation, culture, etc. de Toro writes that it is "a clear look — what it perceives is a lack of sense, absurdity" ("Autopoética" 133). *Polaroid* entails the total negation of the literary text as an axiological response and its radically open textuality raises questions and confronts the reader with his/her own conflicts. This is perhaps the text which most radically codified the ethnological disorientation in contemporary Galician literature. Indeed, the great aesthetic and ideological systems that nourished prior literature ceased functioning as orientational models and thus the Galician narrative of the 1980s did not experience a rupture but entered into a stage we can classify as autodestructive. This development is explained partly by the desire to satisfy an ever more heterogeneous readership in a defensive strategy of a system aimed at avoiding the loss of readers to other systems, but also because the present literature is incapable of acting as a mechanism of axiological arrangement and of globalizing codification and reflects the dispersal, the lack of responses, and the disorientation that affect contemporary humanity: "like sociological texts, fictional writings incorporate within their own discourse the crises of our culture" (Brown 157).

With regard to the narrative of the past few years, I offer provisional observations: the panorama has been defined by individualism or fragmentation and a certain tendency to deny conventional categories (both narrative and generic or semiotic). These phenomena may be understood as part of postmodernity, but also as strategies suited to literary codification of the contradictions in Galician society: "inconsistency of roles, receptors, and intentions is a central feature of modern society, a society characterized by instability of identity, by the difficulty of achieving an integral biography, and by the reduction of the person to a factor of production" (Brown 160). To this extent, the process initiated at the time by de Toro and continued by authors such as Xurxo Borrazás will surely carry on in the immediate future. In my opinion, only an ethnically defensive reaction on the part of Galician society or by a system that sees a risk to its survival (i.e., in the heterodoxy presented in these models) would result in the definitive abandonment of the Galician narrative as predicted by its detractors. Moreover, the progressive maturity of the Galician literary system neutralizes the risk put forward as a potential response to the reductionist social model which some would wish to impose from the centralized authorities of Spain. In a hypothetical situation of conflict between paradigms of

identity between Galician and Spanish and social energy would tend to be concentrated as a defensive strategy and thus generating centripetal models in literary discourse.

I believe that the arbitrary process initiated in the 1980s of experimentation with new styles has now come to an end. The process has ended because those involved achieved, more or less successfully, their main objectives to demonstrate the maturity of Galician literature. However, the temerity with which certain sectors continue to delimit thematic subspaces or discourses reveals that the system still does not perceive itself as plural and flexible and it is therefore essential to mark predefined limits. This strategy would allow certain agencies to be established and differentiated and this is what has occurred from 2000 onwards with the promotion of narrative written by women, thanks to various collections, prizes, and critical recognition. The centripetal tendency generated partly as a result of the already mentioned phenomena suggests a recovery of particular signs of Galician identity either by cultivation of an autochthonous fantasy by means of recovery of the literature of the Galician Middle Ages, the revisiting of foundational moments (The Civil War) or resorting to the exploitation of the epic potential of certain places — such as Argentina — closely linked to the development as Galician community. This route was consolidated once the tension between exogenous and endogenous forces was resolved in favor of the latter and that lost their connotations of resistance in order to broaden their outlook with proposals that less ethnically marked, but of clear autochthonous vocation. Some critics — e.g., Silvia Gaspar — detect a certain degree of disorientation in the writings of the 1990s, which I attribute on to a displacement of narrative by poetry but which I also understand as a projected image of a discourse turned inward on itself and a product of some authors who were submerged in a state of introspection brought on by fatigue and by the mannerism of a genre that was now paying the price for its forced and intense contribution to the supposed normalization of Galician literature. The result of all of this is the commitment of many authors to personal literary projects and distanced from the compromise of collective work: the works of Xosé Carlos Caneiro, the change in direction of de Toro, and the new approach of Méndez Ferrín in favor of a style of writing which displays a particular degree of internal coherence.

In my expectation in the coming years we will appreciate how the development of the Galician literary system affects its external projection, especially in a system with which it maintains a conflicting relationship such as the Spanish literary system. For example, the canonization of Manolo Rivas's work has modified expectations: as the Spanish market opens up to other Galician voices, we will begin to appreciate whether the general availability of Spanish versions of the texts would modify sales of the originals in Galician. We will also see whether or not the debate about when translations should be allowed would be polarized or silenced and whether the outside reception of contemporary Galician literature would be judged in terms of exoticism and/or ethnicity. I also believe that aspects and functions of mass media including the internet will impact on Galician literature. Further, a new element has changed the Galician literary environment in recent decades, namely the growing interest shown by the film industry. For example, the adaptation of de Toro's novel to the film *Trece badaladas* changed the traditional process of literary canonization, introducing new values that would determine both the image of these authors, as well as the projection of their work outside Galicia. This new situation is bound to have a particular impact on Galician literature as it would on any minority literature in which the scarcity of cultural agencies result in lesser means of canonization and reception.

Note: The above article is a revised and shortened version of Dolores Vilavedra, "Political Autonomy and Literary Institutionalization in Galicia." *New Spain, New Literatures*. Ed. Luis Martín-Estudillo and Nicholas Spadaccini. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2010. 117-34. Copyright release to the author.

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