

'CELESTINA' TIMES TWO AND "ENTROPY"

**Carole A. Holdsworth
Loyola University of Chicago**

In an interesting study published in 1979, Peter L. Hays and Robert Redfield analyzed the influence of the "Hidden source" *Celestina* (1499?), by Fernando de Rojas, on Thomas Pynchon's fourth short story, "Entropy."¹ I now wish to discuss the possibility of a second Spanish source for the Pynchon work, the short story "Las nubes" (from *Castilla*, 1912) by José Martínez Ruiz, best known by his pseudonym "Azorín."

My study will examine such possible points of contact between "Las nubes" and "Entropy" as setting, characterization, and--most important--the two authors' preoccupation with time.

Our short stories reduce markedly the broad urban canvas of *Celestina*. "Las nubes" has as its setting a house with a patio; from an upper balcony, Calisto gazes pensively into his garden. "Entropy" presents us with two groups of characters in a vertical setting. We are concerned here with the character grouping composed of Callisto and Aubade, who live on an upper floor of a Washington, D.C., apartment. In the two stories, vertical space receives a strong emphasis; as Pierre-Ives Petillon has remarked, the technique utilized by Pynchon recalls the "double scène...comme dans un théâtre élizabéthain..."² Azorín's use of balcony and patio is equally Elizabethan.

Another striking point of contact in the setting of the two works is their presentation of a *locus amoenus*. A garden figures prominently in "Las nubes," which supposes Calisto and Melibea living happily with their daughter Alisa in Melibea's family home. Azorín, known for his detailed descriptions, devotes several paragraphs of the very brief story to a description of the garden, a description opening with the key adjective "amena": "La huerta

¹ Peter L. Hays and Robert Redfield, "Pynchon's Spanish Source for 'Entropy,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 16 (1979): 327-34.

² Pierre-Ives Petillon, "American Graffiti: S=k log W.," *Critique* 462 (1985): 1092.

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es amena y frondosa."³ The final adjectives chosen to describe the garden summarize its Eden-like nature: "En el jardín todo es silencio y paz" (706).

Pynchon, in "Entropy," reverses the spatial order of "Las nubes" by locating his work's garden in the upper apartment, that of Callisto. The middle-aged recluse and his young companion have turned their quarters into a "Rousseau-like fantasy," a "hot-house jungle which it had taken [them] seven years to weave together."⁴ Like Calisto's *huerta*, this urban garden constitutes a haven of peace and order: "Hermetically sealed, it was a tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos, alien to the vagaries of...any civil disorder" (68). For both Calisto and Callisto, the garden serves as a refuge from the disintegrative threat of the outside world.

The settings of the two stories share several other details. Both in "Las nubes" and "Entropy" the cheeping of birds fills the garden. Azorín refers to the "*chiar* de las rápidas golondrinas" (705), Pynchon to the *chatter* of birds (73; my italics in both cases). An individual bird also figures in both works. Azorín begins "Las nubes" with a reference to the youthful Calisto's hawk and ends it with the father watching a young man, who had chased after *his* hawk, talking to Calisto's daughter in the same garden in which Calisto had first spoken to Melibea. In "Entropy" Callisto and Aubade fail in their attempt to nurse a "small bird" (83) back to health. Like the cheeping of birds, music also appears in these two works. In "Las nubes" Alisa plays "dulces melodías" (704) on the clavichord; in "Entropy," fugal in structure,⁵ a stereo blasts music from Meatball Mulligan's lower apartment into Callisto's home.

The hawk and the sick bird, harbingers of disorder, thus invade the sacred space of the garden. Alisa's delicate melodies and even Meatball's stereo blasts are human attempts to structure reality.

Turning now to the characters, the man Cal(i)isto and a young girl appear in both narratives. The girl, who plays a subordinate role in the two short stories, has a name beginning with "A" in the Azorín and Pynchon works. In both stories, the description of Alisa/Aubade is brief, generic; Azorín refers to her as "una moza," "su hija," while Aubade is simply called "the girl" several times. In both stories she is subservient to an older man; perhaps such subservience enters into the authors' pausing to comment upon her lovely hands: "¿Quién podría contar la nitidez y sedosidad de sus manos?" (706) - "two exquisite hands" (85). Alisa plays the clavichord for her father; Aubade fixes cold compresses for her lover and takes his dictation.

Calisto, in *Celestina* a lovesick young man of twenty-three, is forty-one in "Las nubes," the passive and melancholy father of a grown daughter. In "Entropy" Callisto is fifty-four, a reclusive intellectual "in the sad dying fall of middle-age" (73). As we shall see, both men are haunted by the swift passing of time. As Stephen Gilman has commented

³ Azorín, (J. Martínez Ruiz), "Las nubes," *Obras completas* II, ed. Angel Cruz Rueda (Madrid: Aguilar, 1947) 702.

⁴ Thomas Pynchon, "Entropy," *Slow Learner: Early Stories* (Boston-Toronto: Little, Brown, 1984) 68.

⁵ Robert Redfield and Peter L. Hays, "Fugue as Structure in Pynchon's 'Entropy,'" *Pacific Coast Philology* 12 (1977): 50-55.

in an excellent study of the Rojas work, "the evidence necessary for consciousness of growth towards death can only be obtained from aging and sickness--neither of which is effective thematically in *La Celestina*."⁶ Pynchon's Callisto, "leery at omens of apocalypse" (70), thus resembles Azorín's pensive, mature Calisto much more than he does Rojas' passionate young lover.

In his Introduction to *Slow Learner: Early Stories*, Pynchon criticizes "Entropy" for embodying "a procedural error" typical of "beginning writers": "it is simply wrong to begin with a theme, symbol, or other abstract unifying agent, and then try to force characters and events to conform to it."⁷ Yet both Azorín and Pynchon appear to have done just that in these stories, and successfully. The "symbol or other abstract unifying agent" is different in each case, but the theme, I propose, is the same: the theme of time. Azorín clearly states that his clouds are a temporal symbol: "Las nubes son la imagen del tiempo" (705). Pynchon's symbolic use of entropy, or "the measure of disorganization for a closed system" (74), is more complex, since--as Anne Mangel has noted--his "notion of symbol and metaphor" rests upon symbols which "point in a thousand different directions and never lead to a solid conclusion."⁸ Again in the Introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon admits that he thinks of entropy, "nowadays," in close "connection with time, that human one-way time we're all stuck with...and which terminates, it is said, in death" (14-15). In this context, the passage which follows from "Las nubes" is of special importance: "Cuando queremos tener aprisionado el tiempo...vemos que han pasado ya semanas, meses, años" (704). These words call strongly to mind the epigraph from *Tropic of Cancer* with which "Entropy" begins: "We must get into step, a lock-step toward the prison of death. There is no escape. The weather will not change" (65).

On the surface, "Las nubes" and "Entropy" present very different concepts of time. Like many members of Spain's Generation of 1898, Azorín was fascinated with Nietzschean eternal return.⁹ In "Las nubes" the concept of eternal return is beautifully summarized in the following manner: "La existencia, ¿qué es sino un juego de nubes?...vivir es *ver volver*. Ver volver todo un retorno perdurable, eterno: ... como esas nubes que son siempre distintas y siempre las mismas, como esas nubes fugaces e inmutables" (705). Yet the Spanish writer acknowledges that man experiences this eternal recurrence as deeply tragic: "¿Habrà sensación más trágica de quien vea ya en el presente el pasado y en el pasado el porvenir?" (705). The clouds, and earlier, the cypress trees (703) are "inmutables," but the individual still faces dissolution; he is thus subject to time in the Aristotelian sense of "the condition of destruction" (*Physics*, Book 4, Section 13, 222b). Writing on *Celestina*, which contains numerous temporal allusions, Azorín singled out a sense of the "fatalidad de las cosas," of

⁶ Stephen Gilman, *The Art of 'La Celestina'* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956) 134.

⁷ Thomas Pynchon, Introduction to *Slow Learner* 12. Pynchon's comments on his youthful work, although harsh, are most interesting.

⁸ Anne Mangel, "Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information: *The Crying of Lot 49*," *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown, 1976) 90.

⁹ Priscilla Pearsall, "Azorín's *La Voluntad* and Nietzsche's 'Schopenhauer as Educator,'" *Romance Notes* 25 (1984): 124.

the "inexorabilidad del Destino."¹⁰ (One of the many little poems scattered through Pynchon's masterly *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) includes the melancholy verse, "Trains go on, and we grow old."¹¹)

Azorín, therefore, accepts intellectually the concept of eternal recurrence, but he endows his temporal symbols with a profound tragic resonance. Calisto has all the ingredients necessary for a happy life, but "sin embargo, puesta la mano en la mejilla, [Calisto] mira pasar a lo lejos sobre el cielo azul las nubes" (704). Like *Celestina's* Calisto, he is "atrapado dentro de los límites de espacio y tiempo."¹² As he watches his daughter talking to the young intruder, he is caught in the same temporal prison as is Henry Adams, a recognized influence on Pynchon: "He himself sat down and stared helplessly into the future."¹³ The sadness which envelops him as he watches the "unchanging" clouds is a natural human reaction, in spite of Nietzsche. To quote Adams once again, "one's instinct abhors time" (228).

While Azorín's Calisto "stared helplessly into the future," Pynchon's reclusive Callisto is "helpless in the past" (84). He is only too aware that time moves only in one direction. In a recent study of the concept of entropy, Jeremy Rifkin explains the connection between time and entropy ("time's arrow") in the words of Sir Arthur Eddington: "The second law of thermodynamics shows us...that time is a function of entropy. When the world reaches a maximum state of entropy, and no more energy is available to perform work, time will cease, for nothing will be taking place" (250).¹⁴ Thus, when Aubade smashes the window at the close of "Entropy," she and Callisto have chosen to wait "until the moment of equilibrium was reached," to wait for "the final absence of all motion" (86). Even for Aristotle, time was the "measurement of motion." To choose "stasis or entropy" is simply to choose death.¹⁵

What perturbs Azorín's Calisto is of course the thought of personal death, the awareness of the transitoriness of the individual, "isolate inside the way time is passing" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 353); we recall the "ofrenda fugaz--como la vida" (703) offered by the lovely flowers of Calisto's rosebushes. Pynchon's Callisto, "impotent with the wonder of it" (85), yields to despair when the death of the little bird seems to indicate that heat-transfer has failed. "Time as we experience it is irreversible" (Rifkin 47)--that first-person plural pronoun is the important word for both Calisto and Callisto, neither man an *Übermensch*.

Finally, a bright gleam of hope is present in both stories. In "Las nubes," Calisto is described as "extático" (706) as he watches his daughter and the young stranger. The individual may disappear, but the human race has a chance to endure. In "Entropy,"

¹⁰ Azorín, "La Celestina," *Obras completas* II 993.

¹¹ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Bantam, 1976) 330.

¹² Esperanza Gurza, *Lectura existencialista de "La Celestina"* (Madrid: Gredos, 1977) 224.

¹³ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961) 280.

¹⁴ Quoted by Jeremy Rifkin, *Entropy: A New World View* (New York: Viking, 1980) 48.

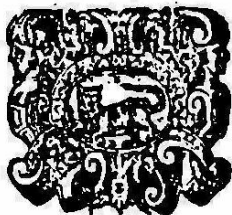
¹⁵ Stephen P. Schuber, "Rereading Pynchon: Negative Entropy and 'Entropy,'" *Pynchon Notes* 13 (1983): 58.

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Meatball Mulligan's decision to try to put some order into the chaos of the lease-breaking party is a positive act, as he "shoulders responsibility for his life in time."¹⁶ Yet it is their authors' conveyance of time as a "condition of destruction" that most clearly links "Las nubes" and "Entropy." In the two short stories, Azorín and Pynchon present the reader with two poignant cases of a middle-aged man who feels trapped in time's prison.

Although a product of Pynchon's undergraduate years at Cornell,¹⁷ "Entropy" is the American novelist's most often studied and perhaps "most mature" short story (Slade 76). Constructed on a scientific metaphor and replete with scientific, literary, and musical allusions, it is a complex work. The words of Azorín, in "La Celestina," could also well describe the young author of "Entropy": "El autor...debía de ser un hombre culto, erudito, libresco; ...un hombre, en suma, intelectual y joven" (993).

"The work of art arises from a background of other works and through association with them," Victor Shklovsky has written.¹⁸ Did Thomas Pynchon's association with *Celestina* extend only to Rojas' work, or had he read "Las nubes" when he wrote "Entropy"? The question is a tantalizing one, and an affirmative answer is at least possible. Pynchon scatters Spanish phrases and allusions to Hispanic writers throughout his three novels.¹⁹ In *Gravity's Rainbow*, for instance, he quotes in Spanish the opening stanza of *Martín Fierro* and refers several times to Azorín's Modernist contemporary Leopoldo Lugones. While I have found no direct references to Azorín in Pynchon's work, it is perhaps significant that in his first novel, *V.* (1963), Pynchon describes as follows one of the minor characters, Signor Mantissa: "He belonged to that inner circle of deracinated seers, whose eyesight was clouded over only by occasional tears, whose outer rim was tangent to rims enclosing the Decadents of England and France, the Generation of '98 in Spain..."²⁰ In any case, there remain the strong similarities of setting, characterization, mood, and theme linking "Las nubes" and "Entropy," two modern descendants of Rojas' *Celestina*.



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¹⁶ Joseph W. Slade, "'Entropy' and Other Calamities," *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978) 80.

¹⁷ In his Introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon states that he wrote "Entropy" in 1958 or 1959 (14).

¹⁸ Quoted by Boris Eichenbaum, "The Theory of the 'Formal Method,'" *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) 118.

¹⁹ I am currently working on a study of the "Hispanic Connection" in Pynchon's writings.

²⁰ Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (New York: Bantam, 1977) 145.



Seneca, the 'amicus principis'. Woodcut frontispiece of the first edition of *Las epistolas de Séneca* (Zaragoza, 1496). (Reproduced by permission of the Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid.)

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