

A Confused Reality and Its Presentation: Ramon Sender's *Réquiem por un campesino español*

PETER A. BLY, *Queen's University*

In his published conversations with Marcelino Peñuelas, Ramón Sender clearly stated the importance he attached to the artistic re-creation of a chaotic reality.¹ The aim of this article is to demonstrate how in *Réquiem por un campesino español*² Sender achieves this artistic re-creation when he recounts the controversial, confused reality of the Spanish Civil War.³

Two types of confusion are discernible, both related to human conduct and not to any supernatural forces.⁴ First, there is the confusion inherent in life itself that arises from misinterpreted words or actions, through ignorance or natural immaturity, and of harmless consequence. A second, more important confusion, is the product of deliberate attitudes and actions, and this is tragic. The former will lead inexorably to the latter in the social and political context of the period studied in the novel, and with a gradual intensification that corresponds to the four chronological divisions of the narrative, assembled out of their logical sequence:

- (1) The years to 1931: Alfonso XIII's reign and exile; Paco's birth and adolescence.
- (2) 1931-36: the Second Republic and Paco's political activities.
- (3) The summer of 1936: the outbreak of the Civil War and Paco's execution.
- (4) 1937: a year after Paco's death and preparations for the celebration of a requiem mass in his memory.

Not surprisingly, the first time period offers the most references to our first category of confusion, that arising from differences of age, education, or social upbringing, particularly between Mosén Millán and his parishioners. The former fails to understand La Jeronima's remarks at Paco's baptism: ". . . the use of the diminutive form for the word 'milk' sounded rather strange, but everything

¹Marcelino C. Peñuelas, *Conversaciones con R. J. Sender* (Madrid: Magisterio, 1970), p. 220: "I propose to make reality probable . . . which it practically never is. It is only probable through the work of the artist. . . . What you see around you is not reality, do you understand? What you see is a passing appearance . . ." (All quotations in the text and notes are my own translations, except those from texts obviously written in English.)

²J. Marra-López, *Narrative española fuera de España, 1939-61* (Madrid: Guadarrama, 1962), p. 405, thinks that the novel is "one of the most perfect and important contemporary Spanish novels." Juan Luis Alborg, *Hora actual de la novela española* (Madrid: Taurus, 1962) II, p. 52, makes a similar comment: "as a novel, *Mosén Millán* [the original title of *Réquiem por un campesino español* when first published in 1953] is a masterpiece of construction and rhythm."

³"This narration is about . . . an unforgettable historical moment," Ramón J. Sender, "Prefacio del autor" to Robert M. Duncan's edition of the novel, *Mosén Millán* (Boston: Heath, 1964), p. v.

⁴It is true that in his "Prefacio" to Duncan's edition, Sender remarks: "But sometimes Man dominates the circumstances and other times he is dominated and dragged along by them. This second possibility happened to Spaniards in 1936" (p.v.). But in this novel, Sender never equates "circumstances" with blind, supernatural forces. The source of conflict is always Man's fellow human beings.

La Jerónima said was always like that."⁵ Years later, he is perplexed by Paco's excuse for carrying the pistol in church: ". . . this subterfuge amazed the priest" (p. 19). He is unable to tell Paco if the dying man of the caves is the poorest inhabitant in the village (p. 26). Sheltered from the realities of life in his ecclesiastical environment, Mosén Millán experiences difficulty in his communications with the villagers. Mutual incomprehension is the inevitable result. The discovery of a new world (the Church), is an equally disorientating experience for Paco. Noticing that the priest wears trousers beneath his cassock, Paco "was amazed and did not know what to think" (p. 17). He is likewise bedazzled by the Holy Week ceremonies: "Paco looked and listened to all of that in amazement" (p. 22). Both Paco and Mosén Millán are penetrating the mysteries of life as they broaden their experience; even the cyclical regularity of natural life offers enigmas: "Nothing more mysterious than a newborn child" (p. 12).

Not all the confusion of this initial period, however, is the product of natural ignorance. In some instances, a person is intentionally confused or mystified by his neighbor, although the consequences are not serious. At Paco's baptism, this confusion takes the innocuous form of a joke between Paco's father and a guest (p. 10). Paco discovers that the washerwomen of the *carasol* really do like watching boys bathe nude in spite of their insults (p. 31). With the concealment of Paco's pistol in church, the potential dangers of any incomprehension, disguised by Paco's assurance, are only realized later when the circumstances of the relationship between Paco and the priest have been drastically changed by external forces. For the moment, this alternation of surprise and bewilderment between the two characters and others is tolerable as part of normal life.

However, with the downfall of the king in 1931, in our second time division, the degree of disorientation increases dramatically with the occurrence of important events at the national epicenter that percolate to the Aragonese periphery. Mosén Millán is skeptical of the cobbler's rumors of Alfonso XIII's imminent departure from Spain ("There could be some truth in what he said, but the cobbler talked too easily," p. 40), yet the cobbler is also confused by the subsequent political developments when the left-wing parties win the elections: "These mysterious words did not clarify the situation very much: the cobbler had spent all his life waiting for just that, and when he saw it arrive, he did not know what to think or do" (p. 58). The village elections "left everybody a trifle perplexed. The priest was confused" (p. 49). If the villagers are nonplussed by external events, their own ability to communicate with each other, which, at the best of times, could be defective, now suddenly undergoes a noticeable deterioration. The actions and words of one's neighbors become increasingly difficult to understand. The appearance of Cástulo Pérez at Paco's wedding reception which "caused a sensation because they were not expecting it" (p. 41), is rendered all the more ridiculous by Cástulo's blasé indifference to the present he has brought the couple.

Given the impetus of external events, it is perhaps inevitable that the respective leaders of the growing social and political antagonisms display the highest degree of mutual incomprehensibility, now clearly deliberate: Don Valeriano refuses to listen to Paco's complaint about the Duke: "When Paco went to tell Don Valeriano, he looked at the ceiling for a while, playing with the dead woman's locket. Finally, he pretended not to understand and asked that the town

⁵Ramón Sender, *Réquiem por un campesino español* (Buenos Aires: Proyección, 1973), p. 11. All subsequent references are taken from this edition and will be accompanied by their respective page number.

council inform him in writing" (p. 51). Indeed, Valeriano finds Paco's audacity so completely puzzling: "Paco, it can't be true. Who would think that a man who only had a patch of land and a couple of mules would have the nerve to speak in that way? After this, there is nothing else to see in the world" (p. 55). Valeriano then abandons the hamlet in desperation: ". . . caught between two fires, he did not know what to do, and he ended up by leaving the village" (p. 55).

The friendship of Paco and Millán is now seriously strained by Paco's political role. The priest savagely criticizes Paco in a moment of anger for prohibiting the usual pilgrimage presents from the villagers to the priest, and then refuses to listen to Paco's explanations (p. 57). Paco's laughter at the self-pity of Mosén Millán infuriates the priest (p. 58). Electoral victory has not brought order to the ranks of the Republican villagers either. Unlike their neighbors who have embarked on definite projects (p. 56), they are unaware of the reforms being planned by their own town council: "Nobody knew for sure what the town council was planning to do 'for those people living in the caves,' but everybody imagined things, and the hopes of the poor people grew" (p. 52). So, in this six-year period leading up to the Civil War, Sender shows how Spanish society becomes increasingly polarized with a concomitant breakdown of communication amongst its members. No longer do natural mysteries or innocent jokes temporarily confuse as part of life's education. A greater perplexity affecting the social collectivity and with potentially tragic consequences is now engendered by external forces feeding on latent tendencies within the rural microcosm. Actions are now added to words to provoke stupor and anger in opponents.

This descent into anarchical absurdity reaches its nadir in the third chronological division that covers the commencement of the Civil War. Barbaric actions now render all life meaningless: "But that had no meaning. Nor did anything that was happening in the village" (p. 61). Words are completely superfluous, remaining unarticulated by the villagers before the finality of the fascist slaughter: "Nobody asked questions. Nobody understood" (p. 59); "nobody cried or laughed in the village" (p. 62); "nobody knew when they killed people. That is to say, they knew when, but nobody saw them" (p. 60). In this negative atmosphere, Mosén Millán again plays a pivotal role, failing to give direction and leadership to his flock and increasing their confusion with his tolerance of the intruders: ". . . seeing Mosén Millán and Don Valeriano sitting in the seats of honor, they did not know what to think" (p. 64). But then Mosén Millán is essentially a person who cannot perceive reality clearly. His confusion at the actions of the fascist outrages are discernible a year later: "Mosén Millán remembered the horrible confusion of those days, and felt upset and confused. Shots at night, blood, evil passions, gossiping, insolent behavior of those strangers, who, nonetheless, seemed well mannered. And Don Valeriano regretted what was happening and at the same time was pushing the young city men to kill more people" (p. 62).

The tragic potentiality of the human weakness to confuse others, especially in the context of disruptive external forces, is seen in relief in the scenes that record Paco's capture and execution. Mosén Millán's disguised uncertainty about the exact location of Paco's hiding place tricks the latter's father into revealing the truth (p. 63). Sender's own comments on the episode ("The irony of life willed Paco's father to fall into that trap," p. 63) would indicate that he sees life as essentially ambiguous, so that the tragic betrayal of Paco is only part of the greater deceit of life itself. When Mosén Millán ultimately acknowledges to the "centurion" his knowledge of Paco's whereabouts, his sign of affirmation is appropriately equivocal (p. 65). In spite of Mosén Millán's evasiveness and naive,

sentimental rhetoric, Paco allows himself to be captured because of his previous confidence in the priest.⁶ One misconception has led to another, but what was originally inoffensive has now been transformed into tragedy. In a way, Paco's life and death have nothing to do with the atrocities and injustices of the Civil War and the years preceding it, but with something that can be related to life in general. Paco's bewilderment at his fate and his Christlike martyrdom between two colleagues extend the universal dimensions of Sender's parable. Paco's life is the story of Man's life on Earth: a succession of surprises and enigmas that with time are resolved by the ultimate betrayal of death. Through his narrative, Sender has developed the tragic potentialities of that initial banter at Paco's baptism.

In all the three time periods studied hitherto, Sender has made repeated use of the characters' ability to exaggerate events the reader has already witnessed, in order to show how far reality can be wittingly distorted by the human participants. La Jerónima perhaps provides most examples of this distortion: ". . . she spoke about Mosén Millán's refusal to help them—all this very exaggerated to cause an effect—and the boy's father forbidding Paco to go. According to her, the father had said to Mosén Millán: Who are you to take the boy to give Extreme Unction? It was a lie, but in the washplace the women believed everything La Jerónima said" (p. 29). Similar exaggeration occurs in the *caracol* after Paco's visit to Mosén Millán to talk about the Duke's estates (p. 50), and also after Paco's tense interview with Valeriano (p. 51). Valeriano, too, is capable of distorting the truth when he reports this confrontation to Mosén Millán (p. 55) which is later denied by Paco (p. 57). Thus another layer of confusion is added to the picture: the tense confusion already present in human relationships because of ideological differences is now exacerbated when attempts are made to distort the reality of previously witnessed actions.

To show that the Civil War was more than the explosion of conflicting ideologies, that in fact it was a predictable development of certain factors basic to the human condition, Sender describes in his fourth time period the village in a state of relative calm one year after Paco's death (at least there is no mention of military events in the area or elsewhere in Spain). Sender may be ignoring the historical reality, but in his parable he probably wants to depict the Spain that emerged from the three-year conflict. Yet, although the village seems to have returned to normalcy, there is still an alarming tendency to mutual obfuscation. It is almost as if the novel is starting all over again.⁷ The deliberate incommunicability now practised by the victors amongst themselves can only presage graver dissensions. Whilst Gumersindo and Valeriano wait for the mass to begin, they refuse to listen to each other so that their clashing voices are bedlam for the priest (p. 49). It is a most discordant trio of postwar victors. Castulo's suggestion that the colt be driven out of the church is "contrary to the view of Don Valeriano who could not bear Señor Castulo to show any initiative where he was present" (p. 69). The altar boy, although he was a witness to Paco's execution and is constantly reciting fragments of the ballad, shows a surprising (or is it natural?) obtuseness when he remarks to Mosén Millán on the lack of worshippers in church (p. 12). And at the end of the novel, he is surprisingly wrong about the animal careering around the empty church: he is sure that it is

⁶That is to say, they will judge you in front of a court, and if you are guilty, you will go to prison. But nothing else. 'Are you sure?' The priest was slow in replying. Finally he said: 'That is what I asked for. Anyway, son, think about your family and how they do not deserve to pay for you' " (p. 71).

⁷We recall that Paco had also served as an altar boy. The naïve, rather slow boy who prepares the church for the mass could be another Paco.

a mule. Gumersindo's absurd and fatuous question to the boy ("Eh, boy, do you know whose mass it is today?" p. 47), seems to echo the gratuitous question of the guest at Paco's baptism.

Of course, the most persistent confusion experienced by the victors is that of Mosén Millan as his mind wanders back and forth, from the recollection of Paco's life to the brief contemplation of the vestry and the other participants in the mass. His bewilderment is not due to his inability to remember past events. His confusion really arises from the examination of his own involvement in Paco's tragic end and his very vivid memory is of vital importance for the logic of the novel's structure: "He thought that that visit of Paco to the cave had a great influence on what was to happen to him later. 'He came with me. I took him,' he added a little perplexed" (p. 30). One assumes that the priest will continue to be racked by the same perplexing doubts in the future in spite of the purification afforded by the celebration of the mass. In a way, the celebration of the mass parallels the execution of the villagers which had climaxed the series of confused episodes noted earlier. Mosén Millan's confused conscience eventually finds consolation in a physical act that, like the executions, will not produce a shining new order of certainty and truth for the agent of the act. Mosén Millán, like his fellow victors, will continue to be assailed by doubt and confusion over the justness of his past actions.

Although the defeated Republicans are not seen in person in this last phase of the narrative, they do appear as the collective author of the ballad composed about Paco's death and which is recited intermittently through the novel by the altar boy. There again the reader notes that the process of distortion is at work, so that even the reality of Paco's death is now confused by his supporters for their own purpose, or perhaps naturally so since they did not witness the event. The ballad may well represent the mythicizing of Paco as Charles L. King has noted,⁸ but it also represents a continuation of the process of mystification that operates on both sides of the sociopolitical divide before, during, and after the Civil War. The inaccuracies of the ballad would seem to parallel the embellished versions of events that the old washer woman under La Jerónima's leadership are always spreading. The altar boy, the reciter of the ballad, enjoys one advantage over its authors: he had been present at Paco's execution, so that at times he is able to indicate the inexactitude of this popular version:

There goes Paco, the one from the Mill
Who has already been sentenced
And who is crying for his life
On the way to the cemetery.

That line about crying was not true, because the altar boy had seen Paco, and he was not crying (p. 7).

Now they take them away, now they take them away
tied arm to arm.
The altar boy could see the scene, which was bloody and full of rifle
bangs (p. 12).

In describing the murders of other innocent villagers, the ballad uses the word "executed" instead of the more accurate word "assassinated" (p. 56). However, on other occasions, the altar boy is unable to provide the complete truth because of his inability to remember all the fragments of the ballad. Indeed his memory

⁸Charles L. King, *Ramon J. Sender*, TWAS 307 (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 80: "Through the ballad a mythical dimension to the story becomes visible."

is most fitful; he only recites lines when they come to mind (pp. 30, 34, 67). Whilst this fragmentation and poetic distortion is proper to the ballads as a literary genre,⁹ it does conform to the whole tendency of the novel towards the confusion of reality. Really the two Spains seem destined to remain divided with their own comforting versions of events.

Forming a clear contrast to the vague, casual memories of the altar boy are the vivid recollections of Mosén Millán, irrespective of the time distance, as he sits in his vestry: the details of Paco's baptism about thirty years previous are as clear as those of Paco's execution the year before the mass. This mechanical ability is certainly more pronounced than his efforts to determine his share of the responsibility for Paco's fate. Indeed, this mnemonic virtue stands out in clear contrast to Mosén Millán's complete inability to avoid confusion in his relations with Paco. Sender implicitly raises the question of the purpose of such recollective precision if it is unaccompanied by honesty in human relationships. Even with Valeriano and Gumersindo, he cannot clearly express his distaste for their idle chatter. Memory then becomes a safe refuge against the exigencies of the present reality: "*Mosén Millán amused himself with those recollections in order to avoid listening to what Don Gumersindo and Don Valeriano were saying*" (italics mine; p. 49). One feels that Mosén Millán will never change and that he will continue through life (and the Catholic Church in Spain too) in the same muddled way. Memories of past wrongs serve no fruitful purpose, they quickly become sterile. If the book were only the remembrances of Mosén Millán, then a serious case could be made out against the possibility of a selective, falsified recollection by one individual.¹⁰ Sender, however, does not allow this interpretation. As other critics have noticed,¹¹ whilst Mosén Millán is responsible for some of the narrative, Sender has unobtrusively inserted a second narrator's voice which overlays that of the priest. Very often the reader is bewildered (for a while) by the identity of the narrator in a particular instance; it could be the priest or the unidentified, omniscient narrator typical of most fiction.

Another stylistic device Sender uses to deepen his picture of confusion is the sudden, constant crisscrossing between Mosén Millán's memories of the past and his contemplation of the present preparations for the mass. But the chronological sequence is even more confused than this would suggest. While the narrative starts in the present—Mosén Millán waiting in the vestry—and proceeds to a logically unfolded flashback of Paco's life, the first paragraph also gives an anticipation of some of the future events; for example: the hostility between Paco and Valeriano during the Second Republic, when the narrator mentions Paco's enemies in the village (p. 6), and also the final tragedy of Paco, when the priest hears the colt of Paco in the distance. The subsequent ballad fragments add more specific, but ultimately contradictory, details on that tragedy before its final presentation at the end of the novel.

Yet Sender does not leave the reader with a totally confused work of fiction. The omnipresence of the unidentified narrator provides an ordered com-

⁹See C. Colin Smith, *Spanish Ballads* (Pergamon: Oxford, 1964), pp. 25-42.

¹⁰In his talks with Peñuelas, Sender does not appear to disapprove of a selective memory, at least in regard to his own experience: "Don't you think that the memory can prove false? 'When you have lived Spanish life as intensely as I have, the selective memory chooses only the most positive, the most effective, lyrically speaking. In that case, of course, that selection makes all the reality one remembers and reproduces a more vivid and memorable reality for the reader, including the Spanish reader.'" Marcelino Peñuelas, *Conversaciones con R. J. Sender*, p. 277.

¹¹King, *Ramon Sender*, p. 77, and David Henn, "The Priest in Sender's *Réquiem por un campesino español*," *International Fiction Review*, 1, No. 2 (1971), 106-11 at 107.

prehension of events. Beneath the disorder of people's minds, words, or actions, and the confusing oscillation of Mosén Millán's recollections, there is a thread of inner logic and order that allows the prevalent confusion to be observed rationally by the reader. The logic of art predominates over the confusion of reality. The reader enjoys the unique privilege, not afforded the characters, of being able to perceive, under the guidance of the skilful artist, the inner kernel of truth and reality that is covered by outer layers of puzzlement.¹²

Réquiem por un campesino español is surely more than the condemnation of the Spanish Church for its part in the Civil War.¹³ Although the weight of Sender's case is tipped against that institution—mainly because he chooses to narrate his story from the perspective of its representative in the village—his picture of confusion unequivocally includes both sides in the conflict. Sender has succeeded in representing in literature the extreme disorder of this period in Spanish history whilst at the same time intimating that this tragedy was essentially due to the innate, eternal tendency of the Spaniard to confuse his neighbor with mystifying actions and words until mutual comprehension and social intercourse break down into the absurdity of violence.¹⁴ Yet by means of his artistic re-creation of the historical reality, Sender is able to convey the impression that his picture refers to any society at any time, to Mankind in general. As he remarks in his *Prefacio del autor*: "Man is the same everywhere if we go by the subtle registers of moral sensibility and human essentialness."¹⁵ The great success of this novel is that such a once-politically-committed author as Sender was able through the catharsis afforded by the processes of art to see and express the reality of the Spanish Civil War for participants and observers, and furthermore to extract the universal elements from this particular tragedy.

¹²Eduardo Godoy Gallardo, "Problemática y sentido de *Réquiem por un campesino español*, de Ramón Sender," *Letras de Deusto*, 1 (1971), 63-74 at 64 remarks of Sender's achievement in the novel: "Sender captures a reality and transforms it into poetic material."

¹³See Henn, "The Priest in Sender's *Réquiem* . . ." p. 106; Peñuelas, *La obra narrativa de Ramón Sender* (Madrid: Gredos, 1971), p. 153; and Julia Uceda, "Consideraciones para una estilística de las obras de Ramón J. Sender," in *Réquiem por un campesino español* (Mexico: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1971), p. 12. Cedric Busette, "Religious Symbolism in Sender's *Mosén Millán*," *Romance Notes*, 11 (1969-70), 482-86 at 485 sees a more complicated presentation of the priest: "He uses Mosén Millán artistically, as the prototype of the priest who personifies spiritual hope and fulfilment, then individualizes him as his own anti-type to reflect the bizarre nature of the historical moment."

¹⁴Alborg, *Hora actual de la novela española*, p. 53, expresses this tragic climax most succinctly: "A ferocious, fraternal explosion of ancestral misunderstandings."

¹⁵*Mosén Millán*, p.v.