

Translator's Introduction

Francisco Ayala is without a doubt one of the great masters of Spanish prose. Born in the Andalusian city of Granada in 1906, he is the author of four novels, nine volumes of short fiction, and countless books of social and literary criticism. Recently the first two volumes of his memoirs, for which he was awarded the National Prize for Literature in 1983, have been delighting Spanish readers. His unique contribution to the world of letters and ideas has long been recognized by both the general public and critics at home and abroad. As a writer of fiction, Ayala has frequently been described as a "classic in his own lifetime." Today, as an essayist and prophet in his own land after many years of exile, he addresses the conscience of his nation.

Ayala did not always enjoy such a satisfactory relationship with the Spanish reading public, which was denied all access to his works for several decades after the end of the Civil War in 1939. At that time, the author, who had served the Spanish Republic in a number of ways (he was Secretary to its legation in Prague), was forced into exile. He had already earned himself a position of respect in the Spanish literary world, having published two novels, a volume of vanguard short stories, and a number of essays about that new and influential art form of the period: the cinema. In 1929, as a scholarship student in Germany, he was to witness at first hand the rise of

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Nazism. In 1934, he was awarded a professorship at the University of Madrid.

When the Civil War broke out in 1936, Ayala returned from a lecture tour in South America to work for his country's democratically elected government. He would go back to the New World at the conclusion of that bloody conflict to make his home for the next decade in Buenos Aires, where, along with several books of essays, many on political science, and his monumental *Treatise on Sociology*, he also published, in 1949, two complementary yet independent volumes of short fiction, *The Lamb's Head* and *Usurpers*, which refer, either directly or indirectly, to those passionate and violent events of war that the author had experienced from the very eye of the storm.

The fact that these two books appeared in the same year suggests that Ayala wrote them simultaneously. Actually, they were composed successively: with the exception of a later addition, the contents of *Usurpers*—a volume of tales based, with varying degrees of fidelity, on historical moments in the Spanish past—antedate the stories of *The Lamb's Head*, which are all centered around the Civil War itself. Indeed, *Usurpers* seems almost to have liberated—even exorcised—the author to be able to write about that national tragedy which turned out to be the prelude to World War II. It is significant that, after a narrative silence of ten years, during which time he dedicated himself to the essay, Ayala's first work of fiction was a moving prose poem entitled "Dialogue of the Dead: A Spanish Elegy," published in Buenos Aires in 1939 (barely a year after his father and a brother had been assassinated by the fascists), which he later incorporated into *Usurpers* as a kind of lyric epilogue that would also serve as a thematic link between this book and *The Lamb's Head*.

In 1944 Ayala published "The Bewitched," which was immediately acclaimed by Argentine critics, among them Jorge Luis Borges, and later, along with five other tales—"The Bell of Huesca" (1943), "The Embrace" (1945), "San Juan de Dios" (1946), "The Invalid"

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(1946), and "The Impostors" (1947)—incorporated into the first edition of *Usurpers*. The book was prefaced by a fictional "Explication Written by a Journalist and Archivist at the Request of the Author, His Friend," which appears in this translation as an appendix. This piece, signed in such a way as to dissemble the real author's complete name—F[rancisco] de Paula A[yala] G. Duarte—is a pseudo-pedantic tour de force that managed to deceive many people at the time, including more than one professional commentator. An expanded edition of *Usurpers* (1969) also included the following postscript, signed by "F. A.," at the end of the "Explication": "In 1950, after publishing the volume of *Usurpers*, I wrote still one more tale, 'The Inquisitor,' belonging to the same vein, which I had thought exhausted, but which nonetheless yielded this late fruit. It is now incorporated in the cycle where it belongs."

The history of *Usurpers* subsequent to that first edition parallels, in a sense, that of its author, who, in 1950, reluctant to continue living in Argentina under the dictatorship of Juan Perón, accepted an offer to teach at the University of Puerto Rico, thus embarking upon a distinguished career as professor of Spanish literature that would take him, eight years later, to the continental United States, where he taught at institutions such as New York University, the University of Chicago, and the City University of New York, from which he retired in 1976. Prior to 1960, when Ayala visited his country for the first time after the war, the Franco regime had virtually eliminated his name from the history of Spanish literature. While stories from *Usurpers* were being translated, anthologized, and studied in university classrooms throughout the United States, the book could only be read clandestinely in Spain. Although a volume of short fiction entitled *A Monkey's Tale* appeared in a very limited edition in Madrid in 1955, the censors prohibited publication of his magnificent pair of novels, *Dog's Death* (1958), translated into English six years later as *Death as a Way of Life*, and *The Bottom of the Glass* (1962).

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In the early 1960s, which saw the entry of Spain into the United Nations, the rapid growth of that country's tourist industry, and the flowering of the Latin American novel, censorship gradually began to relax its grip, permitting a whole generation of Spanish readers to discover their own writers in exile. Although Ayala's next volume of stories, *The Ace of Clubs* (1962), had to be published in Buenos Aires, his short novel *The Abduction* (1965) was printed in Spain. Several of the tales from *Usurpers* were also collected into a volume in 1966, and *Dog's Death* was issued in paperback two years later. Ayala continued to make regular trips to his country, taking its pulse and gradually assuming a major role in its cultural life. But his intellectual prominence did not exempt him from the ubiquitous scissors of censorship: because he refused to allow the elimination of one text, as late as 1969, his *Complete Narrative Works*—which included the expanded edition of *Usurpers*—had to be published in Mexico.

The first complete edition of *Usurpers* to be published in Spain appeared in 1970, followed, in 1971, by a paperback edition that has gone through a number of printings. Meanwhile, Ayala continued to create new fictional works of a more intimate nature. With *The Garden of Delights*, originally published in Barcelona in 1971 and awarded the coveted Premio de la Crítica, he fully reestablished that long-lost harmony with readers of his native land.

Francisco Ayala's definitive return to Spain to live, in 1976, coincided with General Franco's death and the end of forty years of dictatorship. Since then, he has kept pace with the cultural life of the new constitutional monarchy, contributing influential articles and essays to major newspapers, lecturing, working on his memoirs, and continuing to write fiction. Considered something of the doyen of Spanish intellectuals, he is respected by young and old alike for his lucid and independent mind. His novels and short fiction are studied in Spanish high schools and universities. His 1984 election to the Spanish Royal Academy was widely celebrated, and he was

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invited to inaugurate the King Juan Carlos Chair at New York University in the spring of 1986.

Ayala's homeland may be Spain, and Spanish his language of expression, but his themes are universal. Time and again, in both his fiction and his essays, he returns to the subject of the human condition, which, he believes, has remained essentially the same since the Fall of Man. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in *Usurpers*, whose seven tales, based on different historical events of medieval and Golden Age Spain, all attest to the terrible corrupting force of power. Nor is it difficult to see in the ambition, violence, and surrender portrayed therein, in the hatred and—also—the love, a reflection, not just of that country's Civil War, but of mankind's eternal struggle for power.

That the fascination exerted by power and the consequences of this fascination are at the core of the book is explicitly stated by the author's "friend," the apocryphal and erudite Portuguese commentator invented by Ayala to "explicate" his text. Despite his initials, F. de Paula A. G. Duarte is neither a real person nor the author's alter ego. He is, instead, another imaginary character, another narrative voice (almost, but not quite, as anonymous as those of the "Dialogue of the Dead," and even more pedantic than that of "The Bewitched") in yet another piece of fiction. Thus his "Explication" should be read as a sort of fictional invention in which the real author's intellectual consciousness of the content and style of his book is disguised, artistically, in the words of the learned literary critic from Coimbra. Present-day readers should bear in mind both the historical moment and the uprooted author's personal circumstances, when, after finishing the main body of the book, they embark upon the "Explication"; they will discover there many interesting clues to the author's creative intent.

The central theme of the work is stated there as follows: "power exercised by man over his fellow man is always a usurpation." The narrator analyzes how this ideological phenomenon manifests itself

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in the six original narrations, which, as he says, "interrelate in different ways," and he explains both the author's choice, and careful use of historical settings, and his awareness of style. With the addition of "The Inquisitor," Ayala completed his depiction of the human passions giving rise to violence with a factor of paramount importance: fanaticism. The tale is based on a situation that occurred more than once in the history of Spain: that of the convert who, possessed with the ardor of the neophyte, relentlessly pursues his former coreligionists. This portrayal of the rigidity and intellectual arrogance of the fanatic mind has been especially popular with students of Spanish literature in the United States.

Usurpers is a work of great stylistic unity, within which there exist rhetorical differences consciously ascribed by the author to the various narrators and characters of each of the pieces. This fine, but important, distinction presents a major challenge to the translator. Ayala's sentences, frequently long and syntactically complex, unfold before our eyes with a sinuous rhythm that is at once fluid and carefully controlled: the elegant, often baroque line of his prose is, in fact, measured, even austere. He is always precise. In *Usurpers*, with its rich imagery, intensity of feeling, and intellectual complexity, no word, no phrase has been left to chance.

This is the first complete translation of *Usurpers* into English. I have had the privilege of working closely with the author, who is himself a translator, and an accomplished one at that. The characteristics of Ayala's style seemed to me to preclude from the start an overly free translation; they demanded, instead, as faithful a recreation as possible. I have tried to offer readers a mirror of the original by combining, insofar as possible, precision with poetry. I have respected the length of paragraphs and sentences, eliminated nothing, and taken special pains with the author's use of metaphor. The reader will find that certain bodily parts of characters are sometimes granted almost complete autonomy. One of the first Spaniards to write about the cinema as an art form, Ayala often takes advan-

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tage of the visual potential of language, offering us, time and again, close-ups and moving shots that emphasize the intimate relationship between a character's immediate physical reality and his or her inner being.

As the Explicator points out, these tales are based on "historical situations that are well known" to Ayala's readers. Since the English-speaking public is unlikely to have the same degree of familiarity with Spanish history and culture, I have included a limited number of brief notes of a purely informational nature, the majority of them identifications. In addition, there are a few notes intended to clarify other kinds of allusions or to explain an occasional word that has been left in the original Spanish.

CAROLYN RICHMOND