

A Hispanist's Bucket List

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More than a bucket list, it's a shelf list, for what my bucket contains is books. Not the ones I'd like to read or write, but those I'd like to write about. Now in the *tercera edad* of my academic life, I've been writing about books or authors whose company I have prized, that I have read over and over, but that have not been relevant to my research or my teaching. Writing about them is a way of memorializing our acquaintance, tying the knot of readerly affection. The list is not long, mostly because I'm limiting myself to works generally within my competence, modern Spanish or Spanish American literature, and many of my favorite books fall outside this field. So far I've taken about half a dozen items out of the bucket. I have a few more left. Next up is *La alegría del capitán Ribot* (1899), one of Armando Palacio Valdés's most widely read novels, whose popularity lead to its prompt appearance in English a year and century later as *The Joy of Captain Ribot* (1900).

I have to acknowledge that my temperament makes my task a bit harder. In literature as in life, I shy away from complexity, ambiguity, tension, suspense – some of the features of literary works that give scholars pasture to feed on. Instead I favor intelligent sentimentality. To Unamuno's *El Cristo de Velázquez*, I prefer his *Teresa*. To Neruda's "Alturas de Macchu Picchu," I prefer "Poema 20." One of the Cuban poets formerly in my bucket, José Ángel Buesa, was said to write for cooks and chauffeurs. Another, Dulce María Loynaz, likened her poems to ripples of water glinting in the moonlight. When it comes to fiction, my inclinations run along the same soft lines: Pereda, not Pérez Galdós; Valera, not Pardo Bazán. And Palacio Valdés. The Victorian novelist Wilkie Collins's recipe for writing fiction was simple: Make them laugh, make them cry, make them wait. To this I would add a fourth imperative: Make me happy. My poets and novelists do. From this some will conclude that my bucket is full of treacle. Sure, but their treacle is my treat.

If I am to trust my gap-stricken journals, I first read *La alegría del capitán Ribot* in the summer of 2010 while on vacation in Duck, a resort town on the outer banks of North Carolina. That was a difficult summer, and Palacio Valdés helped me get through it. Since then I've reread the novel many times. I'm not sure how many because recently I've been reading it on Kindle and my highlights are not dated (or if they are, I don't know how to locate the dates). But with every reading the Captain's *alegría* rubs off on me once again. Some of Palacio Valdés's novels bear ironic or misleading titles: *El idilio de un enfermo* is hardly an idyll. The title of *La alegría del capitán Ribot* means what it says.

My problem is this: I love this novel, I want to record my gratitude to its author, but I don't know what to say about it. Not because it has been the object of abundant critical commentary, because it hasn't. Like much of Palacio Valdés's fiction, *La alegría del capitán Ribot* is viewed with gentle

condescension. Some scholars have labelled it a *novela rosa*, the kiss of death for serious fiction. A few years ago I wrote about another of Palacio Valdés's rose-scented novels, *Sinfonía pastoral* (1931), which was also in my bucket. As his last novel, written when he was in his late seventies, no one had ever taken it seriously, which was an incentive for me to do so. I would like to do the same with *La alegría del capitán Ribot*. My rule of thumb: If I like it, it can't be all bad.

With *Sinfonía pastoral*, which was published at the turbulent dawn of Spain's Second Republic, I had an obvious hook: untimeliness. With the help of Edward Said, on this hook I was able to hang a reading of the novel as an instance of what Said, following Adorno, calls "late style." This is what I'm missing here, a hook, a bright idea. In the past the bright idea has usually preceded the impulse to write. And so for the most part I've written about literary works that I found interesting because I had interesting things to say about them. Initially they were books or authors I read in college or graduate school. Later, books or authors I assigned for my courses. Since I began my career as a peninsularist, I ended up writing about Zorrilla, Valle Inclán, Laforet, Martín Santos. Sometimes one text led to another, as did the insights. But except when I've written about popular music or TV shows, the insight always came first. Lately, as I've been crossing off items from my list, it's been the other way around. So far, so good. But *La alegría del capitán Ribot* has me stumped. I'm like the student who is assigned an essay about a novel and doesn't know what to say. In such cases what does he do? He resorts to plot summary.

No sooner has Julián Ribot, the protagonist and narrator, docked his merchant steamer in Gijón than his thoughts turn to *callos*, his favorite dish, an insuperable version of which is served in a dock-side establishment. As he is about to leave the ship, a fire breaks out on board. The fire extinguished, he finally sits down before a steaming, aromatic plate of tripe. But just then he hears screams for help. He rushes out and discovers a large, elderly woman flailing in the water by the docks. He jumps in and pulls her out. No tripe for him, but as compensation he meets the woman's daughter, Cristina, who can't thank him enough.

You can guess what happens next: Ribot falls in love with Cristina, who hints by her behavior that she is not indifferent to him. The difficulty: not only is she married but Ribot and Cristina's husband, Martí, have become fast friends. His loyalty to Martí takes precedence over his love for Cristina and the Captain sets out to sea again. Meanwhile, Martí's unscrupulous business partner is leading Martí to ruin so that he can blackmail Cristina into having an affair. Cristina ignores the threats and the coffee-house Darwinist desists. After Martí passes away from consumption, Ribot comes to the rescue again, this time paying off Cristina's debts. But the story doesn't end the way one might expect: the handsome ship's captain and the young attractive widow don't marry. They live happily ever after, but only as celibate friends. Ribot's *alegría* arises from remaining near Cristina without dishonoring the memory of her late husband.

This summary makes me wonder why I like the novel so much. It's not the plot, with its hackneyed twists and turns, but Ribot's voice, its genial warmth, which my summary fails to capture. No matter. To write-off the novel, I

have to come up with something substantial to say, and so I've been doing what critics do: spending several weeks reading everything I can about and around it. I've unearthed a few small nuggets. The first one I found in the prologue to the English translation, where Sylvester Baxter quotes a personal letter from Palacio Valdés in which the Spaniard asserts that the novel is "a protest from the depths against the eternal adultery of the French novel." This makes sense. Before her husband's death, Cristina resists the advances of both potential lovers. After his death, she persuades Ribot that their marriage would encourage others to conclude that they had been lovers during her husband's lifetime.

Palacio Valdés's statement is not surprising, for in the prologue to the first edition of *La hermana San Sulpicio* (1889), he had already expressed his aversion to adultery in novels apropos of the French naturalists and their Spanish imitators. It may be that critics have not noticed Palacio Valdés's intention in writing *La alegría del capitán Ribot* because, whatever he may declare elsewhere, his novels are rife with scenes or suggestions of adultery. He inveighs against a literary cliché that he did not hesitate to employ. The paradox is intriguing, and it's interesting to look upon *La alegría del capitán Ribot* as the anti-adultery novel that closes a century full of adultery novels, but I don't see how to hang on this hook anything other than the sentences I've just written.

As I was going through the plots of Palacio Valdés's novels – yes, I confess it: I relied on summaries (don't you?) – I got another inkling of an idea. I noticed that the plot of *El señorito Octavio*, Palacio Valdés's debut novel, anticipates that of *La alegría del capitán Ribot*. Both novels feature the two suitors – one noble, one ignoble – who compete for the favors of a married woman. In the earlier novel the result is a truculent denouement, while in the later one virtue wins out. I had read somewhere that for his *Obras completas* of 1896, Palacio Valdés extensively revised *El señorito Octavio*, excising about a fourth of the novel and rewriting the remaining sections – the only novel in the collection to which he made such major changes. This suggested to me that in the couple of years leading up to the writing of *La alegría del capitán Ribot*, the two-lover plot had been on his mind. Hoping that I was onto something, I decided to read *La alegría del capitán Ribot* yet again.

Since I didn't have access to a library (the pandemia effect), I bought on the web a used copy (volume 12 in the 1923 *Obras completas*) that had belonged to the Marymount College library. Inside the back cover, the sleeve with a pink library card contained the names of the eight students (rather, seven, since one name appears twice) who had checked out the book before the library began using barcodes, a malign invention that destroys the experience of community with identifiable people. Fortunately, even without names, used books preserve the tracks of previous readers in telephone numbers, addresses, class schedules, a note on the margin that says, "irony!" No less personalizing are the underlinings or highlights, especially when they occur where you least expect them. Then you ask yourself what made this particular reader stop at what seems to you a flyover passage. Highlighting is a minor genre of autobiography. Show me your highlights and I'll tell you who you are. Most revealing, however, is when a former reader, my *semblable* in literary tastes, has forgotten something

between the pages: a ticket stub, a coffee-stained index card, a black-and-white photograph. Then you feel like one of those paleontologists who reconstructs a dinosaur from a piece of bone.

As it happened, my copy of *La alegría del capitán Ribot* contained none of these things: no names, marginalia, underlinings, slips of paper. The only marks were a pair of wavy blue lines, flourish-like, made by a flair or fountain pen. The first occurred at the end of chap XI, the other at the end of chap XIV. When I saw the first one, I thought it was inadvertent. Taking notes, someone ran the nub of the pen across the bottom of the last page of the chapter. But when I came upon the other one, I began to think that the flourishes meant something. Chapter XI ends with Ribot's mistaken belief that Cristina and Martí's business partner are lovers; Chap XIV, with Martí's mistaken belief that Ribot and Cristina are lovers. Maybe the reader who made the flourishes (I couldn't match the ink to that of any of the names on the library card) was pointing me in a fruitful direction, since in *El señorito Octavio* the husband makes a similar error, but with catastrophic consequences (he kills his wife, mistakes the wrong man for her lover, and kills him too).

I could argue, then, that *La alegría del capitán Ribot* represents the definitive rewriting of the earlier novel. Unhappy with *El señorito Octavio* even after extensive revisions, Palacio Valdés took the same plot idea and developed it differently. To flesh out this insight I would need to read *El señorito Octavio*, which I am not keen on doing (especially now that I know how the novel ends), even though I have an old library copy (Niagara University Library) that I also purchased on the web. In addition, I'd have to look further into how Palacio Valdés's religious convictions (a lifelong free-thinker, he converted to Catholicism in the late 1890s) inflected his later fiction. Even if I forced myself to do the necessary spadework, the result would be an essay about how an author rewrites himself, not the most original of conceptions. In fact this was my take on *Sinfonía pastoral*: the novel as an untimely rewriting of *El idilio de un enfermo*. And so I would also be rewriting myself, something that I am even less interested in doing.

I thought to try one last thing. Ever since a professor wrote on one of my term papers, "too much quotation, too little exegesis," I've been a guilt-ridden quoter, but I will disable my conscience for the moment and reproduce the opening paragraph of the novel:

En Málaga no los guisan mal; en Vigo, todavía mejor; en Bilbao los he comido en más de una ocasión primorosamente aliñados. Pero nada tienen que ver estos ni otros que me han servido en los diferentes puntos donde suelo hacer escala con los que guisa la señora Ramona en cierta tienda de vinos y comidas llamada "El Cometa," situada en el muelle de Gijón. Por eso cuando esta inteligentísima mujer averigua que el "Urano" ha entrado en el puerto, ya está preparando sus cacerolas para recibirme. Suelo ir solo por la noche, como un ser egoísta y voluptuoso que soy; me ponen la mesa en un rincón de la trastienda, y allí, a mis anchas, gozo placeres inefables y he pillado más de una indigestión.

Ribot stirs the reader's interest by not naming his favorite dish. After teasing us with a string of pronouns (*los, los, estos, otros, los*), Ribot has the dish materialize as the mysterious delicacy inside señora Ramona's pans, which will produce delight and dyspepsia. It's not until the end of the next paragraph, when he describes being diverted by the fire, that the enigma is solved. Deferral works on two levels: just as Ribot has to postpone indulging his appetite for tripe, the reader has to wait to discover the name of the dish. Make them wait, said Wilkie Collins, and Palacio Valdés does. What makes this more than a clever trick is that the motif of deferral recurs throughout the novel. Not only does Cristina put off her suitors, but her husband's business schemes (among them, making artificial rocks) do not come to fruition. The culminating instance appears at the end: the nuptials that the reader anticipates, and that the conventions of the form require, are put on hold forever.

This is my best idea so far, but if has legs I'm not sharp-eyed enough to see them. It's possible that I could read up on narratology (groan) and stretch the insight about deferral into a 5000-word essay. In a different time and place I probably would have done so. I suspect, however, that the short-form version I've just given already contains what would be valuable in such an essay. I've now mined all of my nuggets without coming up with one to whose elaboration I'm willing to devote weeks or months. Instead of a knot of readerly affection, all I have are loose ends.

O Captain, my Captain. It seems that my desire for consummation, like yours, will go unsatisfied. But unlike you, I'm not in the mood to compose an ode to joy about it. This makes me wonder whether your joy is as genuine as it seems. You admit that you are "egotistical and voluptuous." Would someone like you behave like you? Sybarite to saint? A new idea occurs to me: maybe you're *not* happy at all, maybe the novel is twice a fiction. You brag in the last chapter: "Soy el artista de mi dicha." This is supposed to mean that your happiness lies in having acted selflessly. Maybe it really means that you, as the artist of both your *dicha* and your story, have concocted the story of your *dicha*. In truth you are miserable. Every minute in Cristina's company is agony, for your craving for her is incomparably stronger than your craving for *callos*. That's why you pepper your story with the word *alegría* or its variants (97 iterations, according to my Kindle). Who are you trying to convince? You say that you didn't pressure Cristina. Maybe you didn't and maybe you did. But you pressure us. That genial tone of yours, which I like so much, had me fooled. (Wayne Booth, where were you when I needed you?) Had I understood what you were up to, I would not have given you a second look. But then I would have missed all those hours of happiness, however illusive.

I'm reminded that in the first chapter of *Don Quijote*, the mad knight tries on an old suit of armor. Not having a proper helmet, he improvises one from pieces of pasteboard. To test its strength, he smacks it twice with his sword. The helmet falls apart. After putting it back together, he is sane enough not to test it again. Perhaps I should read this incident as a cautionary tale about the books in my bucket. Continue to enjoy them, but let them be. Better benign neglect than

indecent exposure, though if Ribot's *alegría* is indeed feigned, it's only my gullibility that's being exposed. At the same time, I remember Ruskin's great maxim that our work should be the praise of what we love. I believe this, even though I haven't always lived by it, and I'd like to think that to pay attention, to regard, is in itself a form of praise, irrespective of the results. If so, neither the Captain nor his creator have reason to object to my equivocal homage.