

Another Novel by Miguel Delibes

LAS GUERRAS DE NUESTROS ANTEPASADOS

Barcelona, Destino. 1975

Miguel Delibes is a very consistent writer: in his themes, characters, settings, morals, style and language he has only improved since 1947, when he wrote his first novel. In his latest work, we find an outsider, not unlike Pedro of that first novel, a simple soul like Lorenzo of the *Diarios*, a lover of nature and country life like el Nini of *Las ratas*, a child whose parents try to force him into a way of life which contradicts his own tastes, inclinations and natural aptitudes as in *El camino*, a victim of an over-competitive and cruel society, where the possibility of all co-operating "has not yet been invented", as Jacinto in *Parábola del naufrago*. Here, however, all these traits are found in one character, Pacífico Pérez.

So this could be termed a "consolidating novel" in that it returns to the formulas which have composed the author's successful methods. Yet it is also new and original. The framework, though reminiscent of that used in *Cinco horas con Mario*, takes the form of seven conversations in a prison hospital between a doctor and a patient who is serving thirty years for a murder he did not commit; the conversations were taped and are released only after the patient's death, a technique intended to give authenticity to the fiction. The first part of the novel is slow-moving, merely giving the protagonist's background and details of his life in a village, with a great-grandfather, grandfather and father who are extreme militarists, each having fought in a war and anxiously hoping for the day when war will break out again. They discuss the merits of the bayonet, the bullet and the hand-grenade. After that, the action speeds up: the patient tells the stories of other prisoners as well as his own, and they are all gruesome. Murders for little apparent reason bring us into a *tremendista* world, where biology dictates people's actions, where will-power and reason scarcely exist, anyone is likely to do anything, anger is an immediate response, war merely satisfies an elementary instinct for aggressiveness (p. 58) and even a pacifist must give vent to that same instinct by killing his pregnant girlfriend's brother without reason. There is no remorse, no compassion, no love in this world, though Pacífico is so hypersensitive that he suffers when trees are cut down. There is indifference to death and to cruelty – shooting a helpless dog in a graveyard reminds one of *Pascual Duarte* and indeed there are many more coincidences too. Pacífico has the pride and the principles of an outsider: he protects a criminal who has escaped and left him to take the blame for murder and he protects the dead, but he will not allow others to protect him. His motives are beyond the comprehension of ordinary people and yet we feel that they are somehow praiseworthy. He is an innocent criminal, even when he does kill, because society and ancestry have made him as he is. He is unhappy; yet he is more happy in prison than outside, because he feels more secure. Life offers him so little anyway that he is not merely resigned to his lot but actually freer to enjoy it when removed from the threats and dangers of ordinary life in this world. He is consistent in all his attitudes: indifferent to most things and people, moved by his own internal ethics, the eternal victim who is more free than people in the street. Insanity has many degrees, and whether

Pacífico is insane by some standards is open to question. Fernando Morán in *Novela y semidesarrollo* (p.334) shows convincingly that silence for a peasant signifies negation and rejection: here Pacífico's last words are a request to the doctor to tell nothing, to let him remain silent: the supreme outsider who rejects the whole world which has rejected him.

The theses in the novel are well worked into the plot or rather emerge clearly from it. There is a strong anti-militarist, anti-violence, plea – more explicit than in *El príncipe destronado*; there are also demands for social justice – in Pacífico's village all but four are labourers – and even perhaps for legal reform. We detect a more radical rejection of society than in previous novels, a move from Gil Casado's "crítica" to his "denuncia", a more all-embracing condemnation of the world we know. Pacífico symbolizes the failure of our society as a whole in spite of good will on the part of some individuals.

The language is basically the colloquial idiom of an uneducated villager, which Delibes has made into an artistic form, with questions and contributions in the more cultured style of the doctor. This allows us to see everything through the distorted sensitivity of the patient but slightly moderated by the narrator. The whole composition constitutes one of Miguel Delibes' greatest novels to date.

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