

El año de Gracia and the Displacement of the Word

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The word is power. The power of the spoken word derives from its dynamic nature, from its identification with movement and event. God is the Word, and humanity but the subsequent and dependent articulation of that Word. Over time, the ephemeral, perishable oral utterance has been supplanted among literate peoples by the fixed, binding, written word as the source of power, with the awe of magical potency yielding to a reverence for the might of veracity. The autonomy, immutability, and permanence of written texts lead to the notion that "the book says" is tantamount to "it is true" (Ong 79). Until this century, the concept "text" was identified exclusively with writing and carried, especially through the Middle Ages, a strict correlation with divine and secular authority. Recently the term text has come to include not only oral discourse but any vehicle of unified, articulated meaning. Yet the written word continues to enjoy priority among literate societies and remains at the base of the common concept of text. The notion of the power of the established, self-sufficient written word confers on new literary compositions an inescapable dependence on previously written texts. Texts, we are told, speak to one another in anger, respect, or indifference (Kristeva 338). Written texts not only furnish material, incentive, or direction for new texts, but in both overt didactic and subtler more unconscious ways, they help inspire, orient, and mold the vision of those who read them. While we think of Paolo and Francesca seduced by the story of Lancelot, Madame Bovary deluded by sentimental novels, or the teenager absorbed by comic books, we all may unconsciously assimilate the written word, making it the architect of one's concept of the outside world. To chronicle this absorption of former texts, an author must inscribe within his or her original work some nodding our acknowledgement of the authority of previous texts over the human psyche, and in doing so, exposes his or her dependence on literary heritage.

El año de Gracia (1985), the first novel by the Spanish short story writer Cristina Fernández Cubas, provides a vivid example of the

strong imprint books and stories can leave on an impressionable mind. The protagonist sees himself, others, and the world around him from the perspective of the books he has read. Mostly adventure stories, these works nurture in him a longing for excitement, a desire to travel, and a naive sense of confidence. In addition to his early contact with the tales of sailors and pirates, Daniel became familiar with the Bible and proficient in Greek and Latin during his seven years in the seminary. Cloistered from the real world, first, by literature and then by the monastery, he is ignorant of the fundamental structures that govern the outside, social world. Armed with both sacred and popular literature, Daniel ingenuously believes he is prepared to confront the adult sphere, but he soon learns that his education is useless and his concept of the world erroneous. Slowly each one of his literary referents is subverted and displaced until almost all possibility for communication dissolves.

From their inheritance Gracia (Grace) gives her brother a free year away from home, literally "a year of grace." For the twenty-four year old inexperienced protagonist, his sister's gift promises him freedom and adventure, the opportunity to pursue that "aire libre, mar, ignoradas y fascinantes sensaciones" 'open air, sea, unknown and fascinating sensations' that have always intrigued him. He sets out for Paris where he meets a vivacious photographer, and leads a leisurely existence for a few months until he leaves for Saint-Malo. There he meets Captain Jean, the skipper of the "Providence," whose beard and demeanor instill in him a false sense of trust. An invitation to join the crew provokes in him the delusionary presumption that he is on the verge of reliving the excitement of the seafarers in his adolescent readings. Soon, however, fictional fantasy becomes the brutal reality of murder, danger, and disaster. In the middle of a storm on the high seas, Daniel is shipwrecked and miraculously awakes on an island he later discovers is contaminated by chemical experiments and inhabited only by infected sheep and an equally mangy shepherd named Grock. Gradually his ingenuous illusions of adventure, heroism, and indestructibility are whittled away as experience contradicts each one of his literary models.

El año de Gracia is filled with intertextual references to adventure stories like *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*, and "Sinbad the Sailor" and to archetypes like that of the mythic hero. By flaunting its literary allusions and efforts to emulate other texts, the novel creates a self-conscious referentiality that divides the reader's interest between the

text and its referents, calls attention to its artifices, and diverts attention from its potential for mimetic representation of reality. Harold Bloom maintains that in every case a literary text "is not a gathering of signs on a page, but is a psychic battlefield upon which authentic forces struggle for the only victory worth winning, the divinatory triumph over oblivion" (2). In *El año de Gracia*, in place of a battle we witness a playful match in which the old and the new banter back and forth until each one cancels out the other. The novel begins with a happy confluence of established narrative threads, but as it progresses and as the protagonist struggles to make his life conform to fiction, the narratives serving as points of comparison are subverted by inversion and erasure without being replaced by satisfactory alternatives. As previous literary models are rendered invalid and emerging narrative patterns prove ambivalent, any element of triumph is lost.

Because literature nurtured the protagonist psychologically and molded his expectations, he relates his new experiences to his literary based vision of the world. Standing before the docks of Saint-Malo, he evokes Henry Morgan, Long John Silver, Gordon Pynn, and Captain Nemo and associates his feeling: "con la ansiedad del pequeño Jim del *Almirante Bembow* ante la inminencia de su primer viaje" 'with the excitement of young Jim of *Admiral Bembow* before his first voyage' (30-31). He mistakes Captain Jean, the ship, and other details for good omens and significant signs. As soon as he touches land, he begins to discover, with a certain disappointment, the discrepancy between fiction and fact: "No era una playa, sino el simple llano del rompiente" 'It wasn't a beach, but simply a flat reef' (64). And contrary to what he had read, he finds himself not kissing the earth once safe on land. Incidental divergences such as these announce major contrasts, until all of his exemplary models of confrontation with danger are parodied, subverted, or reversed.

One of the most obvious intertextual references in *El año de Gracia* is to Daniel Defoe's novel. Like Robinson Crusoe, the protagonist of Fernández Cubas' novel runs away to sea, is shipwrecked, and leads a solitary existence on an uninhabited island where he meets a primitive man who becomes his companion. For the modern day, as well as for the Eighteenth Century Crusoe, the Bible is instrumental in his survival, but as a technique for manipulation rather than as consolation. The island he lands on is neither distant nor exotic, and his abbreviated stay includes no series of heroic adventures requiring

courage or stamina. Grock may show some similarity (as the novel itself suggests) to the old man in Sinbad's fifth voyage, but within the context of the *Robinson Crusoe* allusions, he must be compared to Friday. Daniel refers to Grock as "mi variable Viernes" 'my mercurial Friday,' but he soon realizes that: "Aquel viejo simple no se parecía en nada al fiel Viernes de la única novela que, ironías de la vida, me había olvidado de evocar ante la visión del Providence" "That simple old man did not resemble at all the faithful Friday of the only novel that, ironically, I had forgotten to evoke when seeing the Providence' (124). Rather than a submissive gentle servant, he encounters a volatile and perverse tyrant. By reversing the roles of master and servant, Fernández Cubas subverts the presumed superiority of civilized man. Defoe is often portrayed as the prophet of progress, the defender of the Protestant ethic and Anglo-Saxon ethnicity, and the propagandist for imperialistic commercialism (Downie). In Fernández Cubas, any justification of contemporary society yields to scorn, and praise gives way to skepticism. Both Daniel and the civilization that produced him are criticized; the first for his naiveté, and the second for its callousness.

The fragile illusion Daniel had built for himself on the basis of his readings comes tumbling down like a house of cards. The literature in which he steeped himself proves an unreliable guideline for his own behavior and an inaccurate predictor of new situations. Parody gives way to irony as imitation turns to reversal. Heroism is displaced by perversion, nobility by baseness, and grandeur by banality. Without a valid literary map to assist him, Daniel is deprived of the security of dependable meanings and is consequently obliged to chart new patterns on his own. Having been deceived by the power of the written word, he must look to other spheres to communicate for the sake of survival with the only human being near him.

Those who define language as a "prison-house" or the "law of the father" recognize its constraining force and the influence of its schema. Derrida contends that writing engulfs speech, but also notes that "Western metaphysics has systematically privileged voice over writing, on the presumption that *logos*, as the a priori, transcendental power of knowledge and signifier of being is immediately present in speech, whereas writing is displaced, one degree removed as the representation of speech" (Adams 81). What is relevant to the present discussion is not the question of priority of either speech or writing, but the authoritarian power of established models over specific

representation. In written literature, texts emerge as the pre-existing authority and the collective points of reference. Unlike speech, writing always *appears* symbolic, promising meaning by its solidity and apparent autonomy. Literature paradoxically attracts because it is something other than ordinary communication, yet its power and permanence require us to reduce its strangeness by drawing on a number of conventions to make it into communication (Culler 134). This complex process endows literature with a special mystique and enables it to influence profoundly not only new narrations but also thought patterns and even personal behavior. Such conditioning by and authority of the written word is what Fernández Cubas challenges in *El año de Gracia*. In the spirit of postmodernism, she deconstructs standard, pre-existing meanings until signs are loosened from their secure grounding. She first rebels against the written word through (re)writing, displacing its established meaning by the subversive imitation inherent in parody. She then eradicates the written word and exploits the irrational potential of pure sound.

In Fernández Cubas' novel, all formal systems of communication—oral as well as written—fail. As a conventional yet arbitrary system of sounds, language always depends on "some level of shared assumption between utterer and receiver" (Harland 18). Its arbitrariness is neutralized by the fixedness that allows stable, consistent structures to organize mobile, individual utterances. A common code, context or conduit permits the exchange of messages and the production of communication. In *El año de Gracia* the lack of commonality provided by participation in a common social environment or by the possession of a common vehicle of linguistic communication compels the characters to find points of intersection outside language and social conventions. Phyllis Zatlin has already singled out Fernández Cubas' noteworthy approach to the nonverbal. As she accurately observes, the narrator of the novel, a well-read polyglot, for all his linguistic proficiency is not able to maintain communication as he regresses from knowledge to ignorance in what is, in many ways, an inversion of the myth of the hero (114). While in her short story "La ventana del jardín" the narrator confronts words that sound familiar but take on new meaning, in her novel the "semiotic chaos" in which its narrator finds himself is more severe because Grock's strange mixture of Celtic and English bears no resemblance to anything familiar. With the organized support of literary and oral discourse both undermined, Daniel must regress deep into the primordial roots

of language to find a point of minimal exchange, or he must direct himself to other human systems to uncover a way to transcend linguistic communication.

After discovering a Bible that belonged to Grock's mother, Daniel exploits his companion's lost affective bonds to thwart the dominion he holds over him. Every three nights Daniel visits the shepherd's cabin, keeps him company, and reads to him. In exchange, Grock provides him with food and wood. With this "milagroso ardid" 'miraculous trick' of reading, Grock's uncontrollable urge to dominate is mitigated; and Daniel can pass from "esclavo a dama de compañía, de naufrago a Sherezade" 'slave to lady-in-waiting, from shipwreck to Scheherazade' (137). The power of the word that ends Grock's control over Daniel derives not from the meaning of those sacred words or even from the provocative force of any narrative thread, but rather from the purely verbal nature of the word, from its elemental quality of sound and rhythm devoid of any semantic weight. Daniel himself recognizes that: "lo que realmente fascinaba al viejo era el rito en sí, el arte prodigioso de la lectura" 'what really fascinated the old man was the rite itself, the wonderful art of reading' (133). Condensed to its primordial essence of acoustic repetition, the word reverts to its magical power of incantation. The potential of words for charm is what helps Daniel captivate and restrain his savage companion, for "the central idea of the magic of charm is to reduce freedom of action, either by compelling a certain course of action or by stopping action altogether" (Frye 124). On an extratextual level, the reversion in *El año de Gracia* to the rhythmic, irrational, or "semiotic" dimension of language, as Julia Kristeva calls it, can be considered a continuation of a trend Mary Lee Bretz notices in other works by Fernández Cubas and a part of a broader tendency among many modern women writers to recuperate the alternative feminine discourse repressed by the symbolic order (Bretz 88). The association of this pre-discursive, pre-linguistic semiotic form of language with the maternal is subtly borne out in *El año de Gracia* by the fact that the Bible belongs to Grock's mother. More obvious is the disruption of the sublimated symbolic order. Grock's realm of non-signification supplants the histories, order, and the apparent clarity of the language and literature that patriarchal discourse had bestowed upon Daniel.

Only through the displacement of the symbolic by the semiotic and the supplanting of verbal communication by psychological communion can the linguistic and intellectual incompatibility between

Grock and Daniel be resolved. The concessions in communication that take place in the novel have ironic social implications and serious personal consequences for the protagonist, because in chaos he finds the wholeness that the rational and orderly material world cannot sustain for him. Besides renouncing the literary referents that helped mold his ingenuous perception of the world, Daniel discovers that the communicative process, the exchange of messages between addresser and addressee can occur simply through psychological contact without a shared system of signs determined by common cultural ties. With his recitations Daniel gives pleasure to Grock; Grock, in turn, infuses hope in him. This balanced interchange establishes between the two a mutual need and a symbiotic relationship that transforms each one into the counterpart of the other. In *El año de Gracia*, communication surpasses the major levels of exchange delineated by linguistic structuralists to include a reciprocity verging on divine communion (Holenstein 188). Grock unwittingly sacrifices his life for Daniel in a gesture that effects a comprehensive and ultimate exchange of identities and a spiritual communication that Daniel will never be able to put into words. Grock's sublime symbolic exchange, based more on a system of gift-giving than on equivalent interchanges and predicated upon unilateral sacrifice, transcends the conventional process of linguistic communication the protagonist of the novel anticipated.

Along with this readjustment of his concept of communication and his loss of faith in his literary inheritance, the protagonist of *El año de Gracia* must alter his attitude toward writing. He must learn to transform his interest in the text as a definite written object into an urgent need to experience the written word as a temporal, ephemeral activity, both because modern society allows no other function and because personal need can be fulfilled no other way. According to established archetypes, the returning hero confirms, shares, and perpetuates his experiences by retelling them to others; however, in this novel the expected outcome is again displaced. Recognition is supplanted by indifference and notoriety by silence. Daniel's original manuscript is photocopied and then destroyed for reasons of hygiene by the ecologists who rescue him, and his story itself is suppressed by the doctors and scientists who are intent on protecting the secrets of the contaminated island. Daniel, for his part, suspects that his guardians question his sanity and refrains from divulging to them any information about Grock. Repression and self-restraint, then, cancel Daniel's dream of triumph over anonymity. In his experiences there

are further implications for demythification not only of the message of established texts but of our reverence for the physical embodiment of written messages. Western culture has preserved original texts as historical treasures or authoritative evidence, but in *El año de Gracia*, the representatives of society either disregard or destroy the written word as text, as authority, or permanence. On every level traditional attitudes towards texts and writing are challenged in *El año de Gracia*.

The destitution that threatened Daniel on the island made him understand the importance of his spiritual needs. Writing, he discovered, is essential to his survival: "Tenía que escribir . . . mis necesidades iban más allá de comer o dormir . . . Mi supervivencia no estaba amenazada por el exterior sino por mí mismo. Por eso debía continuar desde mi cabaña el estúpido diario de viaje que, con tanto engreimiento, había iniciado bajo la mirada sagaz de tío Jean. . . . Iba a escribir. No podía dejar de hacerlo. La labor de consignar los principales acontecimientos de la jornada, mis dudas, mi desconcierto, se erigía en la única senda para conservar la razón" 'I had to write . . . my needs went beyond eating and sleeping. . . . My survival was not threatened from the outside but from within myself. This is why I had to continue, inside my cabin, that stupid travel diary I had begun with such presumptuousness under Captain John's shrewd eye . . . I was going to write. I couldn't keep from doing it. The chore of noting down the main events of the day, my doubts, my confusion emerged as the only avenue for keeping my sanity' (81-83). What began on ship as a misguided belief in his own importance becomes, on the island, a drive for self-expression and basic communication. Implicitly subscribing to the notion that self-dialogue is an incorruptible form of communication, Daniel sees his diary as a medium for his voice and a place of reception for his words. Writing, then, provides the juncture necessary for the communication he trusts will give him companionship, sympathy and hope. In the absence of a real audience, Daniel invents an accommodating, ideal reader he first addresses as "hypothetical reader" and slowly defines with greater specificity. "Mi hipotético lector, nacido sin rostro, habría ido adquiriendo, poco a poco facciones y características concretas. Tendría más o menos mi edad, veinticuatro, veintisiete, tal vez treinta, años; sufría con mis infortunios y se alegraba ante mis hallazgos" 'My hypothetical reader, born without a face, had gradually acquired concrete features and characteristics. He was probably more or less my age, twenty-four, twenty-seven, perhaps thirty years old; my misfortunes caused him grief and he rejoiced at my

discoveries' (139). His imaginary companion gave him the moral support necessary to sustain his hopes while he waited for his liberation from isolation. Nurtured on the validity of the written word, the narrator does not hesitate to embrace writing as an avenue of truth and to exalt the reader as favorably disposed to that writing. Daniel's patterning his reader on himself affirms the existential connection suggested in the novel between narration and life and the literary notion that a text creates its own reader. The concepts of reader as savior and as mere invention will collide when the latter idea establishes its reality over what ultimately emerges as a naive belief in the transcendence of literature.

If the written work is destroyed, as occurs with Daniel's manuscript, the reader residing in it ceases to exist and the life represented in it survives only as memory. *El año de Gracia*, in this supposition, confirms Todorov's assertion that "Narrative equals life; absence of narrative, death (Todorov 74). On the physical and spiritual levels, storytelling keeps Daniel alive. His meaningless oral recitations save this modern day Scheherazade from physical abuse at the hands of Grock, and his written scribbles defend him from the existential deletion that words, names, and stories prevent. Once he returns to society and ceases to tell stories, he slips into a stagnant state of estrangement from which he can escape only by withdrawing sporadically into memory and the unarticulated word. If narration is life and the reader is the comforting reconfirmation of that existence, the end of the story equals death in Todorov's terms. Along with his invented, personal reader, the storyteller himself dies. Daniel is acutely aware that his probable death on the island dashes his hopes of creating, through writing, the hypothetical reader who would ratify his self-worth: "Había llegado la hora de emprender la auténtica, la imprevisible aventura, de la que, desaparecido el rostro de aquel lejano, imposible y fastidioso lector, no me iba a molestar en dejar constancia" "The moment had arrived for me to undertake the real, unpredictable adventure, of which I was not going to bother to leave any evidence because the face of that distant, impossible and annoying reader had disappeared' (170). With what appears to be his imminent extinction, Daniel is about to lose his reader, his story, and his very identity.

From Daniel's experiences, the inference emerges that life, as meaningful existence, is story—movement, progression, and mortality and that texts endure not as fixed signifieds but only as a continual, fluid process of writing and re-reading "*experienced only in an activity*,

a production" (Barthes 75). Held in language, Daniel's text exists only in the moment of its generation and the stages of its reconsideration. As already seen, in *El año de Gracia* only when he writes his own story does he sample communication and a sense of self-perpetuity. It is also important to note, as one critic does, that Daniel writes the memoirs of his experiences while they are in progress and at the same time comments upon the process of that writing (Zatlin 115). The overt intertextuality of the book is a self-conscious, metafictional device that draws attention not only to the literary conventions it inscribes but also to its nature as fictional object. On close examination we discover that the novel is not so much the transcription of Daniel's diary, the extemporaneous recounting of his adventures, as his re-reading of that narration or the story of his story.

Halfway through the book, he writes, "Releí '*Aunque los mejores años de mi vida transcurrieron de espaldas al mundo . . .*'" (85) I reread: "Although I had spend the best years of my life with my back to the world . . ." The reiteration of the first lines of his narration highlights the dual process of writing and rereading that makes his text into an ongoing process of discovery and evaluation. The illusion of simultaneity is intermittently undermined by the retrospection implicit in phrases like "En aquellos días yo escribía para mí" 'In those days I wrote for myself' (99) and "Pero ahora cuando mi ánimo lleva camino de serenarse definitivamente" 'But now my spirit finally begins to calm down' (101). This metafictional perspective creates a distance between the action and the narration which, besides contradicting the sense of immediacy of a diary, permits commentary on the naiveté and short-sightedness of its author. Self-directed scorn creates a posture of ironic distance between the narrator and his narration and casts suspicion on the truthfulness of his writings or at least underlines its inadequacy: "Por eso debía continuar desde mi cabaña el estúpido diario de viaje que, con tanto engreimiento, había iniciado bajo la mirada sagaz de tío Juan . . ." 'This is why I had to continue, inside my cabin, that stupid travel diary I had begun with such presumptuousness under Captain John's shrewd eye' (82). Writing, then, although the sustaining force of self-identity, proves suspect, vulnerable and variable when reviewed. The process is valuable, but the product is invalid. Through the process of writing, the naive, presumptuous young man has learned that not heroism, but self-interest motivates human behavior. Any attempt to expose that motivation, Daniel discovers, is barred; his manuscript is sanitized through photocopying

and the story it contains is met with restrictive admonitions or incredulous laughter. Any truth his work may contain is prohibited from spreading beyond the private, hidden personal realm where it continues to exist among his private thoughts and is reappraised as interminable reality. Unable to transform itself from Text into Work, Daniel's manuscript awaits in latent expectancy a new reading that will "incorporate, displace and dismantle" its meaning anew (Barthes). Only we, its select, confidential readers, can do that, for in the modern society the novel indicts, the freedom to contradict acceptable meanings and prefabricated messages is curbed.

El año de Gracia reveals a world in which the ability of literature to sustain meaning is problematic and meaning itself becomes irrelevant. The discoveries Daniel made on the island are threatening to society and therefore, once silenced, are left unknown. Ignorance brings a bliss indistinguishable from stagnation and indifference. Irony and skepticism dominate the postmodern era. Although emphasizing language as a way to construct new realities and deeming the illusory fictional world more valid than the material realm, the postmodern novelist distrusts the images and thought patterns outlined in established literature and questions the ability of any discourse to fashion valid models or convey significant messages. The paradox of a literature that subverts its own legitimacy, of course, produces a climate of ambivalence and pessimism. In *El año de Gracia* the stale written word is displaced by the magic of the spoken word. Fernández Cubas' fiction regularly displays "a marked logocentrism," an admiration for the effective storyteller and the orally transmitted tale (Rueda 260). Her usual emphasis on the act of story-telling over the story itself is carried to its ultimate limit in her novel by the reduction of Daniel's Bible recitations to uncommunicative acoustic repetitions. In her novel as in her short stories, although the voice is admired writing is identified with authority and power. What intensifies the opposition between oral and written discourse in *El año de Gracia* is that both are in some way restricted, displaced, and depreciated. The voice is deprived of its potential to articulate stories by the linguistic impasse obstructing verbal communication between Grock and Daniel, and writing cannot flourish because the addresser fails to find an accommodating addressee for his words. The cold community of scientists and the fanatic band of ecologists, for differing reasons, are not any better disposed to communicating with Daniel than the coarse shepherd. Since literature proves unable to capture valid

meanings and society shows itself unfit to accept truth, the protagonist—as writer and human being—turns away from both in sober complacency. As writer he learns that not the literary works that nurtured his intellect, but language and narration alone can articulate meaning. Yet since his words—both oral and written—are displaced, communication on a collective level ceases.

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