LAZARILLO DE TORMES [1554]

I. The picaresque novel: A very characteristic of literary genre in Spain appeared in the period of Carlos I, this new kind of prose fiction belongs to the realist and satirical literary tradition which is centered on the main character, a picaro or rogue, a vagrant, an anti-hero, serving as the narrator “I” to tell the story. Since the “I” is a picaro, this type of novel became known as picaresque or romance of roguery. Although the ancestry of the picaro may be traced back to characters in folklore, and to La Celestina in Spanish literature, the birth of the first important picaresque novel took place in 1554 with the publication—in three different editions—of Lazarillo de Tormes. In contrast to the types of novels then prevalent—the chivalrous, pastoral and sentimental—the picaresque novel is marked by a down-to-earth, highly satirical portrayal of real life, and mostly the life of the lower classes. Its structure is usually uncomplicated. And the picaro recounts, in autobiographical form, his adventures, his misfortunes, and his tricks, both agonizing and amusing, in the struggle to survive.

II. The problems of editions and authorship in Lazarillo de Tormes

In the year 1554 three different editions of the book entitled Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades (Life of Lazarillo de Tormes and His Fortunes and Adversities) were printed in Burgos, Antwerp and Alcalá de Henares. They all differ somewhat in language, but it is the one form Alcalá that departs most radically from the other two. It adds some episodes, not in the other editions, which were probably written by a second author. Because Lazarillo was very critical of the clergy, it was put on the Index Purgatorius in 1559 and further editions were prohibited inside Spain. Then, in 1573, an abridged version was printed that omitted
Chapters 4 and 5, along with other items displeasing to a watchful Inquisition. The mutilated version was reprinted until 19th century, when Spin finally allowed its people to read the complete work again. The identity of the author of this novel has always been a problem. However, the most widely accepted theory was the attribution to Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, a famous humanist. Many earlier editions carried his name as author, even though no real proof of his authorship has been found. Some critics, following Américo Castro’s lead, think the author was a Jewish convert to Christianity because of certain phrases which point in that direction.

III. Characters

Lazarillo is the main character and narrator of the book. As we read the novel we become aware of the link of the name Lázaro (Lazarillo: little Lázaro) with biblical Lazarus, either the figure who died and was brought back to life (John 16) or the beggar (Luke 16: 20-31). This “historical” relationship is further compounded by the fact that many episodes of the novel came from traditional versions in European folklore. There is, for instance, a 13th century French theatrical farce, “Le garcon et l’aveugle”, in which a servant plays tricks on a blind man. And the British Museum manuscript of the “Decretals of Gregory IX” contains an illustration of a boy drinking through a straw from a blind man’s bowl. More examples are to be found in this book.

Our main character, Lazarillo, no idealized hero but one of the unkillable children of the very poor, narrates his generally painful experiences with a variety of masters and has to use his wits to obtain the slice of bread from his mean, cruel, avaricious and hypocritical elders. Thus we should say the dynamic force of the work is hunger. Lazarillo is, certainly, a figure (“tipo”) characterized by humanity, which arouses the readers’ sympathy from the very beginning as he records his miserable
family and childhood. Lazarillo is a “round” character as we notice his transformation throughout the whole work. From an innocent boy he becomes a mischievous, then vengeful, blind man’s boy. He observes the hypocrisy, avarice, false pride, materialism of his masters, and when he marries the archpriest’s mistress for what he can gain, he applies all the lessons he has learned on the ladder to success—to the “height of all good fortune”. The autobiographical tone is appropriate for the simplicity of Lazarillo’s narration, without any connotation of erudition nor of intellectualism. Through Lazarillo’s eyes, the novel reflects certain segments of society in 16th century Spain. For instance, the king Charles I became involved in several foreign wars, and had gone deeply into debt to German and Italian bankers in order to finance those wars; the effects of inflation were enormous; beggar and beggars’ guilds were numerous; men of all classes were affixing titles to their names and refusing any work—especially any sort of “manual” labor—unless it suited their new “rank” (as the character of squire); the clergy was rather corrupt in need of reform, etc. All these things can be found in the novel. Nevertheless, some critics believe that this work distorts reality downward and only gives us the negative traits of society.

In addition to the main character Lazarillo, the novel provides us a gallery of figures (“tipos”) from diverse social classes. Most of these “flat” characters (particularly the mean blind man, the avaricious priest, the poor squire) represent not only the value of that period, but also the corrupt social forces though depicted in exaggerated and humorous manner. Often times, the writer, impartial and objective, has a very deep sympathy toward the poor, malicious, avaricious blind man and priest. The figure of starving squire, obviously, reminds us of the ideal, dignified, but miserable Don Quijote.
IV. Structure, style

The style of the Lazarrillo is plain, moderate and popular, and indeed, adjusts to its diverse characters. The vocabulary used by our characters is simple, somewhat poor, but colloquial and amusing. The novel is a social satire and a description of local customs of 16th century Spain as well.

In terms of its structure, Francisco Rico believes that the novel is complete with a “circular” structure. He notes that the novel is addressed to a certain fictional character ("You": Vuestra merced), and that Lazarillo intends to tell this character “all the details of the matter”, the “matter” being apparently the questionable relations between the archpriest and his wife. Thus there is a continuity from the beginning of the work through the details of Lazarillo’s life, until the last chapter where the “matter” itself, alluded to previously in the Prologue, is finally revealed in some detail. Other critics point out the usage of “Vuestra merced” is a device whose purpose, like “Arabian historian” and the “translators” of Don Quijote, is to create an atmosphere of realism.

V. Significance

Lazarillo de Tormes was enormously popular, inspiring many translations and imitations not only in Spain by the greatest writers of its Golden Age (Mateo Alman, Cervantes, Quevedo) but in the rest of Europe (by Lesage, Fielding). Americo Castro notes that this novel is a step toward the masterpiece of Cervantes, Don Quijote de La Mancha, “In addition to its intrinsic merits, the Lazarillo de Tormes is supremely important viewed in its historical perspective. In many ways it made possible the Don Quijote. Among other things, it offered in the intimate opposition of the squire and his servant the first outline of the duality-unity of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza”.