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## The Indianist Novels of Estanislao S. Zeballos

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Engineer, journalist, geographer, linguist, law professor, diplomat, politician: Estanislao S. Zeballos (1854–1923) was, as Roberto Giusti has put it, a sort of “hombre-orquesta” (7) criticized for the very diversity of his accomplishments.<sup>1</sup> A prominent lawyer who served several presidents as Minister of Foreign Relations, he represented Argentina in the negotiations with Brazil in a border dispute in 1893, in which his adversary was the Baron of Rio Branco, and later tangled with Euclides da Cunha over similar issues (Putnam xvi). Zeballos was also a prolific and popular writer of fiction and nonfiction, including works as varied as volumes on Argentine geography, novels of life among the Indians, and a twenty-volume encyclopedia for children, *El tesoro de la juventud*. A contemporary of Lucio V. Mansilla and the generation of 1880, Zeballos exhibited the mixture of exhibitionism and curiosity about other peoples that marks the best-known work of his generation, Mansilla’s *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles*. Like Mansilla, Zeballos felt a particular interest in the pampas Indians, but (also like Rosas’s nephew) his interest was as much in dramatizing himself as in recreating the savage spectacle he had observed among the Ranquels.<sup>2</sup> As a young man he made the first of many trips to the frontier regions of Argentina, trips which later served him for his works of military strategy (*La conquista de quince mil leguas*, 1878) as well as of descriptive geography (the trilogy of works comprising *Descripción amena de la República Argentina*, 1881–88). Besides these nonfiction works on the Argentine frontier, Zeballos wrote a trilogy of works on the life of the Ranquel and Araucanian Indians which are as much fiction as history: *Callvucurá y la dinastía de los piedra* (1884), dedicated to General Roca, the hero of the Conquest of the Desert and then president of the republic; *Painé y la dinastía de los zorros* (1886) and *Relmu, reina de los pinares* (1887). The latter two works, *Painé* and *Relmu*, form a single narrative unit which will be the primary subject of this essay.

Zeballos was a sort of Buffalo Bill of the Argentine south: a vainglorious braggart and unscrupulous collector of Indian curiosities. His best-known find was of a cache of documents supposedly left by

Calfucurá's captive scribes in the dunes near the present town of General Acha. These documents – authentic or not – allowed Zeballos to begin his first footnote to *Callvucurá y la dinastía de los piedra* with the words: "Este capítulo es de una rigurosa exactitud histórica" (29n.). The cautious reader will note, however, that the style and vocabulary of the supposed captured documents is identical with that of the rest of the work, and that the captive scribe Avendaño and the fictional character Liberato Pérez in *Painé* and *Relmu* are uncannily similar. Zeballos also held in his collection the skeleton of the Ranquel chief who befriended Mansilla on the latter's journey in 1874, Mariano Rosas, as revealed in a footnote to *Painé y la dinastía de los zorros* (262). Later in his career, while in Asunción, Zeballos was to acquire the alleged remains of Doctor Francia, the dictator of Paraguay from 1814 to 1840, and would eventually donate them to the Museo Histórico Nacional de Buenos Aires (Roa Bastos 459–64).

Zeballos ends his novelized history *Callvucurá y la dinastía de los piedra* with the triumphant words: "Hasta ahora hemos tenido un pueblo militar; pero, por fortuna, la espada ha terminado su tarea en la República" (185), a proud defense of the campaign of genocide against the Indians. He defines a program of immigration and development that owes much to the positions advocated at mid-century by Sarmiento and Alberdi, though it is also influenced by the later faith in positivism and social Darwinism. The very last words of *Callvucurá* are: "La era política y social que se inicia impone a todos los argentinos una tarea definida y un amplio programa, que se enuncian en esta fórmula concreta: POBLACIÓN Y TRABAJO" (185).

After the Conquest of the Desert the pampas Indians disappeared from the Argentine reality but, as was to happen with the figure of the gaucho some years later in *Don Segundo Sombra*, the Indian appeared for a last time in nostalgic fictions which evoke a vanished world. It is in this respect that Zeballos's historical novels are particularly interesting, though they may be found lacking as works of literature and as history.<sup>3</sup> In *Painé* and *Relmu* Zeballos idealizes the frontier life of the 1840s, "reconstruyendo la vida del indio y de los soldados de avanzada," as Juan Carlos Ghiano has written (26). What is strange about the fact that Zeballos should have written these novels is that he was himself one of the architects of the Conquest of the Desert. Myron Lichtblau has commented that Zeballos's "purpose was to refute the widespread belief of the viciousness and inhumanity of the Argentine indigenous population, and to show that savage races, through proper education, could readily be civilized and might progress rapidly" (110), yet it could be argued that the impulse to genocide is much stronger in Zeballos (and indeed in most of his

contemporaries, as David Viñas has shown in *Indios, ejército y frontera*<sup>4</sup>) than the impulse to education.<sup>5</sup> General Roca wrote in the preface to Zeballos's book *La conquista de quince mil leguas* (1878): "La lectura de su libro destruirá toda duda acerca de la importancia y la posibilidad de llevar la frontera al río Negro" (8). But, despite his polemic against "los enemigos tradicionales de nuestra riqueza agrícola," as Roca says in the same preface (8), Zeballos in his novels calls the Ranquels "una misteriosa e ignorada civilización" (246), and the predominant tone of the novels is romantic and nostalgic.

The narrator of *Painé* and *Relmu* is an almost featureless young man, Liberato Pérez, who flees to the Indians when pursued by the agents of Rosas. His Indian protector is Painé, father of Mansilla's friend Mariano Rosas; Liberato falls in love with one of Painé's wives, the Christian captive Panchita, and flees with her after her husband's death, only to lose her in yet another raid and to see her crowned at the end of the series as "Relmu, reina de los pinares." Liberato is a poor excuse for a narrator, pushed aside when Zeballos wants to fill in historical background to the fictional events (248-57), with asides in which Liberato Pérez advises the Argentine army on military strategy in combating the Ranquel Indians (256-57), or even informing the reader of events which happened between the time of the action and the time of the writing (261-62, 307-08). The author seems obsessed with the idea that his work consists of "narraciones históricas de una verdad perfecta" (247).

The footnotes included in the text, emblematic of the author's scruples about the truth, ultimately help destroy the paltry fiction of Liberato Pérez, since an "I" appears in them which is undoubtedly that of Estanislao Zeballos. This "I" has written other works - *Callvucurá* and *Descripción amena de la República Argentina* (see 228, 232, 238, 260, 283, 286, 293, 322, 331, 341). He is also the owner of a macabre collection of Indian curiosities which includes the skeleton of Mariano Rosas (262), and seems also to include the skull of Painé, since there is an extended discussion of the shape and size of the latter's cranium (257). This "I" intrudes not only in the notes but also in the text of the novels. The narrator, for instance, comments on Mansilla's *Excursión* (published in 1870), reflects on the military strategy which brought the success of the 1879 campaign, and announces that in 1867 he ran through the streets of Buenos Aires shouting "¡Viva el futuro Presidente de la República, doctor don Domingo Faustino Sarmiento!" (388), all of which actions are much more likely in the person of the young Zeballos than of the aged survivor of more than a decade of captivity who is his supposed narrator. Indeed, at moments like these

the supposed narrator vanishes, and the novels come to resemble closely the geographical and historical treatises by the same author.

The novels provide a wealth of geographical, historical and ethnographic information far exceeding anything encountered in Mansilla. Zeballos reveals a frontier world of incredible complexity.

There are fugitives and captives of different varieties and subtle relations between the various Indian groups on both sides of the frontier with Chile, as well as a frontier dividing the Ranquel Indians, "la dinastía de los zorros," from the followers of Callvucurá, "la dinastía de los piedra" (152). The very wealth of information overwhelms the paltry romantic fiction. In Zeballos's books we undoubtedly find more and better information about the life of the Ranquel and Araucanian Indians than in Mansilla, but get little of the flavour of that life. I suspect the motive for this imaginative failure lies in the author's ambivalence toward his material, given that he was one of the agents of the destruction of the mysterious, unknown civilization he says he wants to evoke. Because of this ambivalence, we have here two poorly conceived and poorly executed novels, and a presentation of historical, anthropological and geographical information far inferior to the author's other, nonfictional, works. Adolfo Prieto, who prefers *Callvucurá* to *Painé* and *Relmu*, has commented with regard to the later works that "Zeballos incurre en el error de introducir en un relato que hasta entonces se limitaba a la reconstrucción histórico-documental, una trama novelesca que desvirtúa el poder de convencimiento de los datos utilizados sin compensar esa pérdida con un eficaz dominio de la ficción o de los recursos atribuibles a la novela como género," and comments on the "hibridez de intenciones" in the latter works (69-70).

The love intrigue is almost comical in its awkwardness: for ten years Liberato Pérez spies on Panchita as she bathes and as she languishes in the fierce embraces of Painé, yet after the latter's death, when they escape together into the wilderness, they seem to enjoy no more than a chaste kiss. It could be argued, however, that the love interest is central to Zeballos's purpose. By having Liberato Pérez fall in love with the Christian captive Panchita he suggests the possibility of peopling the pampas with white Christians after the destruction of the Indian civilizations. Zeballos has Panchita fall captive to the Indians a second time, and ends the book with Liberato Pérez's recognition of her, a recognition which causes him to swoon. Liberato's nihilistic rage at the end of *Relmu*, in fact, would seem to justify the destruction of the whole native civilization, for the apparently sufficient reason that civilization is responsible for the repeated humiliation and subjection of the white heroine.

## NOTES

- 1 Adolfo Prieto notes that Zeballos was satirized by Gálvez in *El mal metafísico* as the law professor Dr. Zavala for "el empaque y la presuntuosidad un tanto ridícula del 'magister' universitario, y su manejo de la política exterior argentina" ("La generación del ochenta" 69).
- 2 Enrique Williams Alzaga discusses the parallels between Zeballos's works and Mansilla's *Excursión* at some length in *La pampa en la novela argentina* 194-205.
- 3 Granada says of Mansilla's *Excursión* and Zeballos's novels: "ofrecen grattísimo esparcimiento al ánimo y le elevan. El asunto no es literario; pero el buen gusto de aquellos autores le ha revestido de formas bellas. He ahí como la naturaleza y la vida, aun en lo que apena y horroriza, ofrecen materiales de buena ley al arte" (16n.). This is an overly generous estimate of the artistic value of the Zeballos novels.
- 4 Viñas calls Zeballos "el intelectual más orgánico de la conquista" (217), and discusses him at some length (217-23).
- 5 In a note on Sarmiento written about 1898 (republished in *Sur* in 1977) Zeballos celebrates Sarmiento's obsession with public education, though he calls it a "locura," a "delirio civilizador" (215). In the same article Zeballos calls the *Facundo* "el libro de América porque refleja con la exaltación extraordinaria de una visión maravillosa, el cuadro primitivo de sus razas, semi-salvajes y semi-ocultas en revuelta y espantosa agitación" (213).

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# La Maga or the Problem of Readership

LELIA MADRID

I have admired Julio Cortázar and still do. Of all the things that have impressed me, it is his theory of the novel and of reading as an act of writing, that is perhaps his most important accomplishment. But one cannot overlook the fact that Cortázar's *Rayuela* would have not been possible without Macedonio Fernández' novels or Borges' fictions, written much earlier. Nevertheless, it was Cortázar himself who, through the very structure of *Rayuela*, developed the theoretical issues raised by both Fernández and Borges (Rodríguez Monegal 81).

The main target of Cortázar's novels, and especially of *Rayuela*, is the reader, the author's "(mon) semblable, (mon) frère." In Cortázar's reader two problems converge: language and transcendence (Madrid 156-57). For Cortázar was, after all, one of the most remarkable exponents of the neo-Romantic trend in Latin American literature. Readers felt overwhelmed by *Rayuela's* display of narrative forms, famous names, theories of the brain, of painting, jazz, in short, by its obtrusive name-dropping. Very few thought of themselves as Cortázar's ideal readers. To understand Cortázar's cosmopolitanism, given its intricate web of cultural references, is a tall order indeed.

The heterogeneous quality of *Rayuela* has puzzled readers for years. Their profound admiration of the writer's craft, in a word, the Cortázar myth, did not help them to penetrate a seemingly alien universe. On the other hand, the fact that *Rayuela* is Phoenix-like, that its discourse is intended to be subverted for it to be reborn again,<sup>1</sup> prevents us from seeing the novel's inconsistencies. Yet Cortázar was consistent in his perennial questioning of all discourse and its foundations. The reader is constantly reminded of the inadequacy of words, and of rational thought.<sup>2</sup>

Evidently, Cortázar's aim was to break the monolithic pattern of Cartesian rationalism together with our confidence in it. That was the main reason to attempt changing the reader's normal response. This task was transcendental since the problem of readership was closely tied to Cortázar's search for the Other.<sup>3</sup> It is here that unexpected contradictions become apparent in *Rayuela*.

The problem is, first, related to the response expected from the ideal reader. Is the author himself not, after all, speaking through the voice of his *alter ego* Morelli, who wishes the reader to forget his individuality and become one with the author's objectives?