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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Sigüenza y Góngora's novelistic chronicle, *Los Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez*, and how the elements of the chronicle genre of the time, similar to those found in Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios*, intermingle with elements of picaresque narrative, comparable to those found in works such as *El Guzmán de Alfarache* or *El Lazarillo de Tormes*. We will also see the fundamentally symbolic role played by food and drink in the work in relation to misfortune.

Key words: Novel chronicle. Picaresque. Comparative.

Resumen:

El presente trabajo tiene como finalidad analizar la crónica novelada de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Los Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez* y cómo los elementos propios del género cronístico de la época, similares a los que pueden encontrarse en los *Naufragios* de Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca se entremezclan con elementos propios de la narrativa picaresca, comparables a los de obras como *El Guzmán de Alfarache* o *El Lazarillo de Tormes*. Asimismo, veremos el papel fundamentalmente simbólico que cobran los alimentos y las bebidas en la obra en relación con el infortunio.

Palabras clave: Crónica novelada. Picaresca. Comparativa.

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".... imagination is the power of man to project the truth and get
out of this world of shadows and incomplete acts."

Felipe Ángeles

Elena Garro

Los Infortunios by Alonso Ramírez has been considered a novelistic chronicle that contains several elements of the picaresque genre, which are recognized from its narrative approach by means of an intradiegetic narrator in first person willing to relate the events of his life starting from his birth. According to Aníbal Gonzales: "Thus in *Los infortunios* we are confronted with a singularly humble picaresque 'Yo', respectful of laws and higher authority." (Gonzales, 1983, p.200). Within the story -like numerous Spanish picaresque works, such as *El Guzmán de Alfarache* or *El Lazarillo de Tormes*- the protagonist's need to look for a master or lord to serve, in order to prosper or achieve a better social position, is notable. It should be noted that the word *misfortunes*, present in the title of the work, represents an indication of the different forms of sorrow or suffering of the protagonist; for example, his inexhaustible fatigue and frequent torture by English pirates. Among other misfortunes, hunger and thirst stand out throughout the narrative, which reflects a diversity of foods and beverages that maintain specific functions within the text. It should be noted that the main character does not represent the archetype of a rogue, but rather, the work resorts to picaresque elements that evoke the presence of a Lázaro de Tormes or a Guzmán de Alfarache; however, Alonso Ramírez does not demonstrate a behavior towards deceit or swindling to survive -unlike those two characters-, rather, he only suffers hunger, physical pain and a desire for social ascent; but he does not demonstrate an inclination to deceit or theft.

The temporal context of the work is situated at the end of the 17th century, where historical characters such as Gaspar de Sandoval Cerda y Mendoza, Count of Galve, who served as Viceroy of New Spain from 1688 to 1696, appear.¹ The presence of this secondary character stands out both in the dedication and in the final part of the text, and his mention is not gratuitous, since at that time, the figure of the Viceroy intervened in mercantile decisions, which extended beyond the national territory, reaching

¹ This chronological reference is confirmed by William G. Bryan in the footnotes of the edition consulted.

island countries such as the Philippines, where criminals were sent and captured, and where, it must be said, pirates abounded and had the reputation of trading food and beverages in different regions, including the port of Veracruz and Campeche, places that Alonso Ramirez knows during his stay in Mexican lands. The narration grants the importance of a historical value where the commercial relations between New Spain and that eastern region were predominant. According to: Javier Fernández del Páramo:

During the 17th century the importance of the Asian market grew to a great extent, which led to an attempt to improve the administrative organization following the American colonial model in the Philippine Islands, although they were really a sub-colony of New Spain because the imperial communication with the Asian province was done through the American viceroyalty (Fernández, 2008, p.18).

Returning to the central theme, it is worth noting the recurrence of certain foods such as rice or various types of meat.² The protagonist's first contacts with food occur after his departure from Puerto Rico, after having become a page, whose job was to check the ships' supplies. The aforementioned cereal is related to a work function that at times conforms to legal norms, and at others, to a context of illegality. This second scenario is exemplified in Chapter IV, where the pirates force the prisoners to soak various quantities of rice in order to facilitate its consumption. From such an approach, one of the narrative functions of the food portrays part of the misfortunes suffered by the protagonist through tireless forced labor, as well as the cruelty he endured as a prisoner:

In addition to this, we had to go to the rudder and to pile the rice that they continually ate, having previously soaked it to make it flour, and there was an occasion when each one of us was given eleven sacks of two arrobas for a single day's work with the penalty of whipping (which we often tolerated) if we failed to do so (Sigüenza, 1984, p. 22).

Similarly, part of those misfortunes are described as the pirates ate and drank their food, while Alonso Ramírez and other starving prisoners could only watch helplessly the vileness of their captors. In this sense, such cruelty emphasizes hunger and thirst as a pair of active elements in the narrative:

² Several types of meat appear in the narrative, including fish, turtle and pork.

Meat, wine, aguardiente, bonga,³ nor any other of the many ministras that they brought with them reached our mouths; and having coconuts in large quantities, they threw us only the shells to make coir, which is to clean them and leave them as tow for caulking; and when they were ready, they drank the water fresh and threw them into the sea (Sigüenza, 1984, p.22).

The theme of food is presented in a somewhat disturbing way considering the narrator's point of view, who describes with some revulsion how in the islands of Caponiz, near the Philippine municipality of Mariveles, the capturing pirates killed some natives and then proceeded to eat their burned bodies. It is worth noting that cannibalism represents a common feature in other chronicles, such as the *Naufragios*, by Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, where the elements of food play an important role in the narrative.⁴ Likewise, it is worth noting that, although the group of pirates represented by Sigüenza y Góngora was of English origin, anthropophagy reveals a cultural trait present in some towns of New Spain, which is related to a ceremonial aspect. Accordingly, Fernando Anaya Monroy expresses:

Religion was then an essential motive for the practice of anthropophagy among the ancient Indians; in the understanding that the dead were not the object of oblivion or contempt, since they were remembered by dedicating special days to them on which they mourned by offering them food and flowers in their graves (1966, p.214). (1966, p.214).

Taking into account Monroy's quote, the element of food -in this case, human flesh- exposes a function that connects with a historical-religious aspect of the ancient pre-Hispanic peoples, and conveys in turn a kind of cultural shock through the perspective "of the other", whose act is described by the protagonist as a "bestial action". At the same time, the food is represented through a form of Christian charity transmitted through the character of Don Cristobal de Muros, priest of the church of Tihosuco, located in a small village in the state of Quintana Roo. According to the text, it is commented how that religious man

³³ Filip. Mixture of the fruit of the areca and betel leaves that is customary to chew. REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA: Diccionario de la lengua española, 23rd ed., [version 23.6 online]. <<https://dle.rae.es>> [Accessed on: 20/01/2023].

⁴ Regarding the theme of food and drink in Cabeza de Vaca's work, there is the interesting study by Charles B. Moore "The Role of Food in the Shipwrecks of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and in the General and Natural History of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo." *Revista de Literatura Hispanoamericana*. n. 52, Venezuela, 2006, pp. 23-42.

was in the habit of offering plates of food and evangelizing several natives in need. Such particularity reveals that food also transmits a charitable and moral function focused on helping others.⁵

Another noteworthy aspect revolves around the various ways in which the protagonist must obtain his own food, sometimes by fishing,⁶ others by collecting it from a banana plantation or palm tree,⁷ and others by confronting it directly with the help of his weapons. From this point of view, food acquires a descriptive function of wild life, where survival evokes an essential part of the human condition. In Chapter VI, where Alonso Ramírez's stay on the Yucatán coast is recounted, he highlights part of that natural instinct, in which the killing of prey inevitably represents a determining factor for subsistence:

Going with me Juan de Casas, and after having walked about four leagues that day, we killed two wild pigs, and being scrupulous that the meat would be lost in such need, we carried them so that our companions could get them. (Sigüenza, 1984, p.29).

The narration also highlights the importance of corn in New Spain, which symbolizes part of the food and commercial base of several native peoples, as well as the natural wealth of some vernacular regions. In addition, this plant stands out for its mystical and religious value among the ancient pre-Hispanics. Regarding this subject, Jean Chevalier comments that:

In Mexican and related cultures, corn is at the same time the expression of the sun, the world and man. In the Popol Vuh, the creation of man is only achieved after three trials: the first man, destroyed by a flood, was made of clay; the second, dissolved by a great rain, was made of wood; only the third, our father, is made of corn. It is the symbol of prosperity considered in its origin: the seed (1995, p.676).

Although Chevalier's references are far from the aspects mentioned by Sigüenza y Góngora, it is undeniable the interest of our author to project the importance of corn through different narrative functions; for

⁵ The text does not specify the food that the priest shared with the native peoples; however, the Christian references are projected in the personality of Alonso Ramírez, who during the journey of his misfortunes commends himself many times to God and to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

⁶ Chapter V shows that Alonso Ramírez and his companions ate only what they could catch. From this approach, food represents a survival function.

⁷ One of the few feasts of the protagonist during his trip consists of roasted bananas, this detail recreates part of the natural wealth of that land,

example, its mercantile value used to negotiate the lives of some natives can be noted: "After having approached them they spoke to Juan González, who understood their language, and promising him a piece of amber that would weigh two pounds and as much corn as we wanted of the one they were carrying, they asked him for his freedom" (Sigüenza, 1984, p.34). (Sigüenza, 1984, p.34) Likewise, this sacred plant conveys a work function (as does rice), in which part of the process of its preparation is described, which consists of grinding the grains and then arranging them in the food. Likewise, the presence of corn exposes a charitable function -similar to the case of the priest of Tihosuco- which is shown through the goodwill of the Indians in the face of the adversities of the protagonist, who being in extreme need receives tortillas and beans from them. From this perspective, such food not only amplifies the theme of hunger, but also demonstrates part of a food base that extends in several regions of the national territory. The text also exposes part of the commercial activity in the state of Oaxaca, where the high value of seeds such as cocoa⁸ and grana among the Mixe, Chontal and Cuicareca Indians is demonstrated. This detail emphasizes the author's intention to highlight the mercantile function of food, which is manifested through other natural resources, such as amber, vanilla, cotton, silver, musk and camphor.⁹ Each of these, as well as the different foods in the narrative, reflect part of the diversity of products that represented an economic base in New Spain.

It is worth noting that the most mentioned beverages in the work are wine and aguardiente, which not only maintain a direct link with the pirates, but also fulfill a double narrative function; the former is in charge of quenching the thirst of that group of characters who constantly drink those liquors, while the latter is in charge of highlighting the commercial value related to the ethyl traffic in New Spain. It is worth remembering that, at the end of the 17th century, although there were states that produced their own aguardiente, those drinks were legally allowed only under Spanish importation, this in order to favor the peninsular empire; in accordance with this, Enrique Florescano comments that:

⁸ It is worth noting that cocoa beans are also part of the natural environment of Puerto Rico, which is described at the beginning of the narrative.

⁹ f. disuse. camphor. m. A solid, crystalline, white, burning terpene with a characteristic pungent odor, obtained from the camphor tree by treating the branches with a stream of steam, and used principally in the manufacture of celluloid and smokeless gunpowder and, in medicine, as a cardiac stimulant. REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA: Diccionario de la lengua española, 23.^a ed., [version 23.6 online]. <<https://dle.rae.es>> [Accessed on: 20/01/2023].

In spite of the optimal conditions that sugarcane cultivation found in the Morelos Valley and the coasts of Veracruz, during the 17th century and first half of the 18th century, the sugar produced by sugar mills and mills was destined for domestic consumption, which had increased significantly. But the production of aguardientes was stubbornly prohibited in order to favor the importation of Spanish "broths, wines and aguardientes" (2000, p.559). (2000, p.559).

In addition to wine and aguardiente, water is another beverage that is quite present in the text. Sometimes its description represents a factor of cultural identity, for example, the existence of certain original towns in Puerto Rico -the protagonist's country of origin- such as Aguada, Aguadilla and Aguas Buenas, where the sailors would stock up on drinking water before resuming their voyage to Spain, is mentioned.¹⁰ On the other hand, a particularity of this liquid is related to a scatological element, which portrays how the character Juan de Casas, companion of the protagonist, was forced at knifepoint by the pirates to consume excrement mixed with water. From this point of view, the element of the drink functions as a form of cruelty that highlights the sorrows or misfortunes witnessed by the protagonist. Among the final observations, it is worth noting that the work conveys a deep pessimism about the human condition, where the awareness of pain and suffering stands out. Likewise, among the different misfortunes suffered by the main character, hunger and thirst appear as constant elements, most of which are caused by pirates. It should also be noted that these bandits represent an important mercantile contribution in several Hispanic colonies such as New Spain and the Philippines, where supplies were controlled and often restricted by the Spanish Crown. In addition to covering the physiological needs of hunger and thirst, the elements of food and drink convey different narrative functions, which are represented through forced labor, mercantile negotiations, personal survival, as well as forms of charity and even torture. Likewise, their representation connects with a historical reality, in which there was a consumption, as well as a recurrent commercialization of diverse products that emphasize the cultural and economic importance of various foods and beverages in New Spain.

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¹⁰ William G. Bryant, in the aforementioned work of the author, recognizes those towns that attest to the importance of that island.

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