

NUMA AND THE NATURE OF THE FANTASTIC IN THE FICTION OF JUAN BENET

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Literary critics have drawn upon a broad range of critical methodologies in their attempts to elucidate the narrative of Juan Benet. It is widely acknowledged that Benet is a difficult writer, that his works are complex and enigmatic, and that much of his narrative seems to defy traditional modes of explanation through which inconsistencies are resolved and loose ends tied neatly together. Perhaps the most rewarding approach to Benet's novels, therefore, will be one that encompasses the irrational and seeks to reveal the mysterious, one that can be closely identified with the notion of the fantastic. Both Tzvetan Todorov and Eric Rabkin have formulated a thoughtful and useful hermeneutics of the fantastic, and have shown from different critical perspectives how it impels certain types of literature.¹ However, I am not wholly comfortable with either Todorov's definition (that the fantastic stems from the hesitancy produced in the reader by what seem to be supernatural elements in the text), or with that of Rabkin (the fantastic in general as a mode of knowing the world, and defined in literature by the diametric reversal of the "ground rules" of the narrative). Thus, before discussing Benet's fiction and the manner in which the fantastic inheres within it, I would like to outline a brief working definition of the fantastic as I propose to use it here.

My proposal turns primarily upon a synthetic modification of the precepts of Todorov and Rabkin, which is hinted at in Rabkin's only reference in his book to Todorov's study. In a lengthy footnote Rabkin affirms the disparity between his and Todorov's definition of the fantastic and suggests, in part, that "[Todorov's] hesitation should be seen not in relation to external norms, but rather in relation to micro-

contextual variations" (p. 118). By foregrounding "microcontextual variations" here, Rabkin in effect undermines one of the principal tenets of Todorov's conceptual framework. Although Todorov's structuralist precepts lead him to examine the intrinsic patterns of fantastic literature in its generic make-up, his basic theoretical tenet that defines reader perception of the fantastic is rooted in the extra-textual. It depends primarily upon the reader's ability to perceive and accept commonly held laws of reality in "the world which is our world, the one we know" (p. 25). That is to say, Todorov incorporates into his theory a phenomenological element that focuses on the correspondence between the reader and his circumstances, rather than on the relation between reader and text. This clearly encumbers his theory with a troublesome precept, for it suggests a preclusion of contrary opinions on what is "normal and natural" (p. 73).

In contrast to Todorov, Rabkin emphasizes the "internal ground rules" of the text as the only reality to which the reader must attend when defining the fantastic (pp. 4-5). He notes, for example, that "Talking plants . . . are not inherently fantastic; they become so when seen from a certain perspective" (p. 4). For Rabkin, this perspective cannot be rooted in any reality external to the text, but rather must pertain to the particular fictional world at hand. The reader may be astonished by many aspects of a literary fiction, but the fantastic obtains only if the norms of the literary world are transgressed and reversed. This represents a crucial difference between Rabkin and Todorov, and makes their theoretical stances fundamentally opposed. Nonetheless, the views of the fantastic offered by the two writers need not be construed as mutually exclusive. Instead, they can be conjoined to form part of a bi-modal sequential process that accounts for the reader's belief in what is real and what is not, both within and beyond the particular fictive reality at hand.

The person who enters into the process of reading fiction does so with certain preconceived notions of what are commonly accepted views of reality. As the reader penetrates and interacts with the text, a new "fictional" reality is superimposed on the world view originally brought to the work. If the reader is sensitive to the narrative, this fictional world gradually emerges as the predominant one, even as alien associations engendered from within and outside the text conflict with the pattern of consistency that the reader seeks to establish.² During this process of assimilation into the fictional reality the reader frequently vacillates, unable to balance the discrepancy between things that seem to be real, or verisimilar, or supernatural. These

hesitations form the foundations of the fantastic, as Todorov suggests, but they should not remain dependent upon what the reader considers to be the laws of "the world which is our world." Once new laws are established within the literary text, and once the reader suspends extra-literary beliefs in order to accept these laws, a world emerges that reconfigures our view of what constitutes fantasy and what does not. Hence many of our hesitations concerning the "reality" of the narrative are able to be resolved. At the same time, however, other hesitations frequently remain, perhaps because the style and technique of the work are designed to undermine certainty, or because the laws of the text are ambiguously drawn, or because the reader has been unable to grasp the nature of the literary world. In the latter case, a second or third reading may resolve the ambiguity, and thus certainty, rather than doubt, shapes the production of meaning.

In many instances, however, hesitation continues to run throughout the reader's response to the fictional world at hand, despite efforts to impose a rational and complete hermeneutics. It is at this point that Rabkin's notion of diametric reversal of the ground rules of narrative becomes acute. That is to say, some aspect of the established fictional world must be controverted in order for the fantastic to prevail. However, the hesitation of the reader demanded by Todorov must remain the motivating factor in this scheme. If the reversal clearly defies the "laws of nature" as developed in the text, it pertains to the world of the marvelous (i.e., new laws must be forged to account for it).³ But if, on the other hand, the reversal is couched in doubt (e.g., through the use of the imperfect tense, oxymoronic description, or prefaced with introductory locutions such as "hearsay" phrases), the reader is forced to hesitate and the fantastic moves to the fore. Todorov's concept of "I [the reader] nearly reached the point of believing" (p. 31) is crucial here, for it articulates the posture from which the reader must explore the ambiguities of the text. It must be understood, however, that doubt or ambiguity does not by itself create fantastic literature. As discussed above, the fantastic is a dynamic process impelled by simultaneous textual reversal and reader hesitation, and mystery or enigma are only correlative (though frequently immanent) elements of this process.

For the duration of our hesitation, then, we are enveloped by the world of the fantastic as defined by Todorov, but modified here to coincide with textual, rather than extra-textual realities. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the hesitation inspired by the text need not ultimately be resolved, as Todorov seems to demand:

At the story's end, the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous. (p. 41)

Rather than emerge from the fantastic by "opting for one solution or the other," the reader will in many instances be compelled (by the norms of the text) to sustain hesitation and doubt, for these concepts may represent the essential meaning of the work. Hence, through theme the fantastic becomes (as Rabkin affirms) a way of knowing the world. The synthetic view of the fantastic that I am proposing, therefore, accounts for the world view of both the author and the reader, but only as it is implicitly molded by or emerges from the literary text.

The creation of hesitancy by an apparent reversal in the ground rules of the narrative is a particularly useful concept in the study of Juan Benet. Benet creates a fictional reality in his narrative and articulates a strategy in his theoretical writings that closely parallels the fantastic (though without reference to the notion of "fantastic literature") as I have outlined it. Because the role of enigma and mystery in Benet's theory has been the subject of several critical essays, I do not propose to analyze it here.⁴ What is important in relation to the present study, however, is the concept of hesitation that Benet explicitly builds into his theory. He consistently maintains that the writer who proposes to invent a fictional world must transcend the domain of reason and seek inspiration in ". . . a realm where every manner of certainty is chimerical, open to doubt and sterile."⁵ This type of writer, therefore (and implicitly, the reader), "will never be able to feel certain" (*EC*, p. 51). Furthermore, during the act of writing the writer moves "in the opposite direction of knowledge" (*EC*, p. 50) in order to explore the dynamic and irresolute world of incongruities. Benet suggests throughout his theory that the writer must continuously reverse and transcend the ground rules of reality as they evolve within his narrative framework. Writing, for Benet, takes place between the poles of "affirmation and negation" (*EC*, p. 52); thus the laws that govern his fiction are constantly in flux, constantly created and recreated by means of contradiction. This recurrent

reversal of fictional laws, coupled with the insistence upon uncertainty and doubt, places Benet's theoretical writings squarely within the world of the fantastic as I have sought to define it here. The principal difference between my own view and that of Benet, of course, is rooted in disparate intentions. While one emerges as the principal tenet of a critical methodology, the other gives impetus to the invention of fictional realities.

The fantastic exists in Benet's fiction on what might be termed two "levels of persistence." On the first level, certain aspects of the text function to produce reader hesitation for only limited duration. These elements initially seem to transgress the laws created within the text (and therefore form part of the fantastic), but eventually work themselves into Todorov's categories of the uncanny or the marvelous. This first level of intensity, of course, is sustained only during the first reading of the narrative because it depends primarily upon the withholding of crucial information through a variety of technical and plot devices. When we have finished reading the text, and later turn to it again, the knowledge already gathered from the first reading enables us to synthesize the elements and fill in the gaps that originally inspired doubt.

The fantastic on its second level of intensity in Benet's fiction emerges initially in much the same way as the first. The ground rules of the text are established, then apparently reversed. In contrast to the first level, however, the ambiguous reversal that gives impetus to the fantastic is not resolved at the end, but rather is sustained and even intensified. Doubt becomes one of the norms of the narrative and prevents the reader from reaching a final solution (i.e., from opting for the marvelous or the uncanny). Hence rereading the text may afford new and different insights into its complexity, but the fantastic elements that inhere within it preclude the possibility of complete and logical resolution. Together, therefore, these two levels weave an immanent pattern of the fantastic throughout Benet's fiction, and thus function as a crucial narrative determinant.

The fictional world that Benet creates in his novels, though enigmatic and mysterious, consistently stems from real-life existential problems set against a backdrop of modern Spain. For example, Benet represents the geographic make-up of his mythical *Región* with detailed and scientific rigor, which in turn lends mimetic authenticity to the characters and events situated within it. Furthermore, he portrays a broad spectrum of incidents from modern life and contemporary Spanish history: progress penetrates *Región* and transforms

tradition; battles are fought during the Civil War; the political and social decay of postwar Spain is represented from various points of view. Benet thus creates the illusion of a well-defined novelistic reality that is based on the observation of real-life events, and the intrinsic laws of the text seem to parallel closely those of external reality. However, against this backdrop Benet sets into motion a variety of events which defy the very laws that he has created. As a result, he frequently enters into the world of the marvelous (e.g., the magic flowers that grow only on gravesites and the supernatural powers of the gold coin in *Volverás a Región*; the dead relatives that speak in *La otra casa de Mazón*; the keys and pedals of a piano that move before they are touched by the pianist in *Un viaje de invierno*). All of these events are rooted firmly in the realm of the supernatural and their occurrence is never placed in doubt.

On other occasions Benet portrays characters and events that appear to represent a diametric transformation of the established laws of the text. Upon closer analysis, however, the apparent reversal may prove to be not a reversal at all, but rather a twisting of the given reality that serves to undermine reader certitude. The realm of the marvelous is thus displaced by the world of the fantastic, and irresolution and doubt move to the fore. Perhaps the best example of a recurring element of the fantastic in Benet's fiction, and one whose role has been widely debated among critics, is Numa, legendary guardian of the Mantuan forests of *Región*. Numa appears throughout the cycle of Benet's *Región* novels, and the peculiar nature of his existence links him to both levels of the fantastic discussed above. As his character emerges within Benet's fiction during more than a decade, Numa at once conforms to the realistic norms of the narrative and consistently transgresses them.

From his early appearance in *Volverás a Región* (1967), where incertitude and mystery mark his implied presence in the forests of Mantua, to the long narrative "Una leyenda: Numa" (1978), in which he emerges as a flesh and blood figure with his own existential dilemmas, Numa seems to shuttle back and forth between the worlds of the marvelous and the uncanny. During the intervening period (*Una meditación*, 1970; *Un viaje de invierno*, 1972; *La otra casa de Mazón*, 1973), Numa continues to inhabit what Benet would term the "zone of shadows." While some critics point to his existence as an allegory of decadence and destruction, or as a mythic figure counterposed to Nemi of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*,⁶ others deny that Numa exists at all (i.e., he is a fiction within a fiction),⁷ and suggest

that he symbolizes the abnegation of passion by the inhabitants of Región. However, though his symbolic or allegorical meaning remains a matter for debate, it is my view that Numa appears primarily in Benet's novels to create and sustain narrative ambiguity and reader doubt. He thus reifies Benet's theoretical stance on enigma, and must be placed squarely in the world of the fantastic.

In Benet's early fiction Numa is frequently alluded to, but never appears directly in the narrative. In *Volverás a Región* the pseudo-omniscient narrator, as well as several of the characters, discuss his existence and create about him a legendary aura of the fantastic. For example, he is described at various points as astute and cruel, fierce and strange, and it is even suggested that he practices cannibalism. His age remains unknown, but many believe his life on the mountain dates from the Carlist Wars of the mid-nineteenth century. His origin, in fact, represents one of the most elusive aspects of his existence (or non-existence) on the mountain. In addition to being a refugee from the Carlist Wars, it is suggested that he may also be a monk who abandoned his order, or a soldier who escaped into the mountains during the twentieth century. Despite his ambiguous origins, however, the inhabitants of Región remain convinced that Numa exists, for they have heard the sound of his rifle each time that the Mantuan forest is violated by an outsider. Numa's victims are routinely shot dead with one bullet and disappear forever.

Although the confusion that surrounds Numa's origins is important (as I shall discuss), it is necessary to bear in mind here that from the very outset Numa incarnates one of the constants of the fantastic: he is a being "more powerful than men" (Todorov, p. 109). The suggestion of supernatural powers is crucial to the formation of Numa's role, since it immediately distinguishes him from other characters of the narrative who are framed within the laws of nature. Numa thus appears as a transgressor of the norms of the fictional world (i.e., his actions imply their dramatic reversal), but the precise nature of his activities, the limits of his power, and even his very existence remain uncertain. Though he may at times function allegorically as imaginary causality, or as a symbol of the decay of Región, Numa's implied supernatural powers mark him as a fantastic creature who frustrates the pattern of narrative consistency and logic that the reader seeks to create.

Despite the belief of many of the inhabitants of Región that Numa indeed stands guard over the Mantuan forests and that his omnipresent eye and steady hand assure death to intruders, the reader

of *Volverás a Región* can by no means conclude that Numa exists. In order to create and sustain this uncertainty, Benet utilizes two correlative technical constructs. The first has to do with narrative perspective. As I suggested earlier, the implied reader of a literary text must integrate himself into the world of the characters and accept the new laws that emerge within it. This process of integration frequently (though not always) involves the identification of the reader with one or more of the main characters. When the characters themselves contradict or undermine their beliefs in what is real within their own world, the reader must share this doubt, unless matters are clarified by a reliable (and, most often, omniscient) narrator. In *Volverás a Región* both characters and narrators impair their reliability when relating the legend of Numa. Doctor Sebastián's narration, for example, in which several possible explanations of Numa's existence are offered, is ideally suited for enhancing the fantastic.⁸ As a first-person narrator whose memory and perspective have been eroded by time, Doctor Sebastián lacks the dependability necessary to convince the reader that the supernatural indeed exists. Hence he inspires doubt in the face of the marvelous, and thereby enhances Numa as a fantastic character. The third-person narrator of *Volverás a Región* functions in a similar way to undermine reader certitude. Rather than affirm the presence of the supernatural as fact (and thereby establish Numa as an element of the marvelous), the narrator frequently prefaces his remarks with introductory locutions such as "se dice," "tal vez," "parece que," etc. This implied skepticism leads to the same kind of irresolute vagueness that characterizes the narrative of Doctor Sebastián. Thus both the first- and third-person narrators produce reader uncertainty throughout the novel and, as a result, propel Numa into the world of the fantastic.

Numa's existence in the realm of the fantastic (particularly in *Volverás a Región*) also depends upon the creation of suspense, but in a reciprocal sort of fashion. Todorov points out that "the presence of fantastic elements permits a particularly dense organization of the plot" (p. 92). In all of Benet's novels plot clearly defies easy synthesis and maintains a level of density that nurtures uncertainty in the reader. At the same time, this uncertainty (created by suspense and density) intensifies the functioning of Numa as a fantastic character, since his supernatural powers are never described directly and explicitly, but rather emerge slowly amid ambiguity through the convolutions of plot. Even when the novel comes to an end, and the elements of the *historia* can be pieced together, Numa remains an

enigmatic component of a confusing and unsettled series of events.

The disparate explanations both of Numa's origins and actions suggest that none of the inhabitants knows him. In fact, none of the inhabitants of Región has ever seen Numa, except for one of the characters of *La otra casa de Mazón*. However, the character is none other than the dead king, himself a marvelous figure who serves to subvert any notion of traditional realism in the novel. Furthermore, the only description of Numa's existence in Benet's early fiction occurs in *Volverás a Región* (e.g., "covered with rough wool like a Tartar shepherd and wearing leather sandals" [p. 12]) and is cast in doubt by the third-person narrator. Hence, rather than assure the skeptical reader, the description of Numa serves to intensify uncertainty. Our efforts to comprehend Numa are obstructed at every level, and the accumulation of evidence about him is contradictory and confusing. This pattern of doubt is woven throughout Benet's novels, and Numa remains a shadowy figure whose presence is consistently implied, but never confirmed, by a reliable narrative voice.

With the publication in 1978 of the long narrative fragment, "Una leyenda: Numa," Numa finally moves from the fringes of Benet's fiction to become the major focus of attention.⁹ For the most part, Benet seeks to portray the "humanization" of Numa. We learn that Numa has guarded the forest of Mantua for an unusually long period of time (though the precise number of years remains vague); that he comes from an ancient line of shepherds who have inhabited the area for centuries; and that he is employed as a guard by the owners of the Mantuan forests. We also learn the way in which he stalks and kills his victims, and how he has changed his methods of killing as he has gained more experience. In addition, for the first time in Benet's narrative the mental processes of Numa are revealed. We discover that he, like most "normal" human beings, experiences doubt about his work, fears that he will lose his job, and questions whether the nature of his task (i.e., the numerous murders that he has committed) can be morally justified. In short, Numa emerges here as a concrete individual and no longer serves merely as a topic for discussion among other characters or as an enigmatic point of reference for the narrator. As a result, one of the most important elements that links him to the fantastic throughout Benet's previous fiction—his possible non-existence—ceases to function.

Benet's treatment of Numa in "Una leyenda: Numa" in large part coincides with the devices that he uses to create the fantastic throughout his fiction. That is to say, he postulates the real in order to

subvert it. He ascribes human characteristics to Numa and concretizes his personality, only to suggest the reversal of the norms that he has created. Hence Numa at times moves toward the world of the uncanny, but finally remains in the world of the fantastic. In the first place, he continues to reveal the supernatural powers that set him above other men. Numa himself recognizes these powers ("He was so absolutely persuaded of his superiority" [p. 123]), and his survival on the mountain, as well as his ability to rid it of intruders, depends upon their potency.

Numa's actions clearly border on the supernatural, since Benet's unwillingness to explain or clarify them fully promotes irresolution and doubt. For example, Numa knows "by instinct" when an intruder enters Mantua, even though the intrusion occurs several miles away: "With a glance he knew that the mountain was in order, with a glance he knew that something was amiss" (pp. 106-07). Numa maintains an intimate relationship with the mountain of Mantua and communicates with it in a mysterious fashion. As mentioned earlier, his ancestors lived on the mountain for centuries, and thus it seems natural for Numa to carry on the tradition of previous generations. What appears to be a straightforward narration of historical continuity, however, is impelled towards the fantastic by a reversal of its simplistic premise. We learn, for example, that Numa's ancestors formed part of "the forsaken race . . . that had trampled, vilified, and sacrificed the mountain in vain, that had squandered and ruined it, [and were] responsible for its current hostility" (p. 115). Numa feels compelled to expunge his ancestral guilt, but is unable to decipher the origins of the transgression or discover how to overcome it. Hence it continues to vitiate his life in the present on a mythic scale. Furthermore, the mountain itself comes alive to demand revenge: "The mountain wanted nothing to do with strangers: it was without doubt the depository of hatred, and had decided to seclude itself in tenacious isolation, [and] warn [Numa]: they are coming now" (p. 112). Benet does not personify the mountain merely for the sake of intensified dramatization, but rather gives it life as a means of undermining the fictional ground rules that he has already established. The reader is thus left to explore a supernatural reality that edges towards the marvelous but which, by virtue of its ambiguity, remains in the world of the fantastic.

Within the broad context of uncertainty in Benet's fiction, then, Numa stands as the most striking intertextual representative of the

fantastic. From his vaguely drawn characterization in *Volverás a Región*, to his emergence as the major narrative focus of "Una leyenda: Numa," Numa clearly traverses the two levels of the fantastic discussed previously. On the one hand, certain ambiguous elements of his make-up that link him to the fantastic in Benet's early fiction (most importantly, his possible non-existence) are clarified as his character is drawn more fully. Hence he gradually moves towards the more tangible world of the uncanny. On the other hand, however, the principal aspects of his existence that serve primarily to reverse the norms of the text (most significantly, his superhuman powers) are reaffirmed and intensified as more about him is revealed. He remains firmly in the world of the fantastic, which ultimately represents the only pattern of consistency to which he adheres. Numa therefore recurs throughout Benet's narrative as a major structural and thematic component, and incarnates Benet's aim of eliminating from his writing "the demon of exactness" (*EC*, p. 48).

There are of course other characters, events, and techniques in Benet's fiction that contribute to the creation of the fantastic.¹⁰ Through the recurrent use of oxymoronic constructions that undermine the reader's certitude or the invention of characters such as the Brigadier in *Una tumba*, the innkeeper of *En el estado*, and the grandmother in *Saúl ante Samuel* or the portrayal of events such as Arturo's ascension of the Río Torce in *Un viaje de invierno* and the recurring power of the cards in *Saúl ante Samuel*, Benet seeks to forge a world that constantly turns back on itself in order to subvert its own laws. Benet contends in his theoretical writings that the "zone of shadows" which the writer must explore exists "where the bounds of rationality have no value and where . . . the spirit of combat among opposites dominates" (*EC*, p. 53). Benet's fiction to a large degree adheres to this precept, for in its essence it is an oxymoronic world into which the reader can enter, but where he can never feel entirely at ease. The commingling of the marvelous and the fantastic recurs in nearly all of Benet's fiction, but it is the latter that enables the author to penetrate most fully the zone of shadows. Within this mysterious zone the reader must make his way through contradiction and ambiguity, and in the end hesitancy emerges not only as a fundamental narrative determinant, but also as a way of knowing the world.

NOTES

1. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); Eric Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976). References to both works are to these editions and are noted in the text of my study. It should be noted here that, although Todorov's study of the fantastic concentrates on nineteenth-century literature, the principles that he formulates can be adapted to more general use, since they provide insight into certain aspects of contemporary fiction as well.
2. For a more comprehensive explanation of how a reader's alien associations function, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). See in particular Chapter Eleven, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach."
3. Todorov's third category is the uncanny, which he defines as follows: "If [the reader] decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny" (p. 41).
4. See in particular Robert Spires, "Juan Benet's Poetics of Open Spaces," paper delivered at the Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association, Houston, 1980; Vicente Cabrera, "El enigma existencial y el sistema de expresión de Benet," paper delivered at the Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association, New York, 1976; and my own *The Novelistic World of Juan Benet* (Clear Creek, Indiana: The American Hispanist, 1977), Chapter Two.
5. Juan Benet, *En ciernes* (Madrid: Taurus Ediciones, 1976), p. 50. Future references to *En ciernes* are to this edition and are noted in the text by page number and the letters EC. All translations here, as elsewhere, are my own.
6. Malcolm A. Compitello, "Juan Benet's Intertextual Web," in *The Vision of the Spanish Civil War in Postwar Spanish Fiction*, The American Hispanist Publications, forthcoming.
7. Stephen J. Summerhill, "Prohibition and Transgression in Two Novels of Juan Benet," paper delivered at the Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association, New York, 1976.
8. Juan Benet, *Volverás a Región* (Barcelona: Ediciones Destino, 1968), p. 11.
9. "Una leyenda: Numa" forms the second part of Benet's *Del pozo y del Numa* (Barcelona: La Gaya Ciencia, 1978). The first section of the book ("Del pozo") is an essay on Thomas Mann. All references to "Una leyenda: Numa" are to this edition.
10. For a brief overview of some of these elements, with particular emphasis on the role of enigma in Benet's fiction, see my "Enigma as Narrative Determinant in the Novels of Juan Benet," *Hispanic Review*, 47 (1979), 149-57.