

The Role of the *netigua* in *La niña de Luzmela*

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Although Concha Espina missed winning the Nobel Prize for Literature by only one vote,¹ her works are no longer read frequently outside her native Cantabria, and they are not as thoroughly studied by modern critics as they should be.² Historians of Spanish literature have sometimes dismissed her literary output in brief paragraphs, and she is often described as a regional author with a penchant for describing the local countryside in terms of nineteenth-century *costumbrista* realism.³

Eugenio de Nora, whilst praising Concha Espina's poetic style, has accused her, especially in her first novel, *La niña de Luzmela* (1909), of conventional sweetness.⁴ According to de Nora, *La niña de Luzmela* is saved by its poetic language from the triple dangers of *la novela folletinesca*, *la novela rosa*, and *el relato edificante*.⁵ José Domingo echoes Eugenio de Nora in suggesting that *La niña de Luzmela* is an edifying tale of clear moral intent in which the good and bad characters are very clearly delineated.⁶

A. H. Clarke has studied Concha Espina's early novels in great detail. He shows how Espina's concept of nature without a specific countryside ("naturaleza sin paisaje") adds to the universality of the early works,⁷ and with regard to *La niña de Luzmela* he outlines the function of the *netigua* as a bird of ill omen. He notes that the *netigua*, a species of owl which is associated with malevolent witchcraft and black magic, appears three times within the first part of the novel to reinforce the idea of death; but while stating that the bird actually foretells the death of don Manuel, Clarke fails to study the bird's role any further and goes on to dismiss it as another manifestation of nature.⁸

An analysis of the role of the *netigua* in *La niña de Luzmela* will reveal several things. In the first place, the *netigua* will be seen to be much more than a mere manifestation of nature. It is, at one level, as Clarke has shown, a bird of ill

¹See Victor de la Serna's introduction to the *Obras completas de Concha Espina*, 2nd. ed. (Madrid: Ediciones Fax, 1955), I, xi.

²According to José María de Cossío "la crítica . . . ha hablado mucho de Concha Espina, pero no la ha estudiado todavía con los métodos y el aparato erudito que merece" *Estudios sobre escritores montañeses* (Santander: Diputación Provincial de Santander, 1973), I, 128-29.

³See, for example, F. C. Sainz de Robles, *La novela española en el siglo XX* (Madrid: Pegaso, 1957), pp. 131-34 and J. García López, *Historia de la literatura española*, 10th. ed. (Barcelona: Editorial Vicens-Vives, 1966), pp. 610-11.

⁴Eugenio de Nora, *La novela española contemporánea* (Madrid: Gredos, 1958), I, 330.

⁵Eugenio de Nora, I, 331.

⁶José Domingo, *La novela española del siglo XX*, (Barcelona: Editorial Labor, 1973), p. 91.

⁷A. H. Clarke, "Naturaleza sin paisaje: un aspecto desatendido del arte descriptivo de las primeras novelas de Concha Espina," *Boletín de la Biblioteca de Menéndez Pelayo*, 45 (1969), 35-46.

⁸Clarke, p. 39.

omen that sets the scene for the initial tragedy. However, at a second level, the *nétigua* symbolizes within *La niña de Luzmela* the whole world of witches and witchcraft which it represents in Cantabrian folklore. In fact, there are direct parallels between the *nétigua* and certain other characters who take on some of the physical and psychological traits of the bird. These parallels are so important that the *nétigua* may be considered a leitmotif which must be correctly interpreted in order to appreciate fully the vast quantity of folkloric images which Concha Espina accumulates within her narrative. At a third level, references to the *nétigua* parallel the novel's thematic development. In this fashion part one presents a real visible bird which foretells the death of don Manuel and the future misery and misfortune of Carmen. In part two, these misfortunes are intensified by doña Rebeca and her family whose characters are often described in images associated with the fields of witchcraft, devilry, and possession. In part three, the death and burial of the *nétigua* symbolizes the end of Carmen's misfortunes and the restoration of peace and tranquility to her life.

Clearly there are elements of conventional sweetness here, but the associations of the imagery, whilst delineating the bad characters as very bad indeed, heighten the symbolism of the novel to such an extent that one is forced to question the label of nineteenth-century regional realism which is traditionally affixed to Concha Espina's art. In fact, given the impressionistic nature of the dream sequence in which doña Rebeca is portrayed as a witch with her hair on end riding on a broomstick, one must also call into question the use of the term "realism" when applied to Concha Espina.

Readers familiar with Santander, la Montaña, and Cantabrian folklore will be conversant with the legends and superstitions which surround the *nétigua*. The word itself rarely appears even in the best Castilian dictionaries, and one must consult G. Adriano García-Lomas's vocabulary of the *montañés* dialect to discover that the *nétigua*, together with the *carabó* and the *cuco*, form the trilogy of birds that are most connected with superstitions and tales of bewitchment.⁹ García-Lomas expands this further in his *Mitología y supersticiones de Cantabria*, where he writes that the *nétigua*/owl which symbolizes the kingdom of the dead in Egyptian hieroglyphics presages tragedy and death in Germany. For the Cantabrians, however, the *nétigua* has multiple functions.¹⁰

When it flies close to the house of an individual it fulfills its normal role which is to announce the imminent death of that person (*Mit.*, p. 196). In addition to this, its cries, associated with the rejoicings of the devil, torture the soul of the dying (*Mit.*, p. 198). Moreover, there is a very close relationship between *nétiguas* and witches, so much so that the credulous, at least in Cantabria, believe that the *nétigua* is a malevolent witch "en disposición de comenzar a hacer daño" (*Mit.*, p. 196). The *carabó*, which is also mentioned in the novel, is another bird of ill omen and bewitchment, although it is neither as powerful nor as malicious as the *nétigua* (*Mit.*, p. 200).

The *nétigua*, then, is not only associated with the prediction of death and misfortune, but also with a malevolent witch about to cause harm. This last point is of particular importance and it will be interesting to set out the type of damage usually wrought by Cantabrian witches. Generally they are associated

⁹G. Adriano García-Lomas, *El lenguaje popular de la cantabria montañesa*, (Santander: Aldus, 1966), p. 270.

¹⁰G. Adriano García-Lomas, *Mitología y supersticiones de Cantabria*, (Santander: Diputación Provincial de Santander, 1964), p. 195. Future references to this work will be included in the text, and page numbers will appear after the initial reference *Mit.*

with the "evil eye" (*Mit.*, pp. 165-67); but more often than not the Cantabrians see the witch as a troublemaker: ". . . no da más que disgustos . . . hace mal de ojo a los niños . . . y enciende la guerra civil en las familias" (*Mit.*, p. 170). One of the misfortunes which follows the sighting of the *netigua* is precisely the family civil war which is precipitated by Carmen's arrival at Rucanto.

The *netigua* appears only three times in the first part of the novel and, as Clarke has pointed out, its presence is closely associated with the last moments of don Manuel. Carmen, don Manuel's adopted child, is playing in the garden when she is disturbed by the *netigua's* first appearance: "Padrino, la *netigua*; espántala!" (p. 9). The bird flies away only to reappear moments later at the windows of don Manuel's room, frightening Carmen who runs inside. Don Manuel, who has been ill for some time, has already decided that after his death Carmen will stay at Rucanto with his sister doña Rebeca. Carmen, scared initially by the bird and later by the arrival of doña Rebeca, begs don Manuel not to make her leave Luzmela. Don Manuel now realizes that he has made a mistake, as Carmen is afraid of his sister (who will torment the child after his death). Since he will die speechless before he can remedy the situation which he has created, the *netigua's* presence also foretells the sufferings of poor don Manuel. Doña Rebeca banishes Carmen to the garden and, as she returns there, the *netigua's* third and final appearance in this part of the novel coincides with the moment of don Manuel's death: "— ¡La *netigua*! De las habitaciones de don Manuel salían ya los chillidos agudos de doña Rebeca, y el ave agorera tendía sobre el azul cobalto de la noche su vuelo silencioso. El hidalgo de Luzmela había muerto" (p. 11).

There is, even at this stage, a very important parallel between doña Rebeca and the *netigua*. As doña Rebeca's carriage arrives at Luzmela prior to the death of don Manuel, the *netigua* reappears. The carriage stops at the gate and Carmen cries out "Otra vez la *netigua* . . ." (p. 10). She is referring to the bird which is now beating at the window, but as the doors open and don Manuel's sister is announced, Carmen makes her fear plain by crying out that doña Rebeca is coming for her: "Viene a buscarme; ¡no me dejes, por Dios, no me dejes!" (p. 10). This implicit association is made explicit at the beginning of the second part of the novel when Carmen is said to have fallen into the claws of the *netigua*, now specifically doña Rebeca: "Había quedado Carmencita llena de terror en las manos de dona Rebeca, y dona Rebeca tendía con ansia sus garras de *netigua* hacia la herencia codiciada, sin poder apresar los caudales, por tener las unás llenas de la carne inocente de la nina, flor de pecado y de dolor" (p. 11).

Carmen's life at Rucanto is made miserable by doña Rebeca and her children who taunt and torment the newcomer unmercifully. Carmen's parentage is questioned and her relationship to don Manuel denied; actually, she is don Manuel's love child, born out of wedlock, though the Rucanto family will not admit this. Carmen's good deeds cause her to be called "saintly" and the imagery of saintliness which begins to accumulate around Carmen contrasts strongly with the devilish imagery which is used to describe the Rucanto family.

Julio, one of doña Rebeca's children, is clearly possessed, and he pursues Carmen with his "evil eye." He spies upon her from dark corners, laughs at her misfortunes, and one day, out of spite blasphemously scratches out the eyes of "el niño Jesus" the only religious ornament which Carmen possesses. Narcisa's attitude and actions towards Carmen are disgraceful, and doña Rebeca's daughter creates nothing but trouble. Her worst deed is to ply the bestial Andrés with drink, to fire him with a lust for Carmen, and finally to turn the key in the lock thus trapping the would-be rapist in the attic with his unwilling victim. This

outrageous act, carefully conceived and deliberately carried through, finally compels Salvador to remove Carmen from the dangers of Rucanto to the sanctuary of Luzmela by force.

There is a certain unity of imagery in the second part of the novel, and many of the images which pertain to the associative fields of witchcraft, devilry, and possession clearly relate the actions of Carmen's tormentors to the qualities attributed by Cantabrian folklore to the *nétiagua*. Thus doña Rebeca is described as an "alma diabólica" (p. 30); she is referred to indirectly as "la bruja" (p. 39) and even addressed directly by Salvador as "doña . . . bruja" (p. 48); there are also several references to the devil and to "artes diabólicas" (e.g. p. 47).

The imagery surrounding Andrés is usually bestial in nature, but the other two tormentors, Julio and Narcisa, also receive their share of epithets from Concha Espina's folkloric supply. Julio's laughter is described as "un agrío rumor semejante al graznido del carabó" (p. 29). His eyes are usually his most important feature. They are threatening cat's eyes (p. 22) and he is clearly possessed of an evil eye for his glances are like curses: ". . . una mirada sañuda, semejante a una maldición" (p. 28). However, there is some gratitude in poor Julio, for when he becomes ill and is nursed by Carmen he is said never again to have cast his evil eye upon her nor to have bewitched her: ". . . nunca volvió a aojarla con expresión satánica de maleficio" (p. 41). Narcisa's voice is similar to Julio's, and when she calls for supper the sound of her voice is "una cosa acre, fría, inclemente" (p. 27), like that of the *nétiagua* or *carabó*.

These few selected examples, obvious enough in themselves, are brought more clearly into focus when Carmen, having been rescued by Salvador, conjures up in the dreamlike world of her warm bed in Luzmela the sinister, grotesque impressions of her relatives in Rucanto. In this inspired dream sequence, all too reminiscent of Goya's *Caprichos*, doña Rebeca leads the way on a broomstick: ". . . montada en una escoba; llevaba a medio cubrir las piernas secas y nudosas como leños, y en los pies, unas alpargatas cenicientas" (p. 50). As the description continues, so the witchlike imagery is accumulated. Doña Rebeca's hair stands on end and is blown in the wind of her ride; her bodice is "de color de ala de mosca, prendido con alfileres" and her skirt is "mezquina y desgarrada" (p. 50). Narcisa follows with green face and yellow dress. She has a white daisy on her breast and, like some of Goya's creations, "le habían puesto en los labios un candado cruel y tenía en los ojos dos bocas horribles, abiertas por sangrienta desgarradura de la carne en una explosión de sapos y culebras" (p. 50).

Andrés comes after Narcisa. He drags himself along on all fours "sobre un charco de vino hediondo, luchando por levantarse, en un pataleo intercalado de blasfemias y amenazas" (p. 50). The shrouded form of poor, demented Julio brings up the rear of the ghastly procession "andando sin pasos ni ruidos, como un alma en pena; abría desmesuradamente los ojos, con expresión satánica, y lanzaba unas desatinadas imploraciones" (p. 50). This Goyesque sequence of impressionistic images surely makes one question, yet again, the so-called realism of Concha Espina's art. They also confirm the assertion that there is an established association between the *nétiagua*, the witch/*bruja*, and doña Rebeca.

The novel ends with Carmen back where we first met her, at Luzmela. The Rucanto episode is seen to be just that, a nightmarish period which interrupted for a brief time the normal happy flow of Carmen's life. As the tale returns to its beginnings, so Carmen asks Salvador if the *nétiagua*, the bird whose prophecies

have meant so much to her throughout the novel, is still in evidence. Salvador replies that the *netigua* will never again trouble her, for he has killed it: "Yo la maté, ¿sabes?, con mi escopeta cazadora, desde el balcón de mi cuarto" (p. 51). The *netigua*, symbol of strife, of doña Rebeca, of dark, nightmarish days, and of all the torments suffered by Carmen in the house at Rucanto, has been laid to rest: "Cayó sin vida encima de un rosal, y me costó encontrarla, porque las flores que ella lastimó al caer la cubrieron de hojas" (p. 51).

With the death of the *netigua*, peace and harmony are restored to Carmen who is free to renew her idyllic life at Luzmela. The accumulated imagery of Rucanto's devilish days has been left behind with doña Rebeca, Narcisa, and Andrés.

Clearly there is a thematic link between the *netigua*, with all its folkloric meanings, and the less savory characters of *La niña de Luzmela*. This link is achieved by the actions of the characters and by the accumulation of images drawn from the folklore which surrounds the *netigua* in the Cantabrian region of Northern Spain.

This brief analysis is by no means exhaustive and scarcely touches upon, for example, the system of prophecies used by Concha Espina in the novel. Prophecies may be based on black magic (the *netigua* and the evil omens associated with it) or on white magic (the *sortes virgilianae* practiced by Carmen at the insistence of the village priest with random readings—*tolle, lege*—taken from Kempis). Nor does it detail the systems of contrasts by means of which Concha Espina intensifies the imagery. In this fashion, images of saintliness accumulate around Carmen throughout the second part of the novel and these heighten the effect of the diabolic imagery.

In summary, it should be reasserted that the *netigua* is much more than a mere manifestation of nature as it plays a key role in *La niña de Luzmela*. It is a bird of ill omen that foretells both death and misfortune. It is symbolic of witches and of witchcraft, and the actions of many of the evil characters can be associated with the bird's folkloric malevolence. Doña Rebeca, Narcisa, Julio, and Andrés are all described in terms from the fields associated with the *netigua*, and the bird is present, in one form or another, at most times of distress and misfortune. Finally, when, at the end of the novel, peace and happiness are restored to the heroine in the sanctuary of her former home at Luzmela, the end of her misfortunes is symbolized by the death of the *netigua*. Clearly, then, an understanding of the meaning of the *netigua* in Cantabrian folklore is an essential key to the correct interpretation of Concha Espina's novel.