

Luisa Etxenike. Ejercicios de duelo. Vitoria-Gasteiz: Bassarai, 2001

This slim collection of short stories deserves special attention: probably the most original minute narratives since the appearance of Cristina Fernández-Cubas' first book. They grip the reader's attention from the first paragraph on and do not let go, keep up suspense until the last. The volume not only fulfils but surpasses the promise put forth in the author's first novel, Efectos secundarios (1996) confirmed in her subsequent writings, especially Vino (2000). Everything is innovative here, very post-modern, but at the same time poking fun at postmodernism. All is play. It is sheer delight to read these sketches, yet, the brief fragments are full of undertones and raise more profound questions. No complete story is told in any of them, no answer put forth: they engage the reader's imagination and force her/him to re-compose the pieces of the puzzle.

Unusual is the structure: swift changes of components, of voices (quite remarkable the polyphonic "Retrato de familia"), of attitudes. The density of language enables each word to strike a spark. It incorporates the most up-to-date colloquialisms, yet does not make them stand out of the sake of adding a picturesque note. All is alive and organic; all gives proof of an experienced hand directed by a shrewd mind. Characters are created with a few penetrating strokes; their interaction gives clues as to the possible focus intended by the author. No one-sided message is pounded in: all becomes a process of questioning hinted at in "Retrato de familia": "Rose had led us to a site within ourselves from which one could see the things inside out, dismounted. It became impossible to look at them except with a searching, ever-moving eye" (99). There is no overt feminism; yet, the insinuations can acquire neat profile. It is a model of "non-sentimental", detached exposition, but it is not dominated by hard-core scepticism found in so many post-modern narratives.

One of the stories, "Deconstruction", could be regarded as the exposition of Etxenike's "poetics": an apprenticeship in dismantling traditional prescriptions for respectable life. The reader is made to perceive the emptiness of the lives of old-fashioned family women. Light mockery blends with barely perceptible sympathy. Every protagonist is capable of a double vision and of self-irony. The development of the stories always brings surprises; situations are constantly inverted or subverted. The title of the book very aptly indicates what will be found in it: life as a process, as apprenticeship in self-defence ("duelo") with no lasting illusions of value. First-person narration alternates with third-person; most experimental is the last piece, "Canción": there, all depend on rhythm and shifts which permit to create erotic ambience without the slightest slippage into pornography. The best of female innovative writing in a small capsule.

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