

Text -reader interactions in *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda*, by David Toscana

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— Abstract —

David Toscana is one of the fundamental voices in the Mexican contemporary narrative. Due to the omissions and *negations* embodied in his novels, David Toscana demands active participation from the reader. Toscana's work incites the reader to go deep into a *maddening realism*, that subverts all logic and bends a wide range of norms. This article proposes a new approach to *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda*, by David Toscana, that analyses the text-reader interactions motivated by the novel, which also create a particular aesthetic effect of both rejection and empathy for the characters. To follow this objective, this article draws upon Wolfgang Iser's theory of the aesthetic effect.

Keywords:

Text-reader interactions; aesthetic effect; Mexican novel.

Published by Plaza y Janés in 2002, the novel *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda*, by David Toscana (Monterrey, Nuevo León, 1961), marks a key moment in the narrative of this writer from Monterrey. Thus, for example, the constants of what the writer himself has called a *maddening realism* begin to be defined with greater clarity and accuracy, as well as the various strategies with which he usually appeals to the reader: irony, the grotesque, the absurd, the liminal areas of reality and fiction, the over-indeterminacy of literary discourse and what could be considered a systematic breakdown of expectations in reading.

Analyzing a novel such as *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda*, within the framework of the Tuscan narrative—which to date consist of a book of short stories and ten novels, including the one that we discuss on this occasion—, represents, from our point of view, entering a dialogue with a literary proposal of an original and destabilizing invoice in the context of contemporary Mexican literature.

Las bicicletas (1992), *Estación Tula* (1995) and *Santa María del Circo* (1998) are part of David Toscana's first cycle of novels. Among these three works, the most outstanding is *Santa María...*, a polyphonic, carnivalesque novel, in which a group of circus performers who wishes to find a new town is described as if it were a phalanstery. Due to its ironic, irreverent tone, and its *freaky* and unabashed characters, the novel raises various effects and interpretive possibilities. Here lies, in part, the success it has had in its critical reception. David Toscana's second novelistic cycle includes *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* (2002), *El último lector* (2004) and *El ejército iluminado* (2006). The geographic space he alludes to in all these novels, in one way or another, is in the north of Mexico, particularly the city of Monterrey. In the third novel cycle, which maintains the general characteristics of the Tuscan narrative when creating bizarre, grotesque, absurd, and sometimes hilarious characters, new geographical spaces are introduced that can be several at once, European spaces where war is a constant in the plot. His last novels are part of this cycle: *Los puentes de Königsberg* (2009), *La ciudad que el diablo se llevó* (2012), *Evangelia* (2016) and *Olegarov* (2017).

In this essay, we propose to analyze what are the interaction mechanisms between the text and the reader that allows comprehension and aesthetic experience of an offending, uncomfortable work, such as *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda*. From Wolfgang Iser's contributions (1987 [1976], 1989, 1993) we wondered what happens to the reader when he dives into in David Toscana's literary orb, what are the operations that, via the preorientation structure of the text, requires to constitute the sense of Toscana's novel and what repertoire, in terms of Wolfgang Iser, is necessary to consider approaching Toscana's world.

Before answering these questions, it is important to emphasize that we selected *Duelo por Miguel Pruneda* because as a result of this novel his *deranged realism* is masterfully established, that is, a realism in which neither logic nor reason acts and in which the characters, on the edge of madness, evasion, and absurdity, give themselves to the imagination, because it is on this plane that they find the meaning of their existence.

TEXT-READER INTERACTION FROM ISER'S THEORY

Every writer has an urgent need for communication. His word expressed orally or in writing, always seeks *another*, even when the other is himself in a distanced attitude. The word that transcends thought and manifests itself as sound or physical matter, in any of its possible supports, basically yearns for a response and a certain permanence. The writer, explains Lázaro Carreter (1999), breaks the silence animated by a communicative need, as a traveler would do in a train compartment. This irruption occurs in a "very strange way" because the writer does not have an interlocutor that allows him, in turn, to become a receiver:

His communication is centrifugal, and he does not expect a response, but a welcome. In addition to being centrifugal, it is multidirectional: the message comes out at the same time through the four quadrants. But it targets faceless receivers; many have not been born perhaps they will welcome a text when it no longer exists. (Carreter, 1999: 158)

The reader, to whom every writer aspires translates into the *spirit of appeal* that the literary text entails, that is, the invocation of the *other*, the reader who, through imaginative, correlational, and synthesizing operations, will be able to convert the silent letter in a concert of diverse voices and meanings, of lives that multiply in their speeches and acts. According to Barthes (2000), the one who writes, the one who models an artistic reality, looks for the reader without knowing where he is. However, "it is not the person of the other that I need, it is space: the possibility of a dialectic of desire, of an unforeseen enjoyment; for the cards to not be laid but that there is still a play" (2000: 12).

In *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*, Iser (1987) speaks of the implicit reader as a concave structure that will make it possible for the real reader to intervene in the text, become involved, be the mobilizing energy that assumes the pre-orienting indications of the artistic configuration. The implicit reader is not, of course, the real reader, but it is the open structure that allows external action. "The implicit reader is the intention because he *points* to and acts because he demands decisions, processes, of

a flesh and blood reader. It is, in short, the point where object and subject, text and reader converge" (Sánchez, 2019: 111).

David Toscana develops a highly appealing novel, a narrative that demands a special effort from the reader to capture an amazing world, in which the traditional sense of the verisimilitude of the text is lost because the characters simply operate under their logic that ends up prevailing the reader.

According to Iser, empty or white spaces are all that is not said in the text, which must be completed by the reader or, in terms of Ingarden (1998), indeterminate spots. In a white space, there is a chance to *fill out*, which grants the reader the possibility of collaboration, interaction, and complicity with the literary text.

As Iser points out (1987), white spaces are relevant capital structures in the text's indeterminacy, just like *negotiations* or confrontations to literary, social, or axiological reader norms. White or empty spaces, according to their multiplication or measure, indicate the type of text-reader interaction.

The aesthetic effect of the text is therefore conditioned by the degree of indeterminacy of the literary discourse, by the demands imposed by the text in its decoding, and, of course, by the type of concretization or filling of gaps that the reader makes. Whites or empty spaces multiply as the perspectives presented in the text grow and, even more, when the contrasts between one perspective and another are combined. In doing so, according to Iser (1987), the angle of view of the reader becomes mobile, while new targets or gaps are distinguished.

The more complex the structure of a text, the more complicated will be the process of the representations of the reader who, before a fictional text, we will say, is appealed to a double work of restoration of contingencies or deficits in communication. "The more a text refines its presentation grid, and this is equivalent: the more plural are the schematic perspectives projected by the object of the text, the more equivocally grows its indeterminacy" (Iser, 1987: 266).

The reader, faced with the gaps, may strive to complete what's missing, to find a logical relationship between one event and another, to replenish a connective, to add new data, or, also, to reject the text as complex, obscure, or ambiguous. Either way, the reader will have been forced to decide. When the reader gets involved in the text *it is possible* that he is in the text and, based on his background and expectations, he goes to meet the work.

The "inciting condition of texts" is known only by the effect they produce (Iser, 1989: 133). This effect, in turn, is awakened through the process of reading that starts from the artistic configuration of the literary work and the reading operations that are reconfiguring, in successive narrations, the elements of the work to establish a consistency in the sense. All this implies that, although there is a structure given by the text, and which corresponds

to what Iser calls artistic pole, the literary work, —beyond the text—, will only reach its status when, through an esthete reader, the suggested, the unspoken, the structured outline, become an update, an event of meaning, from reading or communicative involvement between text-readers. To put it another way: only when the pole or aesthetic object is created will there be literary work.

Having regard to the high level of porosity of Toscana's narrative, to the constant denials it formulates, and to the fact that the gaps it raises lie both in the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axis of the narrative, Iser's theory is more than timely to approach David Toscana, one of the fundamental writers of Mexican literature today.

WHITE SPACES OR GAPS IN THE NOVEL

Duelo por... tells the story of Miguel Pruneda, a man about to retire who, upon learning the news that he will receive a tribute for his long years of service in a company, seeks to evade the ceremony (his speech), and reality itself. Not only does he revive an ancient fondness for the graveyards atmosphere by stealing the bones of a crypt, but, together with his wife Estela, his neighbor Horacio, and Monica and Hugo, he will try to keep in formol the corpse of José Videgaray, an old man —his neighbor— who died unexpectedly and who was distinguished for liking bulls and an anti-American feeling. The novel shows, intertwined, the necrophile stories of Miguel, the apathetic and boring marriage life of Pruneda and Estela, the murder of an American professor at the hands of José Videgaray, a plane crash, and the stories of other dead people that the main character encounters.

The gaps can be perceived in the syntagmatic dimension of the novel, in the change from one chapter to another, in the storylines, or the transfer of one perspective to another (from the main character to a secondary one, for example). However, the most interesting gaps and those that confront the reader the most are located in the paradigmatic axis, since they emerge when the text subverts a rule, and it is the reader who is prompted to take a position in the face of such a situation.

In the case of *Duelo por...* it is seen that death, that great physical emptiness, takes on an extraordinary symbolic value since all the stories that are presented have to do with death, as well as all the unknowns that are formulated and that do not always manage to be answered (from those related to the origin of a plane crash in the 1960s, a real and historical reference in the novel; the disappearance of girls; the dark existence of the late Videgaray; to what could be the announced death of Pruneda, with his retirement and dismissal from the labor world). Death is perceived as the great void that links all the argu-

mentative voids of the novel. Moreover: in Toscana, death—as Castillo explains (2008)—is a *leitmotiv* that permeates all his work.

With Toscana, death is observed *close up*; in fact, the grotesque, as another of the characteristic elements of Toscana, settles in the exaggeration of an unpleasant physical trait or the gloating of the images of death, its mutilations, and disappointments. When we say that death is a void that frames another series of voids that appear in the lines of action, we essentially mean that death, from its metaphysical condition, as the "nothingness", is the central unknown from which all the small questions or all the small deaths, doubts, that the reader is experiencing throughout the reading emerge.

But the gaps, in addition to being found in the "permanent irresolution" of questions, are also found in the characterization of the characters. These are described with minimal adjectives, in general, their physical defects are accentuated (obesity, flaccidity, pallor, amputation of a limb...); they are theatrical, but not much is said about their sentimental sphere. We must observe them, stalk them in gesture, in their silence. In this sense, it is obvious that the reader is demanded an active exercise in the representation of the missing characteristics.

Based on the characters' actions, Estela is visualized as a loving, but ridiculous and trivial wife; Pruneda, as an intolerant man, necrophiliac, cynical, but also nostalgic and supportive; José Videgaray, as a sadistic killer, but with idealistic and heroic tints... The contradictory characteristics of the characters cause a kind of magnetic field of attraction and repulsion in which the reader feels subjected because he does not achieve either a total identification or empathy or total rejection. The contact with certain Tuscan characters, for example, Miguel Pruneda, causes an effect like that which in poetry generates *aprosdoketon*, "the unexpected word or expression, used strangely or instead of a usual speech" (Marchese and Forradellas, 1986: 33).

Character traits of an opposite nature awaken in the reader a feeling of "distrust", uncertainty, or even "semantic dissonance", since, as we said, they make the apprehension of the character elusive. In this case, it is not, of course, that the characters should be presented flat, without the necessary nuances that in real life we accuse human beings, but that Toscana works intentionally, from the pre-orienting structure of the text, that the characters present themselves to the reader with characteristics that seem to exclude each other: intolerant/supportive; killer/heroic, for example. There is a struggle here between the negative and the positive attributes that, depending on the reader, will end in the triumph of one or the other, or the feeling of ambiguity. Thus, José Videgaray, who murdered an American professor with a bullfighter's sword, just as if he were a beast, will be able to become a hero if he considers that Videgaray, rather than a murderer, is a patriot who

eliminates the person who embodies the Yankee yoke over the Mexicans, according to Horacio's character.

Toscana narrates with the clear intention of provoking something in the reader, shaking him, making him experience "aesthetic, moral or ideological reactions" (Moreno, 2004: 23). From this perspective, his spirit is romantic, passionate, more on the side of emotions than of rationality. Perhaps that is why his characters conduct themselves with the compass of free will, above the logic or rigidity of forms.

REPERTOIRE, DENIAL, AND INTERPELLATION

The novels of the first two scriptural cycles of Toscana are, for the Mexican reader function as a repertoire or sedimented elements of his tradition, referencing Mexican history, myths, resonant journalistic notes, description of specific geographical spaces, popular sayings, etc.

Toscana's narrative, and particularly *Duelo por...*, exposes, through the repertoire, the transgression of very different social, ethical, moral, religious norms. Among Toscana's concerns is the criticism of institutions (Church, school, family, homeland), codes (of language, urbanity, honor), rituals (of death, love...), and history.

Duelo por... is one of Toscana's most "uncomfortable" novels precisely because of the set of denials to the norms that are exposed there. The most subversive of the denials, from which they all start, is the one that refers to the private sphere. About what this area means, Roger Chartier explains that in private spaces the care of the body, natural functions, or the language of love is consumed. In the private space, "affections, feelings, and, sometimes, perversions" are manifested (in Scarano, 2007: 50).

The private sphere (translated as the house, the bedroom, the bathroom, and even the tomb) is violently "looted" in *Duelo por...* Consequently, what happens in this sphere is stripped of privacy, of the expected collection and, in its shameless display, provokes disgust, horror, rejection. But also, and because here lies part of Toscana's style, open laughter or bitter smile. The orientation of the text will incline the reader, as in the back and forth of a boat, towards opposing emotions, with a certain fulminating speed that Toscana manages to provoke thanks to the various types of irony he uses and breaking reading expectations.

Let's look at the following two examples showing, in contrast, the treatment of death. In the first example, the grotesque description of a corpse is irreverent, sacrilegious; in the second, the enunciation of the reasons why people die in big cities is comical. The theme of death is the same, but its treatment, from one page to another in Toscana, results in dissimilar effects:

Example 1 (Miguel Pruneda in front of the body of José Videgaray):

For Miguel, the obvious thing was to undress him, however, he did not want to deal with that old flesh, he did not even want to think about that wrinkled skin about to turn to scales, he was afraid to discover some camouflaged nipples, a tiny penis, crouching on his skins, whitish, a mushroom half sprout; he did not want to know what his own penis would be in a few more years. (Toscana, 2002: 51)

Example 2 (Miguel Pruneda converses with Monica, in the cemetery):

In this city, about one hundred and fifty people die a day: because they got old, because they got distracted, because they ate something they shouldn't, because they changed lanes, because of air, a virus, or a bullet. After all, life is worth nothing, because I saw you with another, because they didn't use the pedestrian bridge, because of cholesterol or lack of exercise or I don't know how many volts or nobody taught them how to swim, or for being an asshole. (*Ibid*, 117)

The reader watches the characters violate the norm of burying a corpse (that of José Videgaray), to comply with another norm: to comply with the last will of the deceased (stay forever in his apartment). The rule that eliminates other rules is an absurd, strange act that disorients the reader, but this paradox can also amuse him: the fulfillment of every rule leads at the same time to the contempt of another.

According to Iser (1987), making the norms of the social environment visible through the literary text allows "to acquire an awareness of where one is imprisoned" (322). With the denials of norms, a space for the intervention of the reader is automatically opened, who in the appeal to his sedimented knowledge finds a call to take and occupy a position in front of the text. Toscana's characters' morale, in particular the main ones, becomes ambiguous, liminal, as, in turn, the dimensions in which they are usually handled: reality, dream, delirium...

The suppression of the usual spaces and ways of privacy, as a subverted norm, therefore, makes *Duelo por...* to demand the intervention of a reader willing to confront their own frameworks and to follow attentively the double irony with which Toscana is painting his narrative.

In *Mourning for...* the absurd causes annoyance, bewilderment, discomfort, and, again, as in other cases, laughter. This is because in Toscana the absurdity is existential and surreal; it appeals both to lack of communication, to closure, something childish, the fanciful or meaningless. It is understandable, in this way, that, in the face of absurdity as an ambiguous experience, the reader feels dislocated, unable in some way to define the final sensation caused by the reading of *Duelo por...* as it is so opalescent, amber.

The absurdity present in the novel can even go against the reading pact, against the plausibility of the story. But if the reader abandons his

initial expectation of finding a cause-effect logic in the events of the novel, he will soon, paradoxically, distinguish a sense in the absurd actions of the characters, because their "outbreak" is nothing more than a reflection of contemporary society, which amalgamates progress, violence, and dehumanization. Miguel Rodríguez affirms that *Duelo por...* is a provocative and "intentionally absurd and desperate" novel (Rodríguez, 2008: 196).

If, from the absurd, the violation of the order of logic demands from the reader a change in his points of reference and his conception about the limits between reality and fantasy; from the grotesque, so that it corresponds the confrontation of various social norms, as those that concern the measurement, the order and the privacy of the body, an attitude of *resistance* is required.

However, it should also be noted that Toscana, aware of the need not to lose communication with the reader, not to exhaust him to such an extent that he abandons the novel due to the saturation of heavy environments from the point of view of the grotesque, skillfully places in the novel "vents" through which the air flows. Thus, he works with various resources through "breaks": inserting chapters of different tones in which violence or the grotesque is reduced; closing paragraphs and chapters with an ironic phrase that calls for laughter and, consequently, contributes to defusing previous stress or, at least, with a nuance regarding the characters' sleaziness that makes them appear less cruel or even unprotected; breaking the solemnity of one situation with another of an absurd character and granting a detective tint to the plot when investigating the death or whereabouts of some characters.

CONCLUSIONS

As seen, the novel is not totally and uniformly obscure, grotesque, or violent; in it the appeal to laughter, through irony or mockery, counterbalances and places the reader in a plane of relative superiority, from where he feels protected or distanced—at times— compared to what the text proposes. The reader, in the effort required by reading, recognizes that "what has been said only seems to acquire meaning insofar as it refers to omissions; it is through implications and not through affirmations that the meaning is given shape and weight" (Iser, 1993: 355).

In *Duelo por...* the reader, being a spectator of the shipwreck of Pruneda, manages to see in this character, on the one hand, the sleaziness and, on the other, the poignant lack of protection against loneliness and death. In other words, he begins to observe as his own the duel for the character, and it is then that the aesthetic experience makes possible the recovery of a horizon that, at first, seemed totally alien.

The text-reader interaction is conditioned, in the novel, by the identification of key moments in Mexico's historiography that demystify, with shame,

some of its emblematic characters; at the same time, by a reading disposition to follow an absurd plot with frequent breaks in the expectations of the reader. The imagination of privacy, of measurement, is subverted from the negation of implicit social norms, while the characters, in their disorienting realism, neglect these referential frameworks. The provocation to logic, convention, and "property", is a constant from Toscana.

Finally, it should be noted that, if, as Iser (1987) expresses, the texts are known for the effects they cause, in Toscana this effect is experienced in several dimensions thanks to a narrative style worked with "premeditation and malice". The ambivalence of emotions, the same uncertainty experienced by the reader, in tune with the contemporary era, is glimpsed as an inherent part of the aesthetic object that comes from the very active text-reader interaction that brings David Toscana's work to life, a writer who has already entered the canon of Mexican literature of the twentieth century.

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