

*JUAN RUIZ, OR*  
LEOPOLDO ALAS'S LITERARY APPRENTICESHIP

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The transcription and publication in 1985 of the manuscript newspaper *Juan Ruiz*, which had been in the custody of the Adolfo Posada family for over eighty years, give us the rare opportunity to examine for the first time the youthful origins of Leopoldo Alas's vocation as a writer. If the contents of *Juan Ruiz* repeatedly disclose a sixteen-year-old's adolescent mind frame, its form already demonstrates a remarkable degree of maturity. The text, which came out weekly—then twice a week—between 8 March 1868 and 14 January of the following year, was managed by an “autor único” and editor-in-chief named Juan Ruyz (later, Ruiz), who would subsequently be aided and abetted by two other fictitious contributors, Mengano and Benjamín. This enterprising person is characterized as “un solo joven verdadero y muy listo por más señas”. Called a newspaper of wit and humor, this is a surprisingly complex piece of work. Very clever indeed was this

extraordinary teenager who used the pages of his own private newspaper to experiment with a variety of narrative techniques, thus creating in the process an intriguing series of different voices, including those of several imaginary readers. This work, about which I have already published a preliminary commentary, can be seen as an instrument of self-apprenticeship for the young Asturian, whose growth as a writer is clearly discernible in the course of its fifty numbers.

In that self-apprenticeship, he learns by imitating. In both form—a set number of pages, headlines, ordering of materials, and permanent sections—and in content—texts in prose or poetry, complete or incomplete, fragments and occasionally continuations—each issue of this newspaper is a miniature clearly modeled after several satirical publications of the period. Such diversity within the uniformity of the fifty numbers that form the links of this chain, or collection, allows the young apprentice to unfold his literary talents in many directions, some of which offer clear proof, in the volume as a whole, of Clarín's first steps in artistic development. We see, too, his willful determination to carry out methodically what he had proposed to do from the very start. Within the formal model adopted, the complete newspaper collection also displays an internal evolution by reflecting the passing of the seasons; religious holidays; local, national and even international events; the press of both Oviedo and Madrid, with which he pretends to engage in debate; and personal incidents, more or less disguised, from the life of Leopoldo Alas. There are, without a doubt, incongruities and a lack of continuity in the pages of *Juan Ruiz*; nonetheless, the collection constitutes a unified whole, since the last number refers back to the first one, thus allowing the author to bring to a formal close his proposed project.

Far from becoming a monotonous routine, the disciplined regularity with which the numbers of *Juan Ruiz* were written evidently gave the budding impresario infinite opportunities to experiment, not only with different forms of versification and narrative techniques, but with an enormous variety of voices. These voices, which range over entire numbers as well as individual texts, lead him to create multiple perspectives while at

the same time asserting with growing certainty his own point of view. Thus, one of the most interesting elements in *Juan Ruiz* is dialogue, which permeates the entire work in all its facets: dialogue between fictitious characters, *dramatis personae*, poetic voices; between the editor-in-chief with his subscribers (many with their own literary aspirations), with friends and acquaintances, with real writers—living or dead—and with his two main collaborators, Mengano and Benjamín, each of whom, in turn, uses dialogue in his own respective writings. Finally, the whole work, itself entirely fictitious, can be seen as a kind of continuous dialogue which Juan Ruiz, that is to say, the young Leopoldo Alas, has with himself—an exercise that prepares him for the controversial stance of the future critic Clarín as well as for the creation of characters and of diverse points of view in the stories and novels of his maturity. It is this particular aspect of the writer's apprenticeship that I would like to discuss here, focusing mainly on the first few numbers of the newspaper.

Even before the answering echoes of Mengano and Benjamín make their appearance in No. 17, the single voice of Juan Ruyz—probably an anagram made up of the letters, in reverse, of *Alas Y UReña*<sup>1</sup>—rises out of and above the pages of his newspaper. In addition to using dialogue within his different writings in prose and poetry, the voice regularly dialogues with itself through the use of several curious dichotomies as well as in texts that demonstrate a constant preoccupation for the actual process of writing. Already in this first phase, as poet, Juan Ruyz displays a remarkable mimetic ability to parody different types of versification,<sup>2</sup> introducing at the same time a great diversity of themes and tonalities. Besides including dialogue in numerous poems, he also speaks directly to the reader or readers, or else to some specific addressee,<sup>3</sup> thus furthering the dialogic pattern. At times his parody of styles sparks him to end a supposedly elevated composition with a joke or a funny anecdote,<sup>4</sup> so as to establish a break—or contrast—in tone. A similar contrast is produced when the poet, conversing with himself, comments upon his own work.<sup>5</sup>

Since Leopoldo Alas became an outstanding prose writer and not a poet, it is only natural that in this first demonstration of his literary activity we should be primarily interested in examining

his texts in prose, which, moreover, are far superior in quality to the poetry. In both, we find a great variety of themes and tones, although as expected perhaps, the satirical intention predominates. In short narrations, sketches, brief dramatizations, portraits, biographies, and sundry articles, we encounter dialogues attributed to interlocutors who are either personalized or not, all of which obviously constitutes a preparatory exercise for Alas's future work. Besides these internal dialogues, Juan Ruyz keeps up a continuous dialogue with his supposed readers, addressing them directly in formal terms ("V.V", "señores", or "señores y señoras") with rhetorical formulae often employed in later years by the critic Clarín. Frequently Juan Ruyz engages in a kind of introspective dialogue with himself, even taking the attitude of criticizing his own work as a writer.<sup>6</sup>

Dominating this first phase of the newspaper, as we said, is the voice of Juan Ruyz himself, who signs the lead articles and assigns to one permanent section the title, "Cosas de Juan". Although most of the other texts are unsigned, one can assume that they, too, are the product of his pen. The last section, "Correspondencia de Juan", is almost always signed with the initials L.A.U., which of course are those of Leopoldo Alas Ureña, thus referring to the identity of the real person. In this section he keeps up a copious correspondence with a multitude of imaginary subscribers, identified by their initials<sup>7</sup> and scattered all over the globe, in which he supposedly answers letters received pertaining to matters either treated by the newspaper or related to it. He thus creates a disembodied world of voices we do not hear directly, but which are answered, as if we were listening to a telephone conversation carried on in our presence with some distant interlocutor. To create this sensation of multiple voices, Juan Ruyz sometimes quotes—and criticizes—poems appearing in the press, or else written by acquaintances of his.<sup>8</sup> He also includes, with commentary, imitative verses composed by subscribers, who spontaneously send them to the newspaper.<sup>9</sup> On one occasion a long poem, entitled "Manifiesto. El color negro", is signed by "A Patriot" (No. 13), thus suggesting a different author. Another long poem, an amusing composition entitled "Amor y física" and signed by "Galileo" (No. 9), supposedly

prompts a complaint on the part of a subscriber whose own composition Juan Ruiz had rejected. In the next issue the editor justifies his decision to publish the contested poem by claiming reasons of friendship, for as he says, “ese estudiante y yo andamos juntos desde que nacimos”, words that playfully reinforce the single identity of the editor in-chief and author named Juan Ruiz with the student and author Leopoldo Alas. This identity is established right from the start in the resolute declaration “Presente”, which appears in the first issue, wherein he discusses his personal name: “Yo soy estudiante, y no de los peores, no porque yo lo diga, que aquí está Juan Ruiz que no me dejará mentir”. In “Cosas de Juan” (No. 1), there is a curious dialogue—a kind of self-interview—between two unnamed interlocutors, which reaffirms this same identity. In fact, the entire newspaper turns out to be a prolonged and many-sided conversation of Leopoldo Alas—or Juan Ruiz—with himself.

As noted, in both prose and poetry Juan Ruiz often uses dialogue with himself in order to make a brief, but incisive, commentary about his own work. In some of his prose writings this type of self-commentary is enlarged upon to the point of becoming a substantial theme within the composition by focusing simultaneously on the subject matter as well as the manner in which it is presented. One senses that often when he begins to write a piece, he still doesn't have a clear idea of where he is heading, nor of how he plans to bring it to a conclusion, which is probably quite normal in newspaper writing in general. Even the composition of each number of *Juan Ruiz* seems to be dictated by a spontaneous process of association, as can be observed, for example, in No. 7, where the lead article, “¡Música, música!”, about his love for music, is linked to the following article, a farewell to the city of Oviedo, by the title “Más música (Esta es la celestial),” giving it the tone of a canticle or hymn; and in a humorous poetic composition he also has recourse to musical motifs. We can see an example of his progress in writing by feeling his way and improvising, in the final commentary of “Cosas de Juan”, where we read: “He estado meditando un cuarto de hora para hacer un soneto de despedida, y no quiso salir.” Such groping indecisiveness also surfaces when he announces projects that he either abandons in midstream or never even begins.<sup>10</sup>

The actual writing process as a theme reappears frequently. The point of departure for the lead article “¡Música, música!”, for example, is the state or condition an author should be experiencing in order to write—the special “caprichito” he feels<sup>11</sup> —, which, for Juan Ruyz, is music. As the writing advances, the author finds himself in trouble: “Estoy en un terreno difícil. O doy un corte al artículo, o de lo contrario me meto a cuestiones peliagudas. Me decido por lo primero. Pero quisiera que el corte estuviera dado con gracia.” Then, after re-reading what he’s written, he makes his judgment: “creo que difícilmente pueda escribirse nada más insípido en tierra de cristianos. Y, sin embargo, en mi mano está el dar animación a estos párrafos diciendo . . . Pero no, no lo digo.” In “Fígaro y La Menais” (No. 12), he struggles with the problem of how the critic should organize his thoughts and present them in writing after having finished a book: “¡Cuántas ideas se agolpan en mi cerebro después de tan interesante lectura! ¿Cómo coordinarlas para fijarlas en el papel? ¡Oh, de ninguna manera! Es demasiado empresa, pero las presentaré como se presenten.” The first chapter of the (unfinished) novel, “El que tragó el molinillo” (No. 13), begins with an aside to the reader where, in discussing the *et cetera* of the first line (“La noche era oscura como etc. . .”), he reveals a sharp stylistic consciousness about what he is doing. And in the conclusion to the article entitled “Los bañistas (cuadros al fresco)” (No. 16), a parody written in Gijón, he suggests a correlation between the unexpected dramatic ending and the hot weather that is making the author suffer: “Anda, anda, dirán VV., el pobre Juan Ruyz se ha vuelto loco, ¡un articulillo de baños convertido en una escena patibularia digna de Parreño! ¡Pobre Juan Ruyz! tienen VV. razón, ¡pobre Juan Ruyz! el calor le ha trastornado el juicio.” “¿No les gusta a VV. cómo acaba el artículo?” he subsequently asks, going on to talk about the consequences of a different ending, and finally complaining about the heat again: “¡Y a mí qué mal me sienta el calor! ¡Y a VV. qué mal les sienta el artículo!”

With time, the narrative trials and experiments of the first phase of *Juan Ruiz* become increasingly self-confident and mature. All the characteristics we have enumerated in our study of this phase are intensified in the rest of the collection. The

addition of two other identified voices—those of Mengano and Benjamín, from Oviedo—beginning with No. 17 increases even more the tendency to diversify point of view and make use of dialogue. Both writers characterize themselves in the first of their respective poems by saying: “Yo soy así.” In the same number, L.A.U. invites them to join the staff (see “Correspondencia de Juan”), saying to Mengano, as though in response to a previous letter: “Ya ves que publico tu letrilla.”<sup>12</sup> They contribute pieces in both poetry and prose. L.A.U. refuses to answer a subscriber regarding their identity.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile in No. 26 the *boss*, after reaffirming his preference for the spelling of *Ruiz*,<sup>14</sup> finally chooses to use the form of *Ruiz*,<sup>15</sup> a decision that parallels an increased normalization of the newspaper’s capricious spelling. At the same time the September Revolution injects a serious element that will predominate in Nos. 23 through 40, where, in “Cosas de Juan,” we read that “*Juan Ruiz* piensa desde hoy dedicarse menos a la política y más a la literatura,” a resolution that coincides with the publication of the first two chapters of the “cuento raro” entitled “El caramelo” which we will come back to in a moment.

Although the two new contributors do not possess totally opposite traits, since they and Juan Ruiz share certain preferences and attitudes, nevertheless they are both clearly differentiated. Benjamín has an uncle named Don Tomás, to whom he explains, in the article titled “Mi tío y yo,” his decision to join the staff of *Juan Ruiz* in order to combat “esa plaga de chiquillos audaces, tontos, ignorantes y necios” (No. 19)<sup>16</sup>. He declares himself an admirer of Quevedo.<sup>17</sup> He confesses to not understanding politics “tal como hoy anda por España,” thus explaining his silence for a few weeks when he gave up “el puesto al amo y a Mengano” (No. 37). If Benjamín talks to his uncle, Mengano cites his grandmother, Doña Sopalanda Mangaestrecha de Tontuna, whose opinion on freedom of worship is recorded in No. 25. In “Una noche de bureo” (No. 28), he portrays himself obeying a directive of the “manager” of *Juan Ruiz*, who has sent him, on express orders from the boss, to bring in something newsworthy for that same issue. (Once more in this article the text consists of a description of the compositional process.) Likewise, in “Con dolor de

muelas" (No. 31), he appears in the process of writing an article based on his own situation.<sup>18</sup> In the use of these rhetorical devices that combine the theme of the article with its very writing process, the character of Mengano is not so far removed from that of Juan Ruiz, who puts such devices to good use here, as he did earlier. A good example is "¡Me aburro! (Artículo-fantástico-filosófico-burlesco)" (No. 22), where boredom itself inspires him to write the article. A title like this one reminds us of Juan Ruyz's initial declaration when he spoke of having decided to begin publication of his newspaper in order to amuse himself—that is to say, to reduce the boredom—on Saturday evenings, an objective which, once fulfilled, will lead him to put an end to the venture, and thus, to the publication.

Of course, all this splitting of different characters eventually goes back to the inherent identity of the author, who, in "De babero" (No. 33), has his "friend" Juan Ruiz go to his house to congratulate him on his saint's day. In the middle of all this clever—but still adolescently ingenuous—play found in *Juan Ruiz*, Leopoldo Alas's vehicle for literary apprenticeship, there is one complete short story—the one entitled "El caramelo" (Nos. 40, 41, and 42)—which, with its complex artistic use of diverse narrative voices, is doubtless a worthy precedent of many tales that would later spring from the pen of this, the finest short-story writer of nineteenth-century Spain.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The last name is written this way, with a *y*, throughout much of the text. See my article, where I talk about this name in greater detail.

<sup>2</sup> In an article—written in dialogue—titled "Recuerdos" (No.2), the author boasts that he knows more about rhetoric than a teacher of his. Here and elsewhere in the newspaper *Juan Ruiz* there are indications

that one of the motivations behind the young Leopoldo's project was his desire to demonstrate, even within the limits of this private publication, his own superior literary abilities, particularly when set against a background of mediocre teachers, fellow students with greater aspirations than talent, and a dull-witted press, especially that of the *Vetusta-to-be*.

<sup>3</sup> For example, "A Gea-Rusell" (No.4), or "A un suicida" (No.8).

<sup>4</sup> As in the case of "¡¡¡Cayeron!!!", where a list of serious "falls" ends with that of "mi gata [que] cayó de un cuarto piso" (No.1); or "Otro sonetazo (como el de marras o peor)," where the terrible pain suffered by the poet ends up being caused by the housekeeper, "*que no puso orinal bajo mi cama*" (No.8).

<sup>5</sup> Thus, the third part of "Una junta local" ends with the parenthetical commentary, "Gracias a Dios que se acabó" (No. 16).

<sup>6</sup> Quoting his youthful self in No.2, he says: "También yo, cuando hacía pinitos en literatura, escribía sobre la esclabitud [sic] y me acuerdo que uno de mis artículos empezaba: 'Monstruos europeos oíd mi voz y temblad porque ella es el eco de Dios que vibrará en lo más recóndido [sic] de vuestra conciencia . . .' Lo que va de ayer a hoy." In "Más música (Esta es la celestial)," he closes with "Sí, señores, está escrito, y si no carta canta" (No.7); and at the end of "¿Y bien?" he writes: "El articulillo no tiene gracia. Ni malicia" (No.8).

<sup>7</sup> An exception is the case of Theodorus, Emperor of Abbyssinia, a real person whose supposed letter—quoted in No.7—is answered by Juan Ruyz in the Correspondence section of the same number. (For a more detailed commentary on this relationship, see my previously cited study of *Juan Ruiz*.)

<sup>8</sup> In No.2 for example, he cites the beginning of a poem written by a friend of his—one of the many bad poets quoted in *Juan Ruiz*—which he says he has burned.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the "advertisement in verse" sent by "un fino español" or another even longer composition, both in No. 11.

<sup>10</sup> In No.8 he announces the titles of the first three volumes of a planned Juan Ruyz Library, one of which will first appear, in short installments, in No. 13, until its publication is cut short in No.23. No further mention is made of the other two titles. In the same No.8 he announces: "En el próximo numero (si sale) empezaré a publicar una serie de artículos titulados 'De hombres célebres, biografías celeberrimas'—La primera será 'El Marqués de la Ensenada'. Por supuesto que puedo dejar los tales artículos cuando me dé la gana a mí . . ." In fact, the first four installments of this biography appear in the following numbers, each with a promise of continuation. Nevertheless, in the same number which has the last installment, the "Cosas de Juan" section ends with the following declaration: "Ya me lo temía yo. Tengo que

suspender las biografías, pero en cambio publicaré 'El que tragó el molinillo' . . . "

<sup>11</sup> Writing with "un gato en el regazo" (Paul de Kock); or lying "panzabajo" (Manuel del Palacio); in "una semi-borrachera" (Fernández y González) . . . For Clarín's future "musical ideal" see Rivkin's essay in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> It appears that Juan Ruyz had a change of heart when he published this poem with the signature of Mengano, for in "Correspondencia de Juan" (No.15) we find the following: "Da. L.N. (Bolibia). Su letrilla 'Yo soy así' acaso la publique. Gracias a Dios que me mandan algo bueno."

<sup>13</sup> In "Correspondencia de Juan" (No.18) we read: "Dn. JI.F. (Moscow). ¿Pregunta V. que si Mengano, Benjamín y Juan Ruyz son tres nombres distintos y un solo hombre verdadero? Lo que V. quiera."

<sup>14</sup> L.A.U. writes to a subscriber at the end of No.21: "¿V. opina que Ruyz se escribe Ruiz y no Ruyz? Y yo lo contrario."

<sup>15</sup> "Sigo creyendo que está mejor Ruyz que Ruiz, pero la moda va por el lado contrario y hay que ir con la corriente," he then comments in "Cosas de Juan."

<sup>16</sup> "Benjamín," L.A.U. answers a subscriber at the end of No.22, "no es literato de Cimadevilla."

<sup>17</sup> "Yo estuve en la prisión de Quevedo," he writes in "¡Quevedo!" (No.21), an allusion that brings to mind the time Leopoldo Alas spent as a child in León, where the Golden Age poet was imprisoned.

<sup>18</sup> "¿Qué haré yo ahora para desfogar mi mal humor?" he asks himself on returning home with a persistent toothache. "Escribir un artículo para *Juan Ruiz* todo lo peor que pueda. Y si el amo se incomoda me incomoda yo, y si riñe riño y me separo de la redacción."

### *Works Cited*

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