

“GASPAR RUIZ” BY JOSEPH CONRAD: A FLAWED TALE

“GASPAR RUIZ” DE JOSEPH CONRAD: UN CUENTO MAL ESCRITO

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ABSTRACT

This year is the centenary of Joseph Conrad's writing of “Gaspar Ruiz”, a story set in Chile at the time of La Guerra a Muerte. The story is a by-product of Conrad's researches for the writing of his great novel, *Nostromo*. In my essay on the short story “The Brute” (Lucas 2004), I call “Gaspar Ruiz” “a potboiler if ever there was one”. This essay is an attempt to justify this harsh evaluation through an analysis of Conrad's sources, his mixing of historical fact and fiction, the structure and the narrative strategies he employs, and the inconsistencies in his portrayal of characters.

KEYWORDS: Conrad, narrative, Chile, potboiler.

RESUMEN

Este año se cumple un siglo desde que el cuento “Gaspar Ruiz” de Joseph Conrad fuera publicado. El cuento está ambientado en Chile, en la época de La Guerra a Muerte y es un subproducto de las investigaciones que Conrad hizo pensando en escribir una obra mayor: *Nostromo*. En mi ensayo sobre el cuento corto “The Brute” (Lucas 2004), me refiero a “Gaspar Ruiz” como “una obra escrita con el mero propósito de generar algo de dinero”. Este ensayo busca justificar esta dura evaluación, haciendo un análisis de los recursos que usara Conrad, de la mezcla que hace entre realidad histórica y ficción, de la estructura y de las estrategias narrativas que emplea y de las inconsistencias en la representación de sus personajes.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Conrad, narrativa, Chile, obra escrita con el mero propósito de ganar dinero.

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My purpose in this essay is to show that “Gaspar Ruiz”, a story that has been widely dismissed as a potboiler – but dismissed on impression rather than on analysis, is a sloppily written piece of work and not worthy of a great writer such as Conrad. This is an important purpose because, coming first in the volume of short stories, *A Set of Six*, for many critical readers it establishes the tone and literary value for the remaining five sto-

ries, whose virtues tend to be overlooked.

The aspects that I shall consider are, first, the mixing of invention with historical and geographical reality; second, narrative structure and mode; third, features of syntax; and, fourth, the representation of character.

In the middle of his career as a writer, Joseph Conrad turned to Latin America for the setting of three of his works of fiction, *Nostromo*, “An Anarchist”, and “Gaspar Ruiz”.

Up to that time, he had set most of his works in the Far East or on ships at sea, with a few in central Africa, England and France.

In December 1902 or January 1903, Conrad began to work on a story called "Nostromo", which developed over the next 18 months into a novel of about 170,000 words. For the first time in 25 years Conrad visited the Western Hemisphere – but this time it was in his imagination.

Conrad's first-hand experience of Latin America was hardly sufficient for him to use it as a basis for "Gaspar Ruiz", let alone for *Nostromo*. He had voyaged to the Caribbean on French ships when he was a teenager, but the ships had called at ports on the coast of Venezuela and he had little or no opportunity to observe harbour life or to venture inland. Conrad had to rely on Robert Cunninghame Graham, who guided him to many books on Latin America, and gave him the benefit of his own experiences in South America. Of the books recommended by Cunninghame Graham in the writing of "Gaspar Ruiz", the most important was *Extracts from a Journal Written on the Coasts of Chili, Perú, and México in the Years 1820, 1821, 1822* by Captain Basil Hall, and published in 1824.

Conrad rarely identified the settings of his works with real places. His far eastern novels and stories are set in places with invented names, although many of them have since been identified as real places (see Sherry, Norman, 1966); and in "Heart of Darkness" it is obvious that the main narrator, Marlow, visits Brussels before his voyage to and up the Congo, although in the story he never mentions by name either the city or the river. In *Nostromo*, Conrad gives fictitious names to his locations, as in his Far Eastern works, but one senses that with *Nostromo* his motivation for doing so is different. It is not that he wants simply to distance his fiction from events in his own life in order to discourage the reader from in-

terpreting his fiction as autobiography; nor is it (as he says in a letter to Richard Curle, 24th April, 1922) to avoid the "explicitness" that he considers to be "fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion". His purpose in *Nostromo* is rather to compress the whole of Latin America, and the historical, political and economic forces operating within it, into one typical country, his composite republic of Costaguana, so that he can portray on a broad canvas the roles and fates of individuals in the large-scale exercise of political and economic forces in human society.

Conrad finished writing *Nostromo* on 30th August, 1904. There followed a period of troubles for him. His wife Jessie had an operation on her knee, and then the family went to spend a few months on Capri, but it was an expedition full of misfortunes. They returned to England in May, 1905, and during the rest of the year Conrad was not in the best of health. This period, then, was not productive for him, but at the end of the year, being short of money, he produced three short pieces which he hoped to place in popular magazines. One of these stories was "Gaspar Ruiz".

"Gaspar Ruiz" is a tale of about 20,000 words, and is a by-product of the research that Conrad did for writing *Nostromo*. The action is set in Chile at the time of the struggle for independence from Spain. Conrad had never been within three thousand kilometres of Chile, and apart from this story and passing mentions of Talcahuano in *Lord Jim* and in "Typhoon", and a mention of Valparaiso, Chile does not figure at all in his fiction.

Two factors which distinguish the story "Gaspar Ruiz" from most of the rest of Conrad's fictions, and from *Nostromo* in particular, are its degree of historical accuracy and its lack of an attempt to conceal this accuracy by playing with personal and

geographical names. In fiction, and especially in Conrad's fiction, it is often difficult to draw the boundary between fact and invention. Norman Sherry's work in the 1960s, resulting in his two books, *Conrad's Eastern World* (1966) and *Conrad's Western World* (1971), is an attempt to draw such a boundary with some precision, and Sherry claims considerable areas for fact at the expense of invention. Conrad is notorious for concealing, or trying to conceal, this boundary: he is fictional when he purports to be factual, as in his Author's Notes to collected editions of his works; and for his fictional works he draws heavily on facts of his own life, as in "Youth", "Heart of Darkness" and *The Shadow-Line*.

Of course, in "Gaspar Ruiz" we should not expect full historical and geographical accuracy. The work is, after all, a work of fiction, almost incidentally containing people who actually existed, events which actually took place, and authentically-named geographical locations where these people were involved in these events. And, indeed, there are people who did not exist, and events which did not take place, and geographical locations which cannot be identified; and these fictional elements, into which the facts are blended, make "Gaspar Ruiz" a tale, and not a chapter from a volume of *The History of Chile*.

Let us now attempt to distinguish the factual elements from the fictional.

Those figures who are generally considered to be the most important in the history of Chile's struggle for independence from Spain are Bernardo O'Higgins (1778-1842), José San Martín (1777-1850), Lord Thomas Cochrane (1775-1860), and José Miguel Carrera (1785-1821). Of these, O'Higgins, surprisingly, does not appear at all in "Gaspar Ruiz", Cochrane and Carrera (called Carreras by Conrad) are offstage and are little more than elements in the background events; and so San Martín is the only one

who plays a significant role in the story. The only other character who is referred to by his real name is the Araucanian chief, Peneleo. Conrad found Peneleo in the pages of Captain Basil Hall's journal (1824: I, 360-361).

Of the remaining characters in "Gaspar Ruiz", only the protagonist, Gaspar Ruiz himself, is readily identifiable. Hall devotes several pages (I: 322-328 and 368-370) to the activities of Vicente Benavides (1777-1822), and many of these activities are taken by Conrad and attributed to Gaspar Ruiz. The other characters, General Robles, Santierra, Ruiz's wife Erminia and their daughter Erminia, are fictional characters. Benavides had a wife, Teresa Ferrer Santibañez, but she appears not to have played such a role in Benavides' activities as Erminia played in Gaspar Ruiz's.

The events in Conrad's story are based on events involving Benavides in the Guerra a Muerte from 1818 to 1822. Benavides was a man of humble origins, like Gaspar Ruiz, and started his military career as a common soldier in the army of Juan José Carrera. In 1813, during the dictatorship of Juan José Carrera, he became a sergeant in the Republican army. In the same year he deserted to the Royalists. With his brother Timoteo, Benavides was given the task of persuading the Araucanians to join forces with the Royalists and fight against the Republicans. In 1817, he was rewarded with the captaincy of the Concepción battalion, and the following year, in the crucial battle in the struggle for independence, the Battle of Maipo, he was captured by the victorious Republicans and sentenced to death "along with his brother and other delinquents" (Hall, Basil, I, 322).

Conrad's version is already significantly different. After being only some months in the hands of the Royalists, Gaspar Ruiz is recaptured by the Republicans in "a great battle... on the banks of the river Bío Bío"

(Ch. 1). Unlike Benavides, Gaspar Ruiz was unwillingly with the Royalists prior to this battle, of which there is no record in historical accounts. Conrad goes on: "And now, having been captured arms in hand amongst Royalists, he could expect no other fate but to be shot as a deserter. Gaspar Ruiz, however, was not a deserter... He had really been made prisoner..." (Ch. 1). The difference from the Benavides story, then, is that the changing of sides is for very different reasons in the case of Gaspar Ruiz.

Conrad invents the details of the events between Gaspar Ruiz's capture and the execution by firing squad, but the execution itself and Gaspar Ruiz's escape with only a sword wound in the neck is close to Hall's account (I: 322-323).

The neck wound left Benavides deformed, with his head permanently tilted back. This detail would have been not use to Conrad, even if he had known of it, for he would not want to give his hero a grotesque appearance. Gaspar Ruiz's neck wound, on the other hand, arouses the compassion of a beautiful young woman, who nurses him and conceals him from the Republicans, and with whom he falls in love. The earthquake and Gaspar Ruiz's rescue of Erminia, Robles and Santierra from the collapsing house are pure fiction, but they provide a plausible, if highly improbable, link with subsequent events. Benavides' wife always accompanied him on his escapades, and Conrad needs a wife for Gaspar Ruiz to do the same, although in a rather different role. And Gaspar Ruiz had to win allies among the Republicans in order to gain, like Benavides, a secret meeting with San Martín.

Both Benavides and Gaspar Ruiz had their secret meetings with San Martín "at midnight, in the centre of the great square of Santiago" (Hall, I, 323-324), and as a result both Benavides and his fictional counterpart had to prove their loyalty. Benavides was sent to the south to persuade the Royal-

ists to stop fighting, and Gaspar Ruiz was sent to raid a military store in Linares.

In both cases, there was a conflict with the Civil Governor in the south. Benavides quarrelled with Freire, Governor of Concepción, and "speedily commenced a desolating war with fire and sword" (Miller, John, 1829: I, 261). Gaspar Ruiz, however, in a rage and using his great strength, killed the Civil Governor (Ch. 9).

According to Hall, Benavides was responsible for a massacre on the island of Laja of republican soldiers under the command of Major-General Don Andrés Alcázar after he had promised them their lives if they surrendered. Conrad includes this event in "Gaspar Ruiz", but with the difference that Benavides' counterpart is not involved in "the Massacre of the Island", and is therefore not guilty of such cold-blooded and perfidious brutality.

Benavides' capture of several ships and his contacts with the Spanish Governor of the island of Chiloe are taken by Conrad from Hall's account (I, 325-326) and attributed to Gaspar Ruiz with little alteration.

In 1820, San Martín captured Lima and forced the Spaniards to withdraw almost completely from South America. He returned to Chile in 1822, three days after Benavides had been defeated and captured near Chillán, and then executed in Santiago. But according to Conrad, the return from Perú of the victorious San Martín and Robles was the turning point in Gaspar Ruiz's fortunes. He was forced into an alliance with Carreras, "the so-called dictator of the so-called republic of Mendoza on the other side of the mountains" Ch.10). Most of the rest of the story is probably pure invention.

The most important fictional element in "Gaspar Ruiz" is the complete transformation of Vicente Benavides, the unprincipled, bloodthirsty adventurer that we find in Hall's pages, into Gaspar Ruiz. In the early chapters of the story, Gaspar Ruiz is a simple-

minded and good-hearted young campesino who has been drawn into the military struggle between the Royalists and the Republicans. He is guided by the instinct to save his own skin, although he has no wish to harm anybody else in the process, and he has compassion for others in a similar predicament to his own. Then, when he falls in love with the Royalist Erminia, he becomes her instrument for revenge against the Republicans, and she takes control of his destiny.

Let us now look at the narrative structure and mode. Although it is only about sixty pages in length, “Gaspar Ruiz” is more like a sketch for a novel or a romance than a short story. It is episodic in its plot structure, and Conrad divides it into twelve chapters. A little over half the narration is first-person: a retired officer in the Chilean Republican army, General Santierra, relates events from fifty-year-old memories of the military career and death of Gaspar Ruiz. The gaps in Santierra’s account are filled by an anonymous third-person narrator, who also provides two chapters of introduction. This narrator is omniscient. The story concludes with a passage of first-person narration by an anonymous English visitor to General Santierra’s home. Baines comments perceptively on the narrative structure: “... the presentation is as slipshod as the characterisation is crude; whenever Conrad needs to give some information which the narrator [Santierra] could not know he drops him and takes over himself” (Baines, Jocelyn, 1960: 388). But there is another aspect of the narrative that deserves comment, and that is mode.

By far the most commonly used modes of narrative are speech and writing, but frequently in fiction we find a written simulation of oral narration. As in many of Conrad’s fictions, we have two or more narrators, and often one –the frame– narrates in writing, and the other –the main narrator, like Marlow in

“Heart of Darkness”– narrates orally. Of course, what Marlow gives us is a simulation of spontaneous oral narrative, and as I pointed out in my paper “Alternative Narrative Modes for ‘Heart of Darkness’” (Lucas, Michael, 2002), there are extensive passages of Marlow’s narrative which lack the features of spontaneous oral narrative.

In “Gaspar Ruiz”, There is no significant difference between the narrative style of the anonymous third-person narrator, who, we presume, is writing, and the narrative style of General Santierra, who, we are told, is narrating orally. This is an example of Santierra’s supposedly “oral” narration:

He had the strength to pick up one of the heavy posts of the porch. *Holding* it under his armpit like a lance, but with both hands, he charged madly the rocking house with the force of a battering-ram, *bursting* open the door and *rushing* in, headlong, over our prostrate bodies. I and the general *picking* ourselves up, bolted out together, without *looking* round once till we got across the road. Then, *clinging* to each other, we beheld the house change suddenly into a heap of formless rubbish behind the back of a man, who staggered towards us *bearing* the form of a woman clasped in his arms (Ch. 8).

In this passage of 109 words, there are four sentences and two dependent clauses, which means that there are six finite verbs. There are, however, ten other verbs, seven of which are present participles, and three of these occur in clause-initial participle phrases. The syntactic complexity of the four sentences of this passage is a feature of written language, not spoken language. And this passage is not exceptional or inconsistent with Santierra’s narrative as a whole. Conrad seems not to be concerned about giving Santierra a voice; something that he is very concerned about in the stories that follow: “An Anarchist”, “The Informer” and “The Brute” (Lucas 2000, pp. 172-183, and 2004).

In Santierra's narrative we find several other syntactic features that are out of place in spontaneous oral narrative: for instance, the non-restrictive relative clause – what I prefer to call the comment relative clause, such as

... of that subordinate, who, after all, was responsible for those prisoners

and long post-nominal adjectival phrases, such as

But that a young girl, famous for her haughty beauty and, only a short time before, the admired of all the balls in the Viceroy's palace, should take by the hand a guasso, ...

And in general, Santierra speaks in sentences of almost Henry-Jamesian complexity.

I have just mentioned the frequency of present participial phrases. Even in the written mode such frequency is disturbing. It is as if Conrad had developed a stylistic bad habit and made no effort to break it; or he ignored niceties of style in his great hurry to write the story for a magazine in order to get his hands on the cash as quickly as possible.

The last aspect I wish to consider is the representation of character, especially of the characters of Gaspar Ruiz and Erminia.

In the first two chapters, which are narrated by an anonymous third-person narrator, Gaspar is portrayed as a mild and simple-minded peasant. This image is hammered home in a series of eight direct references in six or seven pages to his feeble intellect and powerful physique. Here are some examples:

... his mind was hardly active enough to take a discriminating view of the advantages or perils of treachery.

... sluggish anger, which he could not very well express, as though the vigour of his spirit were by no means equal to the strength of his body.

... a good son on account of the mildness of his character and the great strength of his limbs.

In Chapters III and IV, however, where the narration switches to Santierra, Gaspar Ruiz, locked in the guardroom with other deserters, shows resourcefulness, if not intelligence, and his procedure for obtaining and distributing water to the prisoners is described as "systematic".

In Chapter V, we are back with the anonymous third person narrator, who tells us of Gaspar Ruiz's survival of the firing squad and his escape to the house of the royalist family. Here he is asked by Erminia's father if he is a hated patriot, to which he replies confusedly that he "did not know".

Chapter VII is narrated by the anonymous omniscient narrator, who again remarks on Gaspar Ruiz's "docility and... strength". In Chapter VIII the narration switches back to Santierra, who gives an account of his visit with General Robles to the house of the Royalist family where Gaspar Ruiz has taken refuge, of the destruction of the house by earthquake, and the rescue of Erminia, Robles and Santierra by the swift and resourceful action of Gaspar Ruiz. Then the omniscient narrator takes over in the last part of Chapter Eight, in which Gaspar Ruiz and Erminia establish their relationship in a manner reminiscent of love stories in popular magazines.

In Chapter IX, Santierra tells us of the "audacity and courage" of Gaspar Ruiz, and his super leadership in the raid on thearrison in Linares. This is the initiation of a new Gaspar Ruiz: from being humble and simple-minded he suddenly becomes a strongly assertive character, a skillful and ferocious leader of fighting men with a fearsome temper.

This transformation, brought about by the strong-willed and vengeful Erminia, I find impossible to accept: she might well be

able to implant courage, vengeance and anger in him, but not the intelligence, leadership qualities and resourcefulness to carry out a military campaign.

Erminia I have called strong-willed and vengeful. She is another of those women in Conrad’s fiction –in, for example, *Victory*, *The Rescue*, *The Arrow of Gold*, “Freya of the Seven Isles” and “The Brute” – who threaten the wellbeing and fortunes of the protagonists, although often unintentionally. But there are two serious inconsistencies in Conrad’s portrayal of the relationship between Gaspar Ruiz and Erminia. The first is that, in spite of Erminia’s hatred of Republicans, she countenanced – even engineered – Gaspar Ruiz’s treating with San Martín and his joining the Republican side after his raid on Linares. And the other inconsistency is that, although Erminia has exploited her power over Gaspar Ruiz for her own vengeful purposes throughout their relationship and has shown no genuine feeling for him, as he lies dying, “she bent down, dry-eyed and in a steady voice: ‘On all the earth I have loved nothing but you, Gaspar,’ she said” (Ch. 12) – and then she throws herself over a cliff to her death. This melodramatic denouement is difficult to accept.

The end of Gaspar Ruiz –the character, not the story– could well be pure invention on Conrad’s part, or, as he suggests in his Author’s Note to *A Set of Six*, could have been taken from something he read in his youth. Whichever it was, the episode is even more melodramatic than Erminia’s death, and it guaranteed the acceptance of the story for publication in a popular magazine.

My conclusion is unashamedly almost a repeat of the conclusion to my essay “Reha-

bilitating “The Brute”” (Lucas, 2004). “Gaspar Ruiz” is by a long way inferior to all the other stories in *A Set of Six*, and it is a great pity that it is placed first in the volume, immediately after the Author’s Note, in which Conrad talks about “writing silly stories”, so that we are prejudiced against the remaining five stories.

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