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LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IN
DELIBES' PARABOLA DEL NAUFRAGOJohn W. Kronik
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Therefore is the name of it called
Babel; because the Lord did there con-
found the language of all the earth...
Gen. 11:9

The literary artist's relationship to language has described, from the past century to the present, a historical trajectory in whose trail language has evolved from utilitarian instrument to esthetic object to philosophical preoccupation.* The generations that grew about Balzac, Dickens, and Galdós, sensitive as they were, in differing degrees, to the unique qualities that inhere in language, saw in the word above all a tool for the artistic communication of their social concerns and for the fashioning of scenes that conveyed them. The pragmatic function of their language called for the signified to outweigh the signifier in value and importance. In riposte to the mimetic approach where language was subsumed into the act of projection of the observable, came the notion of the work of art's self-sufficiency, and it came accompanied by language enthroned. The sound and the looks of the word, its harmonious coexistence with its neighbors, its identity as metaphor surged to the fore in the hands of the writers in whom the choice of the signifier was determined as much by its intrinsic attributes as by the signifieds that it cued. From this consciousness of art's esthetic supremacy, it was but a step to an artistic self-consciousness, to a process, within the work of art itself, of reflection on art and of art, which in literature brought quite automatically as its concomitant a focus on the nature and functioning of the word, an epistemology of language, spurred by the waxing interest in modern linguistics. In more recent years (I am of course referring to chronological currents that overlap), having examined and questioned the substance and the generic forms of his art as well as the mode of its conveyance, the artist, perhaps in a state of despair over matters that reach beyond but include his art, turns on it viciously, with an apparent desire to destroy what he has created or to destroy

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²This page number, and all subsequent page numbers in the text, refer to the manuscript copy of the English translation of *Terra Nostra*.

³*Historia de España, Gran historia general de los pueblos hispanos*, Tomo III; ed.: D. Julián M.^a Rubio, D. Luis Ulloa Cisneros, D. Emilio Camps Cazorla, D. Jaime Vicens Vives (Instituto Gallach de Librería y Ediciones: Barcelona), 1959, p. 354.

⁴Ibid.

⁵These choices are summarized on pp. 1393-96.

through creation. In the literary arts, it is again the word, the generative constituent of literature, that must bear the brunt of the assault all the while that it serves to launch the attack.

The mature Miguel Delibes of *Parábola del naufrago* belongs to that group of recent writers who have discovered that language is duplicitous --every bit as duplicitous as the creature that invented it for his own use. The very title of this novel communicates its multiplicity of meanings and at the same time the ambiguity fixed in language, which is one of the book's meanings. The immediately apparent duality that derives from the Latin *parabolē/parabola* in simplest terms translates into a simultaneous signal of the novel's identity --an exemplary narrative-- and its metaphoric structure --a geometric figure. The latter, concretized only twice in the text, once in reference to the "parábola líquida" produced as Jacinto urinates, traces modern society's processes of formulaic reductivism. However, while it is just that, *Parábola del naufrago* is more than a glimpse into the likely fate of *El camino's* protagonist after his expulsion into adulthood and into the nightmarish patterns of a technocratic society styled along Orwellian lines, more than a Kafkaesque vision of an individual's programmed dehumanization by an engulfing structure of symmetries of his own making. This parable whose moral the parabolic arch describes cannot, for its literary shape, do without language; and while language as a vehicle is essential to the communication of a social and existential vision, the form assumed by language in that communicative function causes it to mediate not only that vision, but its own nature as language. The reader of Delibes' novel must recall that although the etymology of "parábola" begins with the idea of similitude that engenders both a particular geometric figure and a particular kind of narrative comparison (proverbial tale), the notion of speech lies at its core (note Span. *palabra*, Eng. "palaver"). The novel's title insinuates that the word as subject is central to the concerns of *Parábola del naufrago*, which, at the same time as it tells the exemplary tale of a modern-day shipwreck victim and at the same time as it marks the curve of the destruction wrought by carefully graphed schemes, recounts the shipwreck of language.

The *degradación* of Jacinto San José into a sheep, preceded by Genaro Martín's metamorphosis into Gen, the dog, is paralleled in the novel by an accompanying *degradación* of language. (Significantly, Spanish has maintained more strongly than English the double meaning of demotion and vilification carried by the term *degradación*.) Delibes' various narrative devices, which shocked reviewers and continued to disturb and alienate readers used to the earlier Delibes, function to undercut the traditions on which logic of language rests. The connections between *Parábola del naufrago's* war on the word and the still more complicated subversions of language in Martín-Santos' *Tiempo de silencio*, Goytisolo's *Reivindicación del conde Don Julián*, and some of the contemporary Latin American novels are evident; like other writers of his moment, the Delibes who has

come of age has found, in what some erroneously take to be gratuitous experimentation, the textual expression most appropriate to his needs.

On the opening page of the novel (references are to the first edition, Barcelona: Destino, 1969), after an introductory paragraph, Delibes offers a key to the procedure followed on the half-dozen occasions where the narrative turns to Gen and substitutes verbal signs for punctuation marks ("Tras la verja coma a la derecha de la cancela coma junto al alerce coma se hallaba la caseta de Genaro abrir paréntesis al que ahora llamaban Gen dos puntos..." p. 10). The need to provide the key announces the inadequacy of our system of signs; at the same time, the key's utter superfluosity ("igual igual a = / punto = a . / coma = a ," p. 9), insofar as it is not necessary to the comprehension of the procedure and yet is not an aperture to its ready absorption, renders absurd both the procedure and its key. In the real-world-turned-surreal of Jacinto and Genaro, conventional rules and signs no longer carry any value, and the narrative signals become as absurd as the life experiences of the characters. The style of writing, mechanized like dictation to a secretary or to a telegraph operator, destroys rather than assists ease of comprehension. The reader, in order to decode the text more readily, tends to suppress the verbalized punctuation marks in the act of reading which suggests that the traditional markers of comprehension (, or . or :) have no value (Cela applied this conviction to paragraphing in *San Camilo*, 1936.) But if the reader suppresses through conscious omission the verbal signs that have supplanted the traditional typographic indications, then the word as sign along with the punctuation mark is degraded and its uselessness, even its intrusiveness, dramatized. The character with whom this particular style is consistently associated is Genaro, the generic man, a biological unit (*gen* = "gene"), whose degradation has preceded the opening of the novel. (His surname, Martín, has evident animal connotations.) *Parábola del naufrago* is thus launched with language and the individual already metamorphosed. The pattern for what subsequently occurs is preestablished.

If it is Delibes' suggestion that existing signs are *de trop*, he also suggests that they are inadequate as governors of communication. One device to which he has recourse throughout is to invent indicators of sound whenever the text informs the reader that a sound has been produced. For example: "Fuera de esto y del chapaleo del arroyo, chuap-chuac, del graznido de las grajetas, quiiiiá, y de los conciertos esporádicos de mirlos, chinc-chinc-chinc, y ruisenores, choqui-piupiupiú, el silencio es total" (p. 49). The narrator's distrust of his medium is immediately apparent in his belief that the description is in itself incapable of transmitting the sound. That fundamental insecurity is compounded, not overcome, by the fact that existing language is further inadequate insofar as it has no signs for these sounds, which have to be reproduced onomatopoeically. Once created, they are a failure, for if reproduction is purportedly superior to description, reproduction in the text is likewise

dependent on the word and in the final analysis is more defective yet because the reproductive sign is meaningless in isolation from its descriptive presentation. What meaning is conveyed by the signs "zurrur," "cle-clip," "nenennnn," "bbb," "bla-ta-blá," "trui-chinc-tiit-orr-sib-sab," etc.? The sign reduced to a sensory projection yet constituted of letters of our alphabet is mortally wounded by the absence of a traditionally determined meaning. It is a code without a key. But are these clusters of randomly positioned letters any more arbitrary than the accustomed signs of man's language? If, on the other hand, we agree with the poets that nature has its own language, then in the text's feeble attempts to approximate it, Delibes succeeds in demonstrating yet again the impotency of man's linguistic system. In the end, without constituting a new language, "guuec" and "plum-buum-bún" and the other such oddities function as interruptions of the narrative flow: one more linguistic element fated for likely suppression by the reader.

Repetition is another avenue of affront to language's ability to communicate. There is constant repetition of words, sentences, ideas in *Parábola del naufrago*, but even more notable and ultimately cloying is Delibes' peppering of the text with parenthetical redundancies purportedly dispensed for greater clarity or precision: "Jacinto ... trata de conformar las ideas con las manos. Le cuesta mucho elaborarlas (las ideas) y más aún ordenarlas (las ideas) y mucho más aún evacuarlas (las ideas)" (p. 82); "Jacinto jadea. Suda (Jacinto). Jacinto tiembla. Llora (Jacinto). Jacinto se ase crispadamente a los bordes del lavabo. Se estremece (Jacinto)" (p. 212). The narrator who falls into this pattern (and all the narrative voices in this novel do) has little trust in his medium and reflects in his relationship with the reader Jacinto's fear of not being understood. The ambiguity of language is underscored to absurdity, for in this case ambiguity implies not richness, flexibility, and mystery, but poverty because a second sign is required to clarify the idea imperfectly conveyed by the first. An irony that emerges is that the repetition, a means of primitivist reduction, in diminishing the uniqueness and substantiveness of linguistic expression, reflects the meticulous impersonality of a machine, thereby vitiating the power structure's assurances that mechanization is no threat to the individual. Most significantly, perhaps, the repetition is ultimately counterproductive to the extent that its burlesque function is not lost upon the reader who, long before all is said and done, is led from amusement to impatience to --again-- rejection of the text's linguistic constitution.

To the charges that the word is superfluous and deficient are added a series of thrusts at the meaninglessness of language. Slogans, for example, take advantage of the ambiguous character of language and lessen its stature by creating automatized structures devoid of meaning. This subversion reaches such extremes that the contradictory composition of most slogans and their senselessness generally go unnoticed by those who utter them and by those subjected to them. The autocratic social structure in *Parábola del*

naufrago is dependent on the opiate of the slogan as an instrument of its survival, and the pawns of the system --the funcionarios-- have been trained to jump to their feet and to recite slogans whenever Don Abdón enters. Their behavior and their language have been ritualized. The exaggeratedness of the act and the resulting destruction of both the verbal sign and its signification are represented typographically through a concatenated system that denies the uniqueness of the word and the integrity of its wholeness: "SUMAR-ES-LA-MAS-NO-BLE-AC-TI-VIDAD-DEL-HOM-BRE," "HA-BLAR-DE-DE-POR-TES-ES-AUN-MAS-SA-LU-DABLE-QUE-PRAC-TI-CAR-LOS," etc. (p. 20).

Another instance of the fracture of meaning in Delibes' novel is the confusion between the cipher zero and the letter O. This interplay is likely to strike the reader as the book's most ludicrous element, especially since the tracing of zeros, and in time the thought of zeros, that nauseates Jacinto is extended to occur even when he shapes meatballs but not when he forms sixes, eights, or nines. Initially, Jacinto simply feels dizzy and ill after having written a certain number of zeros, and he does not know why. It is ironic that the doctor whom he consults, a member of the power structure, instead of effecting a cure or exerting a tranquilizing influence, compounds Jacinto's difficulties by raising the issue of the cipher versus the letter, applying it even to Jacinto's names, which after the medical consultation Jacinto recognizes as ending in confusion or in nothing. Of course, the reader can perceive, as Jacinto does not, that the nothingness of existence makes him ill, that what overcomes him is existential nausea. (Jacinto is not as perspicacious in his self-analyses as is Sartre's Roquentin.) The reader sees, moreover, that in Jacinto's case the absurdity of life's nothingness is projected through the act of writing, his livelihood and his sole productive activity. Zero denotes absence; a letter presumably denotes presence. When the cipher and the letter are equated, made indistinguishable, they add up to nothing. Language equals zero. Ambiguity's solution is the ultimate in ambiguity. We detect that a system of signs, in addition to being meaningless until made to carry given meanings, is meaningless for its arbitrariness and can be subverted by a circumstantial equation. Additionally, the word --and to begin with, the word's rudimentary unit-- is at the root of what disturbs Jacinto's equilibrium in a structure intent on extinguishing his identifying trait as a human being: language, thought.

The logical response to the existence of a system of communication that has lost its expressive power and degenerated into a catalyst for friction is the substitution of a new and better scheme. Jacinto, after a brush with Esperanto, coins "contracto," a contracted language consisting of apocopated words which corresponds to Jacinto's manifest ideal of the reduction of communication as necessary to the health of mankind. (His voiceless mouthing of songs during the church service is a step in this direction as well as a demonstration of his timidity.) The idea is to eradicate error and conflict by ex-

punging speech. (I recognize that Delibes' joke can be read as an attack on the rhetorical mode in Spanish letters, but that is not to the point here.) When Jacinto says to himself, "El contrato soy yo" (p. 101), that is an unmistakable clue to the inseparability of the subversion of Jacinto as a man and the concurrent subversion of language. By that token, with reduction the initial step to suppression, the ultimate limitation of Jacinto's vocabulary to the bleating of a sheep constitutes the achievement of an ideal. But if the failure of Jacinto's linguistically defined utopia is not already apparent in its characteristic self-immolation, its injection into *Parábola del naufrago* as another narrative device serves as ironic testimony to its self-wrought ruin. For one thing, like Esperanto, Jacinto's "contracto" is built on existing signs. Having established in connection with the reproduction of noises that newly invented combinations lack meaning, the text now demonstrates the absurdity of attempting to create meaning out of a system where meaning has been debased. In either case, the invented character of language dramatizes its falseness. More specifically, Jacinto's formula occasions a de-signifying metamorphosis of the word (reminiscent of some of the vanguard experiments), for apocopation is equivalent to amputation or destruction. On top of that, vestigial significations from the parent language obtrude onto the new forms (note especially the transformation of "Presidente" into "Preso"). In the end, this substitute language is as meaningless as the existing one whose bondage it never breaks. Its supposed advantages of greater euphony, economy, vitality, and distinctiveness are perverted when it obfuscates meaning even further, when its forms are resoundingly arbitrary and gratuitous, and when the deciphering of its new code requires an even greater investment of time. The new scheme, the hoped-for solution, is yet again a disturbing element that disrupts the flow of the text.

The idea of sterility imparted by Jacinto's man-made language reverberates in the echoes that are an important ingredient of *Parábola del naufrago*. Echoes are a degradation of language because, the primary source of the sound notwithstanding, they are articulations by objects incapable of speech and of apprehending meaning. When the power of speech is accorded to a well or a valley, the stature of language as a sovereign trait of man is diminished. Through echoes, too, a new language is created, again a truncated, imperfect language with a series of signs devoid of meaning ("orro," "ero," "itos," "brid," "stir"). Neither chance, as in the case of nature's echoes, nor design, as in Jacinto's efforts, is more capable of fathering meaning. As Jacinto succumbs to the anguish of his encirclement by the hedge, echoes are given progressively greater weight in the novel, and the book ends with an echo. We are led to conclude that words and their echoes are equally lacking in substance; that man's cries for help go unheard and unheeded because they are as vain and empty as the reflection of them that is returned to him; that communication is merely an endless reduplication of itself. If anything, the echo that the valley emits is an insensitive sneer in the face

of Jacinto's tormented state. At the end of the novel, Jacinto's potential for communication through speech is exactly at the level of the apocopated neologism of "contracto," the chance sound in nature, or the echo of a bleat.

In other ways, too, the text devalues language at the same time as it recounts the progressive diminution of man's prominence. The narrator frequently exhibits a taste for puns. These allow him to play with the double meaning of a word or an expression; to undercut a serious utterance with a comical inference that emanates from the exact same word structure; or to alter meaning through the simple transposition of a letter (*trepando > reptando*). The introduction of neologisms accomplishes with one stroke a slap at language for its poverty and for its inscrutability. Genaro's innocent questioning of a policy matter is followed immediately by a typographical mutation in his name: "Genaro Martín" > "genaro martín" > "genaromartín" (which has a plural: "genaromartines"). The formal transfiguration of the linguistic sign that contains his identity precedes and betokens the reduction of his physical form and being. Jacinto, late in the novel (p. 228), suffers the same device, which erodes the individual's identifying tag by making it the designation of an object or, worse yet, a class of objects. In order to apprehend this textual maneuver, it is necessary, as in concrete poetry, to see the word. The word functions as image. That is, its role as signifier no longer evolves on a verbal plane. The signification of the word is not carried by the sign through the meaning conferred by tradition on its particular sequence of letters, but rather by a permutation in its physical shape. This strictly visual process can be regarded as an extirpation of language's pristine mission (though the writer of concrete poetry and others might view this as an enrichment). The name of Don Abdón, the matriarchal patriarch of the "technocracy," is a composite of the social order's title of respect (Don) and the alphabetical order's source (A,B). No downgrading of Don Abdón's name is required, for it is in itself a downgrading instrument. The absurdly repetitious ring of the name sets up its bearer as an object of satire, not only for the reader but also for the characters in the book, who make a game of the fact that it is an imperfect palindrome. (Further games are possible: the "don" repetitions are the limbs of a parabolic arch that forms an A; Don Abdón's henchman and overseer is Darío Esteban, whose name is an alphabetical extension of Don Abdón's --A,B-D,E-- and in whose name "Don Abdón is anagrammatically contained.) In short, Don Abdón, unlike the Galdosian character who is defined onomastically, is destroyed by the linguistic sign that designates him. The narration of César Fuentes' castration consists of two sentences that run for two-and-one-half pages (pp. 313-33). The abuse of the polysyndetic construction stands in ironic contrast to the emasculation of Fuentes (whose Christian and family names are an equally ironic commentary on his state). There is in *Parábola del naufrago* a general tendency to string out sentences with phrases and clauses piled upon one another. This stylistic feature has the effect of increasing the possibility of confusion and loss

of meaning as antecedents and referents grow distant and murky and chaos replaces order. The chaos of the concatenated sentence fragments is redoubled by the absence of chapter or section divisions, even of spaces, despite frequent breaks in time, setting, and sequence. Occasionally, a transition is effected by the double use of a word of whose ambiguity the narrator has taken advantage (see, e.g., *barrera* on p. 134), in which case the existence of a link on an exclusively linguistic, non-rational level accentuates the fortuitousness of man's system of communication.

While *Parábola del naufrago* is in its various manifestations a parable of the decomposition of language, the text does not divorce the chaotic state of language from man's condition in general; and if language is shown to be an intrinsically defective instrument, man must at the same time shoulder responsibility for striking the word impotent. It cannot go unnoticed that the founder of the "Por la Mudez a la Paz" movement --Jacinto-- is by profession a copyist, an adder, a calligrapher, and that one of its adherents is Eutilio Crespo, a scribe. True, that all-powerful administration organization is at fault insofar as it allows no questioning, and close as he is to the act of writing, Jacinto is forced to function at total remove from meaning. Although it is clear that, like the acquiescent victims of the concentration camp atrocities that Delibes' book evokes, Jacinto is doomed whichever path he chooses --protest or submission-- as the initiator of the muteness movement, he collaborates in his execution. On the one hand, he undermines his livelihood; on the other, he lays the groundwork for his debasement. Jacinto's voluntary isolation from others through the suppression of language is exactly parallel to his planting and watering of the seeds that Don Abdón gave him and Darío Esteban ordered him to sow. He is fully responsible for scattering the seeds of his own alienation in two directions, and in neither case does he do so with an awareness of the consequences; but whereas he plants the prodigiously proliferating hedge in blind obedience, his fight against language is a conscious, active campaign. "Para mi, las palabras están de más" (p. 97), proclaims Jacinto as he avoids the company of others, leaves his transistor radio disconnected, and invites the entry in his dossier that runs: "Desconfía de la palabra" (p. 76). His distrust of the word appears to stem from the dual conviction that language confuses and language destroys.

During one of his monologues before his mirror, Jacinto affirms that not only does language hold no solution to man's problems, but is the basis of man's confusion (pp. 81-81). If a zero is indistinguishable from the letter O, is it surprising that words should befuddle and that everyone should give a different meaning to the same word? If man is not clever enough to invent two distinct signs for the letter and the cipher 0, then confusion is rampant and inescapable. This is one of the most direct statements in the book about the insufficiency of language and about the disturbing multiplicity of signifieds for each signifier. Subsequently, the cryptic nature of the word is aligned with the hypocrisy in hu-

man behavior (for example, the display of adulation for Don Abdón contrasts with the epithets assigned him behind his back). If two-faced man uses two-faced words, how is it possible to reach understanding? Neither connotation of understanding --comprehension or harmony-- appears to be realizable in language: "La palabra no sólo es voluble sino un instrumento de agresión" (p. 84), concludes Jacinto. So, the word should be destroyed because the word is destructive. Concentrating his whole philosophy on the one word "entendámonos," which he is convinced can be expressed without being pronounced, he founds the "Por la Mudez a la Paz" movement and conceives its manifesto:

a/ No es racional que al hombre se le vaya toda la fuerza por la boca.
b/ La palabra, hasta el día, apenas ha servido sino como instrumento de agresión o exponente de necesidad. c/ Con las palabras se construyen paraísos inaccesibles para las piernas y d/ y última, cuantas menos palabras pronunciamos y más breves sean éstas, menos y más breves serán la agresividad y la estupidez flotante del mundo.

(pp. 99-100)

A universal language like Esperanto, decides Jacinto, is no solution to the world's doleful state because the more its leaders talk, the greater its upheavals. A situation where one-half the world could dialogue with the other half would be disastrous: "si se habla, se discute; si se discute, se odia; si se odia, se mata" (p. 97). On an individual level, the word, with its characteristic ambiguity, had already caused Genaro's downfall: "Ya ves para lo que sirven las palabras, genaro martín, para embrollarte y hacerte decir lo que no has dicho" (p. 87). Clearly, communication with words eroded through use and abuse is more deleterious than silence: "Jacinto... pensaba que una mirada o una mueca comportaban mayores posibilidades expresivas y constituían un vehículo de comunicación más sincero que un torrente de palabras, puesto que las palabras se habían vuelto herméticas, ambiguas o vacías al perder su virginidad" (p. 112). Acting upon this conviction in his creation of an apocopated system, Jacinto teeters between a hatred for existing language and a hatred for language as such. At one instant, he leans towards a language of virgin words that would be free of ambiguity and would suggest the same ideas to all minds, a solution against which the very nature of language militates (the first organizational meeting of the proponents of Jacinto's new language of greater harmony degenerates into a wild disagreement); at the next moment, he opts for total silence, maintaining that with his muteness he says no less than those about him who shout and argue. However, the pitfall of his ideal does not elude Jacinto, since he realizes that speech is man's distinguishing trait as an animal and that he must speak even if in speaking he fails to make sense and deceives: "necesita (el hombre) decir cosas aunque no las razone, precisa (el hombre) descongestionarse, similar que razona (el hombre) aunque sea partiendo de premisas falaces, y cuanto mejor lo

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simule (que razona) más satisfecho queda (el hombre) de sí mismo, aunque sea a costa de desportillar, difamar o engañar al prójimo, que esto es secundario, puesto que lo esencial es descongestionarse" (pp. 164-65).

Jacinto's bitter final experience is proof, first, of this need for oral expression and, second, of its futility. As an enemy of language, Jacinto is an enemy of himself. Distrustful of the word as communication, he draws himself into a state of frightening isolation whose silence (ideal silence?) threatens and torments him as much as did the outside world of human contact and discourse. That muteness and withdrawal (whether imposed or voluntary or effected through suggestion) are not the answer to man's dilemma is demonstrated by the frenzy that overtakes Jacinto when he finds himself shut off. When the monstrous hedge overpowers the fragile and sensitive hyacinth, Jacinto in his despair falls back, first orally, then in writing, on the instrument he rejected. The proponent of muteness shouts at the birds and at the hedge, and this articulation of his fear and anger in his condition of agonizing sequestration dramatizes the inanity of language. As his terror mounts, he challenges his own echo, an act that carries to extreme absurdity the senselessness of dialogue at the same time as it suggests that all dialogue is monologue (as are Jacinto's perorations before the mirror). In a moment of tranquil introspection, Jacinto recognizes (as he had earlier) that his voicing of pointless speech is a pointless act: "es inútil dar voces, Jacinto, convéncete, porque el mundo está sordo y ciego, Jacinto, nadie te escucha, ¿oyes?" (p. 211). When Jacinto perceives in the mirror the metamorphosis he is undergoing, the words

he addresses to his image are that metamorphosis: "--¡Te han suicidado, jacinto!" (p. 228). As it turns out, Jacinto is happiest when, as capable of thought and as incapable of speech as Kafka's beetle Gregor Samsa, his articulators are no longer shaped to produce words: when, in short, he is no longer human. Quite unlike Samsa, he has through muteness arrived at peace.

But at what price? If Jacinto now finds nourishment in the leaves of the hedge that had imprisoned him, the reader can draw little satisfaction from Jacinto's transmogrification. The system has divested the individual of his power to question. It debases man, makes him lose his dignity, and frightens him into muteness. It wills away the word; it demeans. Literally or figuratively, it accomplishes pacification through emasculation. Like the orator's gibberish at the end of Ionesco's *Les Chaises*, the final "¡Beeeeeeeeé!" in *Parábola del naufrago* represents the castration of language.

With language degraded both within the narration and by the narration, the relationship between man and language as depicted in *Parábola del naufrago* takes on three implications. When language is debased, so too is man. In order to debase or destroy man, it is necessary to destroy language. Man, attempting to communicate with language already debased, is easily the victim of debase-ment.

The narrator of *Parábola del naufrago*, master of the word as Don Abdón is of Jacinto, indulges in the game of divesting language of its (already lost) dignity in order to demonstrate its intrinsic insufficiency. However, although neither the essence of nature nor of meaning can be properly transcribed

with the word, man must suffer the word as mediator of nature and meaning. Consequently, atop all the ironies that Delibes has woven sits the pervasive irony that he could not have wrought without language the destruction of language. The degradation of the word is thus the novel's ultimate exaltation. Goytisolo in *Reivindicación del conde Don Julián* paves the way for a new invasion of Spain through the destruction of the myth of Spain. *Parábola del naufrago*, too (even if it is read as a satire of the techniques of the anti-novel), builds something out of the ashes of what it has helped to destroy. When language is destroyed --or when an attempt to do so is made-- its unique power is enacted in the process. When man deprived of the word is metamorphosed into a lower form, the necessity and supremacy of the word have been affirmed. If the word fails to communicate a designated meaning, it does not follow that the word fails to communicate. The shipwreck of the word is the salvation of *Parábola del naufrago*. In this subversion of his own subversion lies the artistry of Delibes' novel. □

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Therefore is the name of it called
Babel; because the Lord did there con-
found the language of all the earth...

Gen. 11:9

The literary artist's relationship to language has described, from the past century to the present, a historical trajectory in whose trail language has evolved from utilitarian instrument to esthetic object to philosophical preoccupation.* The generations that grew about Balzac, Dickens, and Galdós, sensitive as they were, in differing degrees, to the unique qualities that inhere in language, saw in the word above all a tool for the artistic communication of their social concerns and for the fashioning of scenes that conveyed them. The pragmatic function of their language called for the signifier to outweigh the signified in value and importance. In riposte to the mimetic approach where language was subsumed into the act of projection of the observable, came the notion of the work of art's self-sufficiency, and it came accompanied by language enthroned. The sound and the looks of the word, its harmonious coexistence with its neighbors, its identity as metaphor surged to the fore in the hands of the writers in whom the choice of the signifier was determined as much by its intrinsic attributes as by the signifieds that it cued. From this consciousness of art's esthetic supremacy, it was but a step to an artistic self-consciousness, to a process, within the work of art itself, of reflection on art and of art, which in literature brought quite automatically as its concomitant a focus on the nature and functioning of the word, an epistemology of language, spurred by the waxing interest in modern linguistics. In more recent years (I am of course referring to chronological currents that overlap), having examined and questioned the substance and the generic forms of his art as well as the mode of its conveyance, the artist, perhaps in a state of despair over matters that reach beyond but include his art, turns on it viciously, with an apparent desire to destroy what he has created or to destroy

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through creation. In the literary arts, it is again the word, the generative constituent of literature, that must bear the brunt of the assault all the while that it serves to launch the attack.

The mature Miguel Delibes of *Parábola del naufrago* belongs to that group of recent writers who have discovered that language is duplicitous --every bit as duplicitous as the creature that invented it for his own use. The very title of this novel communicates its multiplicity of meanings and at the same time the ambiguity fixed in language, which is one of the book's meanings. The immediately apparent duality that derives from the Latin *parabole/parabola* in simplest terms translates into a simultaneous signal of the novel's identity --an exemplary narrative-- and its metaphoric structure --a geometric figure. The latter, concretized only twice in the text, once in reference to the "parábola líquida" produced as Jacinto urinates, traces modern society's processes of formulaic reductivism. However, while it is just that, *Parábola del naufrago* is more than a glimpse into the likely fate of *El camino's* protagonist after his expulsion into adulthood and into the nightmarish patterns of a technocratic society styled along Orwellian lines, more than a Kafkaesque vision of an individual's programmed dehumanization by an engulfing structure of symmetries of his own making. This parable whose moral the parabolic arch describes cannot, for its literary shape, do without language; and while language as a vehicle is essential to the communication of a social and existential vision, the form assumed by language in that communicative function causes it to mediate not only that vision, but its own nature as language. The reader of Delibes' novel must recall that although the etymology of "parábola" begins with the idea of similitude that engenders both a particular geometric figure and a particular kind of narrative comparison (proverbial tale), the notion of speech lies at its core (note Span. *palabra*, Eng. "palaver"). The novel's title insinuates that the word as subject is central to the concerns of *Parábola del naufrago*, which, at the same time as it tells the exemplary tale of a modern-day shipwreck victim and at the same time as it marks the curve of the destruction wrought by carefully graphed schemes, recounts the shipwreck of language.

The *degradación* of Jacinto San José into a sheep, preceded by Genaro Martín's metamorphosis into Gen, the dog, is paralleled in the novel by an accompanying *degradación* of language. (Significantly, Spanish has maintained more strongly than English the double meaning of demotion and vilification carried by the term *degradación*.) Delibes' various narrative devices, which shocked reviewers and continued to disturb and alienate readers used to the earlier Delibes, function to undercut the traditions on which the logic of language rests. The connections between *Parábola del naufrago's* war on the word and the still more complicated subversions of language in Martín-Santos' *Tiempo de silencio*, Goytisolo's *Reivindicación del conde Don Julián*, and some of the contemporary Latin American novels are evident; like other writers of his moment, the Delibes who has

come of age has found, in what some erroneously take to be gratuitous experimentation, the textual expression most appropriate to his needs.

On the opening page of the novel (references are to the first edition, Barcelona: Destino, 1969), after an introductory paragraph, Delibes offers a key to the procedure followed on the half-dozen occasions where the narrative turns to Gen and substitutes verbal signs for punctuation marks ("Tras la verja coma a la derecha de la cancela coma junto al alerce coma se hallaba la caseta de Genaro abrir paréntesis al que ahora llamaban Gen dos puntos..." p. 10). The need to provide the key announces the inadequacy of our system of signs; at the same time, the key's utter superfluity ("igual igual a = / punto = a . / coma = a , " p. 9), insofar as it is not necessary to the comprehension of the procedure and yet is not an aperture to its ready absorption, renders absurd both the procedure and its key. In the real-world-turned-surreal of Jacinto and Genaro, conventional rules and signs no longer carry any value, and the narrative signals become as absurd as the life experiences of the characters. The style of writing, mechanized like dictation to a secretary or to a telegraph operator, destroys rather than assists ease of comprehension. The reader, in order to decode the text more readily, tends to suppress the verbalized punctuation marks in the act of reading, which suggests that the traditional markers of comprehension (, or . or :) have no value (Cela applied this conviction to paragraphing in *San Camilo*, 1936.) But if the reader suppresses through conscious omission the verbal signs that have supplanted the traditional typographic indications, then the word as sign along with the punctuation mark is degraded and its uselessness, even its intrusiveness, dramatized. The character with whom this particular style is consistently associated is Genaro, the generic man, a biological unit (*gen* = "gene"), whose degradation has preceded the opening of the novel. (His surname, Martín, has evident animal connotations.) *Parábola del naufrago* is thus launched with language and the individual already metamorphosed. The pattern for what subsequently occurs is preestablished.

If it is Delibes' suggestion that existing signs are *de trop*, he also suggests that they are inadequate as governors of communication. One device to which he has recourse throughout is to invent indicators of sound whenever the text informs the reader that a sound has been produced. For example: "Fuera de esto y del chapaleo del arroyo, chuap-chuac, del graznido de las grajetas, quiiiiá, y de los conciertos esporádicos de mirlos, chinc-chinc-chinc, y ruiseñores, choqui-piupiupiú, el silencio es total" (p. 49). The narrator's distrust of his medium is immediately apparent in his belief that the description is in itself incapable of transmitting the sound. That fundamental insecurity is compounded, not overcome, by the fact that existing language is further inadequate insofar as it has no signs for these sounds, which have to be reproduced onomatopoeically. Once created, they are a failure. Their reproduction is purportedly superior to description, reproduction in the text is likewise

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dependent on the word and in the final analysis is more defective yet because the reproductive sign is meaningless in isolation from its descriptive presentation. What meaning is conveyed by the signs "zurrur," "cle-clip," "nenennnn," "bbb," "bla-ta-blá," "trui-chinc-tiit-orr-sib-sab," etc.? The sign reduced to a sensory projection yet constituted of letters of our alphabet is mortally wounded by the absence of a traditionally determined meaning. It is a code without a key. But are these clusters of randomly positioned letters any more arbitrary than the accustomed signs of man's language? If, on the other hand, we agree with the poets that nature has its own language, then in the text's feeble attempts to approximate it, Delibes succeeds in demonstrating yet again the impotency of man's linguistic system. In the end, without constituting a new language, "guuec" and "plum-buum-bún" and the other such oddities function as interruptions of the narrative flow: one more linguistic element fated for likely suppression by the reader.

Repetition is another avenue of affront to language's ability to communicate. There is constant repetition of words, sentences, ideas in *Parábola del naufrago*, but even more notable and ultimately cloying is Delibes' peppering of the text with parenthetical redundancies purportedly dispensed for greater clarity or precision: "Jacinto ... trata de conformar las ideas con las manos. Le cuesta mucho elaborarlas (las ideas) y más aún ordenarlas (las ideas) y mucho más aún evacuarlas (las ideas)" (p. 82); "Jacinto jadea. Suda (Jacinto). Jacinto tiembla. Llora (Jacinto). Jacinto se ase crispadamente a los bordes del lavabo. Se estremece (Jacinto)" (p. 212). The narrator who falls into this pattern (and all the narrative voices in this novel do) has little trust in his medium and reflects in his relationship with the reader Jacinto's fear of not being understood. The ambiguity of language is underscored to absurdity, for in this case ambiguity implies not richness, flexibility, and mystery, but poverty because a second sign is required to clarify the idea imperfectly conveyed by the first. An irony that emerges is that the repetition, a means of primitivist reduction, in diminishing the uniqueness and substantiveness of linguistic expression, reflects the meticulous impersonality of a machine, thereby vitiating the power structure's assurances that mechanization is no threat to the individual. Most significantly, perhaps, the repetition is ultimately counterproductive to the extent that its burlesque function is not lost upon the reader who, long before all is said and done, is led from amusement to impatience to --again-- rejection of the text's linguistic constitution.

To the charges that the word is superfluous and deficient are added a series of thrusts at the meaninglessness of language. Slogans, for example, take advantage of the ambiguous character of language and lessen its stature by creating automatized structures devoid of meaning. This subversion reaches such extremes that the contradictory composition of most slogans and their senselessness generally go unnoticed by those who utter them and by those subjected to them. The autocratic social structure in *Parábola del*

naufrago is dependent on the opiate of the slogan as an instrument of its survival, and the pawns of the system --the functionaries-- have been trained to jump to their feet and to recite slogans whenever Don Abdón enters. Their behavior and their language have been ritualized. The exaggeratedness of the act and the resulting destruction of both the verbal sign and its signification are represented typographically through a concatenated system that denies the uniqueness of the word and the integrity of its wholeness: "SUMAR -ES -LA -MAS -NO -BLE -AC -TI -VIDAD-DEL-HOM-BRE," "HA-BLAR-DE-DE-POR-TES-ES-AUN-MAS-SA-LU-DABLE-QUE-PRAC-TI-CAR-LOS," etc. (p. 20).

Another instance of the fracture of meaning in Delibes' novel is the confusion between the cipher zero and the letter O. This interplay is likely to strike the reader as the book's most ludicrous element, especially since the tracing of zeros, and in time the thought of zeros, that nauseates Jacinto is extended to occur even when he shapes meatballs but not when he forms sixes, eights, or nines. Initially, Jacinto simply feels dizzy and ill after having written a certain number of zeros, and he does not know why. It is ironic that the doctor whom he consults, a member of the power structure, instead of effecting a cure or exerting a tranquilizing influence, compounds Jacinto's difficulties by raising the issue of the cipher versus the letter, applying it even to Jacinto's name, which after the medical consultation Jacinto recognizes as ending in confusion or in nothing. Of course, the reader can perceive, as Jacinto does not, that the nothingness of existence makes him ill, that what overcomes him is existential nausea. (Jacinto is not as perspicacious in his self-analyses as is Sartre's Roquentin.) The reader sees, moreover, that in Jacinto's case the absurdity of life's nothingness is projected through the act of writing, his livelihood and his sole productive activity. Zero denotes absence; a letter presumably denotes presence. When the cipher and the letter are equated, made indistinguishable, they add up to nothing. Language equals zero. Ambiguity's solution is the ultimate in ambiguity. We detect that a system of signs, in addition to being meaningless until made to carry given meanings, is meaningless for its arbitrariness and can be subverted by a circumstantial equation. Additionally, the word --and to begin with, the word's rudimentary unit-- is at the root of what disturbs Jacinto's equilibrium in a structure intent on extinguishing his identifying trait as a human being: language, thought.

The logical response to the existence of a system of communication that has lost its expressive power and degenerated into a catalyst for friction is the substitution of a new and better scheme. Jacinto, after a brush with Esperanto, coins "contracto," a contracted language consisting of apocopated words which corresponds to Jacinto's manifest ideal of the reduction of communication as necessary to the health of mankind. (His voiceless mouthing of songs during the church service is a step in this direction as well as a demonstration of his timidity.) The idea is to eradicate error and conflict by ex-

punging speech. (I recognize that Delibes' joke can be read as an attack on the rhetorical mode in Spanish letters, but that is not to the point here.) When Jacinto says to himself, "El contrato soy yo" (p. 101), that is an unmistakable clue to the inseparability of the subversion of Jacinto as a man and the concurrent subversion of language. By that token, with reduction the initial step to suppression, the ultimate limitation of Jacinto's vocabulary to the bleating of a sheep constitutes the achievement of an ideal. But if the failure of Jacinto's linguistically defined utopia is not already apparent in its characteristic self-immolation, its injection into *Parábola del naufrago* as another narrative device serves as ironic testimony to its self-wrought ruin. For one thing, like Esperanto, Jacinto's "contracto" is built on existing signs. Having established in connection with the reproduction of noises that newly invented combinations lack meaning, the text now demonstrates the absurdity of attempting to create meaning out of a system where meaning has been debased. In either case, the invented character of language dramatizes its falseness. More specifically, Jacinto's formula occasions a de-signifying metamorphosis of the word (reminiscent of some of the vanguard experiments), for apocopation is equivalent to amputation or destruction. On top of that, vestigial significations from the parent language obtrude onto the new forms (note especially the transformation of "Presidente" into "Preso"). In the end, this substitute language is as meaningless as the existing one whose bondage it never breaks. Its supposed advantages of greater euphony, economy, vitality, and distinctiveness are perverted when it obfuscates meaning even further, when its forms are resoundingly arbitrary and gratuitous, and when the deciphering of its new code requires an even greater investment of time. The new scheme, the hoped-for solution, is yet again a disturbing element that disrupts the flow of the text.

The idea of sterility imparted by Jacinto's man-made language reverberates in the echoes that are an important ingredient of *Parábola del naufrago*. Echoes are a degradation of language because, the primary source of the sound notwithstanding, they are articulations by objects incapable of speech and of apprehending meaning. When the power of speech is accorded to a well or a valley, the stature of language as a sovereign trait of man is diminished. Through echoes, too, a new language is created, again a truncated, imperfect language with a series of signs devoid of meaning ("orro," "ero," "itos," "brid," "stir"). Neither chance, as in the case of nature's echoes, nor design, as in Jacinto's efforts, is more capable of fathering meaning. As Jacinto succumbs to the anguish of his encirclement by the hedge, echoes are given progressively greater weight in the novel, and the book ends with an echo. We are led to conclude that words and their echoes are equally lacking in substance; that man's cries for help go unheard and unheeded because they are as vain and empty as the reflection of them that is returned to him; that communication is merely an endless reduplication of itself. If anything, the echo that the valley emits is an insensitive sneer in the face



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of Jacinto's tormented state. At the end of the novel, Jacinto's potential for communication through speech is exactly at the level of the apocoped neologism of "contracto," the chance sound in nature, or the echo of a bleat.

In other ways, too, the text devalues language at the same time as it recounts the progressive diminution of man's prominence. The narrator frequently exhibits a taste for puns. These allow him to play with the double meaning of a word or an expression; to undercut a serious utterance with a comical inference that emanates from the exact same word structure; or to alter meaning through the simple transposition of a letter (*trepando > reptando*). The introduction of neologisms accomplishes with one stroke a slap at language for its poverty and for its inscrutability. Genaro's innocent questioning of a policy matter is followed immediately by a typographical mutation in his name: "Genaro Martín" > "genaro martín" > "genaromartín" (which has a plural: "genaromartines"). The formal transfiguration of the linguistic sign that contains his identity precedes and betokens the reduction of his physical form and being. Jacinto, late in the novel (p. 228), suffers the same device, which erodes the individual's identifying tag by making it the designation of an object or, worse yet, a class of objects. In order to apprehend this textual maneuver, it is necessary, as in concrete poetry, to see the word. The word functions as image. That is, its role as signifier no longer evolves on a verbal plane. The signification of the word is not carried by the sign through the meaning conferred by tradition on its particular sequence of letters, but rather by a permutation in its physical shape. This strictly visual process can be regarded as an extirpation of language's pristine mission (though the writer of concrete poetry and others might view this as an enrichment). The name of Don Abdón, the matriarchal patriarch of the "technocracy," is a composite of the social order's title of respect (Don) and the alphabetical order's source (A,B). No downgrading of Don Abdón's name is required, for it is in itself a downgrading instrument. The absurdly repetitious ring of the name sets up its bearer as an object of satire, not only for the reader but also for the characters in the book, who make a game of the fact that it is an imperfect palindrome. (Further games are possible: the "don" repetitions are the limbs of a parabolic arch that forms an A; Don Abdón's henchman and overseer is Darío Esteban, whose name is an alphabetical extension of Don Abdón's --A,B-D,E-- and in whose name "Don Abdón is anagrammatically contained.) In short, Don Abdón, unlike the Galdosian character who is defined onomastically, is destroyed by the linguistic sign that designates him. The narration of César Fuentes' castration consists of two sentences that run for two-and-one-half pages (pp. 31-33). The abuse of the polysyndetic construction stands in ironic contrast to the emasculation of Fuentes (whose Christian and family names are an equally ironic commentary on his state). There is in *Parábola del naufrago* a general tendency to string out sentences with phrases and clauses piled upon one another. This stylistic feature has the effect of increasing the possibility of confusion and loss

of meaning as antecedents and referents grow distant and murky and chaos replaces order. The chaos of the concatenated sentence fragments is redoubled by the absence of chapter or section divisions, even of spaces, despite frequent breaks in time, setting, and sequence. Occasionally, a transition is effected by the double use of a word of whose ambiguity the narrator has taken advantage (see, e.g., *barrera* on p. 134), in which case the existence of a link on an exclusively linguistic, non-rational level accentuates the fortuitousness of man's system of communication.

While *Parábola del naufrago* is in its various manifestations a parable of the decomposition of language, the text does not divorce the chaotic state of language from man's condition in general; and if language is shown to be an intrinsically defective instrument, man must at the same time shoulder responsibility for striking the word impotent. It cannot go unnoticed that the founder of the "Por la Mudez a la Paz" movement --Jacinto-- is by profession a copyist, an adder, a calligrapher, and that one of its adherents is Eutilio Crespo, a scribe. True, that all-powerful administrative organization is at fault insofar as it allows no questioning, and close as he is to the act of writing, Jacinto is forced to function at total remove from meaning. Although it is clear that, like the acquiescent victims of the concentration camp atrocities that Delibes' book evokes, Jacinto is doomed whichever path he chooses --protest or submission-- as the initiator of the muteness movement, he collaborates in his execution. On the one hand, he undermines his livelihood; on the other, he lays the groundwork for his debasement. Jacinto's voluntary isolation from others through the suppression of language is exactly parallel to his planting and watering of the seeds that Don Abdón gave him and Darío Esteban ordered him to sow. He is fully responsible for scattering the seeds of his own alienation in two directions, and in neither case does he do so with an awareness of the consequences; but whereas he plants the prodigiously proliferating hedge in blind obedience, his fight against language is a conscious, active campaign. "Para mí, las palabras están de más" (p. 97), proclaims Jacinto as he avoids the company of others, leaves his transistor radio disconnected, and invites the entry in his dossier that runs: "Desconfía de la palabra" (p. 76). His distrust of the word appears to stem from the dual conviction that language confuses and language destroys.

During one of his monologues before his mirror, Jacinto affirms that not only does language hold no solution to man's problems, but is the basis of man's confusion (pp. 81-82). If a zero is indistinguishable from the letter O, is it surprising that words should befuddle and that everyone should give a different meaning to the same word? If man is not clever enough to invent two distinct signs for the letter and the cipher O, then confusion is rampant and inescapable. This is one of the most direct statements in the book about the insufficiency of language and about the disturbing multiplicity of signifieds for each signifier. Subsequently, the cryptic nature of the word is aligned with the hypocrisy in hu-

man behavior (for example, the display of adulation for Don Abdón contrasts with the epithets assigned him behind his back). If two-faced man uses two-faced words, how is it possible to reach understanding? Neither connotation of understanding --comprehension or harmony-- appears to be realizable in language: "La palabra no sólo es voluble sino un instrumento de agresión" (p. 84), concludes Jacinto. So, the word should be destroyed because the word is destructive. Concentrating his whole philosophy on the one word "entendámonos," which he is convinced can be expressed without being pronounced, he founds the "Por la Mudez a la Paz" movement and conceives its manifesto:

a/ No es racional que al hombre se le vaya toda la fuerza por la boca.
b/ La palabra, hasta el día, apenas ha servido sino como instrumento de agresión o exponente de necedad. c/ Con las palabras se construyen paraísos inaccesibles para las piernas y d/ y última, cuantas menos palabras pronunciamos y más breves sean éstas, menos y más breves serán la agresividad y la estupidez flotante del mundo.

(pp. 99-100)

A universal language like Esperanto, decides Jacinto, is no solution to the world's doleful state because the more its leaders talk, the greater its upheavals. A situation where one-half the world could dialogue with the other half would be disastrous: "si se habla, se discute; si se discute, se odia; si se odia, se mata" (p. 97). On an individual level, the word, with its characteristic ambiguity, had already caused Genaro's downfall: "Ya ves para lo que sirven las palabras, genaro martín, para embrollarte y hacerte decir lo que no has dicho" (p. 87). Clearly, communication with words eroded through use and abuse is more deleterious than silence: "Jacinto... pensaba que una mirada o una mueca comportaban mayores posibilidades expresivas y constituían un vehículo de comunicación más sincero que un torrente de palabras, puesto que las palabras se habían vuelto herméticas, ambiguas o vacías al perder su virginidad" (p. 112). Acting upon this conviction in his creation of an apocoped system, Jacinto teeters between a hatred for existing language and a hatred for language as such. At one instant, he leans towards a language of virgin words that would be free of ambiguity and would suggest the same ideas to all minds, a solution against which the very nature of language militates (the first organizational meeting of the proponents of Jacinto's new language of greater harmony degenerates into a wild disagreement); at the next moment, he opts for total silence, maintaining that with his muteness he says no less than those about him who shout and argue. However, the pitfall of his ideal does not elude Jacinto, since he realizes that speech is man's distinguishing trait as an animal and that he must speak even if in speaking he fails to make sense and deceives: "necesita (el hombre) decir cosas aunque no las razones, precisa (el hombre) descongestionarse, similar que razona (el hombre) aunque sea partiendo de premisas falaces, y cuanto mejor le



simule (que razona) más satisfecho queda (el hombre) de sí mismo, aunque sea a costa de desportillar, difamar o engañar al prójimo, que esto es secundario, puesto que lo esencial es descongestionarse" (pp. 164-65).

Jacinto's bitter final experience is proof, first, of this need for oral expression and, second, of its futility. As an enemy of language, Jacinto is an enemy of himself. Distrustful of the word as communication, he draws himself into a state of frightening isolation whose silence (ideal silence?) threatens and torments him as much as did the outside world of human contact and discourse. That muteness and withdrawal (whether imposed or voluntary or effected through suggestion) are not the answer to man's dilemma is demonstrated by the frenzy that overtakes Jacinto when he finds himself shut off. When the monstrous hedge overpowers the fragile and sensitive hyacinth, Jacinto in his despair falls back, first orally, then in writing, on the instrument he rejected. The proponent of muteness shouts at the birds and at the hedge, and this articulation of his fear and anger in his condition of agonizing sequestration dramatizes the inanity of language. As his terror mounts, he challenges his own echo, an act that carries to extreme absurdity the senselessness of dialogue at the same time as it suggests that all dialogue is monologue (as are Jacinto's perorations before the mirror). In a moment of tranquil introspection, Jacinto recognizes (as he had earlier) that his voicing of pointless speech is a pointless act: "es inútil dar voces, Jacinto, convéncete, porque el mundo está sordo y ciego, Jacinto, nadie te escucha, ¿oyes?" (p. 211). When Jacinto perceives in the mirror the metamorphosis he is undergoing, the words

he addresses to his image are that metamorphosis: "--¡Te han suicidado, jacinto!" (p. 228). As it turns out, Jacinto is happiest when, as capable of thought and as incapable of speech as Kafka's beetle Gregor Samsa, his articulators are no longer shaped to produce words: when, in short, he is no longer human. Quite unlike Samsa, he has through muteness arrived at peace.

But at what price? If Jacinto now finds nourishment in the leaves of the hedge that had imprisoned him, the reader can draw little satisfaction from Jacinto's transfiguration. The system has divested the individual of his power to question. It debases man, makes him lose his dignity, and frightens him into muteness. It wills away the word; it demeans. Literally or figuratively, it accomplishes pacification through emasculation. Like the orator's gibberish at the end of Ionesco's *Les Chaises*, the final "¡Beeeeeeeeé!" in *Parábola del naufrago* represents the castration of language.

With language degraded both within the narration and by the narration, the relationship between man and language as depicted in *Parábola del naufrago* takes on three implications. When language is debased, so too is man. In order to debase or destroy man, it is necessary to destroy language. Man, attempting to communicate with language already debased, is easily the victim of debasement.

The narrator of *Parábola del naufrago*, master of the word as Don Abdón is of Jacinto, indulges in the game of divesting language of its (already lost) dignity in order to demonstrate its intrinsic insufficiency. However, although neither the essence of nature nor of meaning can be properly transcribed

with the word, man must suffer the word as mediator of nature and meaning. Consequently, atop all the ironies that Delibes has woven sits the pervasive irony that he could not have wrought without language the destruction of language. The degradation of the word is thus the novel's ultimate exaltation. Goytisolo in *Reivindicación del conde Don Julián* paves the way for a new invasion of Spain through the destruction of the myth of Spain. *Parábola del naufrago*, too (even if it is read as a satire of the techniques of the anti-novel), builds something out of the ashes of what it has helped to destroy. When language is destroyed --or when an attempt to do so is made-- its unique power is enacted in the process. When man deprived of the word is metamorphosed into a lower form, the necessity and supremacy of the word have been affirmed. If the word fails to communicate a designated meaning, it does not follow that the word fails to communicate. The shipwreck of the word is the salvation of *Parábola del naufrago*. In this subversion of his own subversion lies the artistry of Delibes' novel. □

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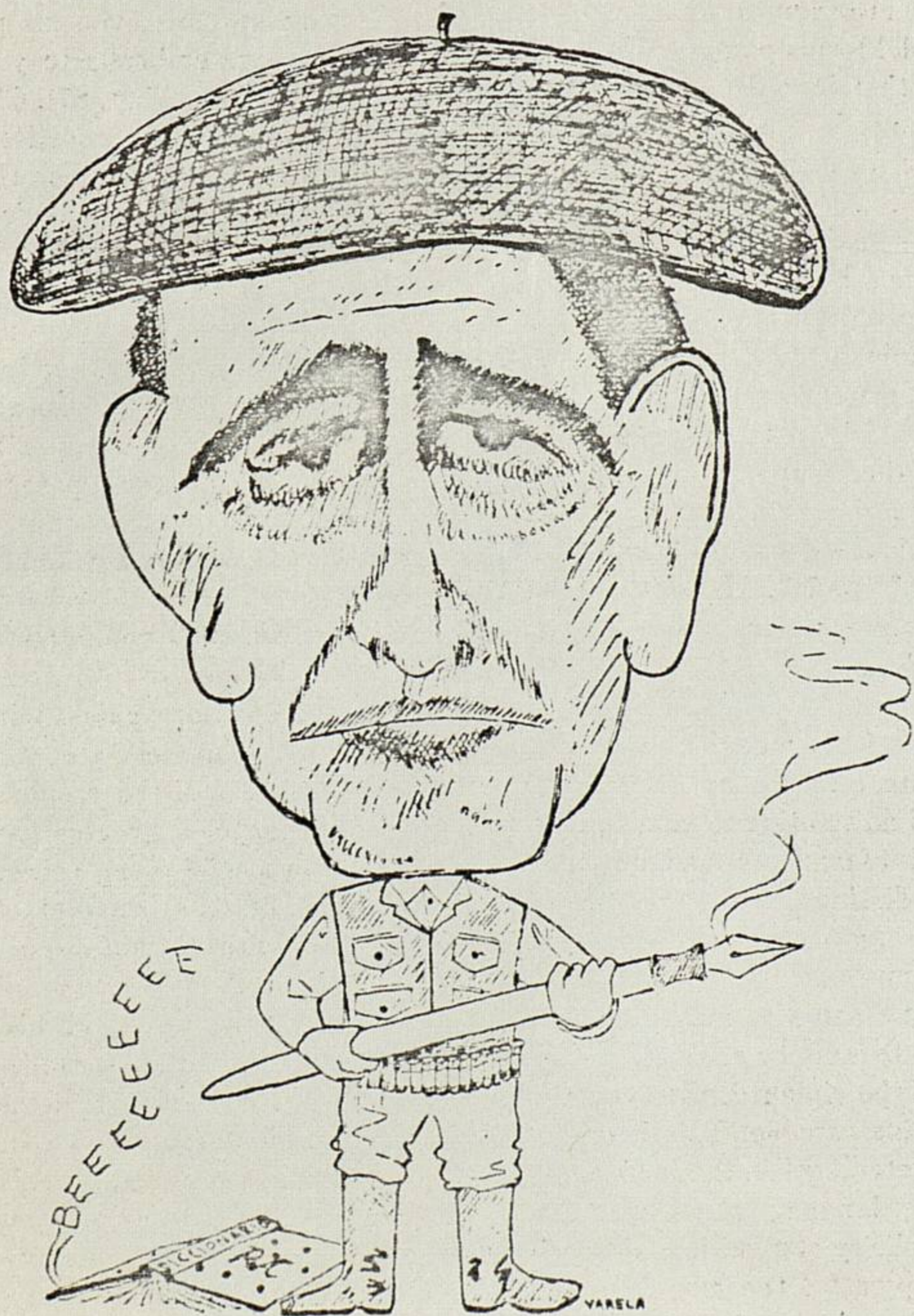
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