

## Beastly Men and Humane Dogs in *El coloquio de los perros*

Gabriela Carrión  
University of California at Berkeley

In *El coloquio de los perros*, the last of Cervantes' *Novelas ejemplares*, Cervantes reflects "the visage of an Other" (El Saffar, "Evolution of Psyche"165) while maintaining a sense of narrative unity. The "Other" refers to those members of the Spanish empire who were not considered legitimate members of society, but who were nevertheless essential to its existence. They include the witches, the gypsies and the madmen; in short, the underdogs of a society that despises but needs them. *El coloquio de los perros* reveals more than a few of the contradictions in seventeenth-century Spanish society, and this is accomplished within the traditional narrative framework of the exemplar novella.

Elements of Cervantes' narrative such as plot and language are skillfully interwoven suggesting a sense of unity as well as continuity. Cervantes also borrows from many well established literary traditions, such as the medieval *exempla*, the Italian *novella* and the picaresque, which in itself would suggest a continuation of those traditions. Yet despite appearances, Cervantes takes all of the unifying elements of the narrative and subverts them by putting them into question. Plot, social structures, and ultimately the language in which such structures are constructed, are not viewed as one-dimensional. These aspects of the novella will be explored individually in terms of unity and subsequent fragmentation, and the implications that may be drawn.

In order to understand the many layers of plot contained within *El coloquio* Forcione finds it necessary to define plot not in terms of temporality but rather "as an imitation of an action or actions which are coherently assembled according to an informing idea or vision" (23). This becomes essential as the reader is confronted by a main plot as well as a dizzying array of subplots. On the one hand, one has the philosophical conversation between two dogs, Berganza and Cipión. On the other hand, there is Berganza's life story containing

several subplots. To further complicate matters, the entire novella can be considered a subplot of *El casamiento engañoso*, the novella preceding *El coloquio* in the collection. *El coloquio* is the retelling of the dogs' conversation—which is previously overheard by a recovering patient, Campuzano,— to Campuzano's friend Peralta.

But let us restrict ourselves to the two principal narrative threads found in *El coloquio*: Berganza's life story, and the dogs' mutual philosophical reflections. These two levels of plot intersect each other at various points. Berganza is often tempted to stray from his main story line, but is repeatedly set straight by Cipión. When Berganza *does* manage to tell his tale he cannot resist editorializing his adventures and is therefore constantly interrupted by Cipión. The following exemplifies their exchanges:

CIPIÓN —¿Al murmurar llamas filosofar? ¡Así va ello! Canoniza, Berganza, a la maldita plaga de la murmuración, y dale el nombre que quisieres, que ella dará a nosotros el de cñicos, que quiere decir perros murmuradores; y por tu vida que calles ya y sigas tu historia.

BERGANZA —¿Cómo la tengo de seguir si callo?

CIPIÓN —Quiero decir que la sigas de golpe, sin que la hagas que parezca pulpo, según la vas añadiendo colas.

BERGANZA —Habla con propiedad: que no se llaman colas las del pulpo. (319)

Where Berganza tries to edify, Cipión tries to rectify; one constructs and the other deconstructs. Furthermore, these positions are interchangeable. Both dogs constantly undermine their mutual functions as storyteller and listener, and as such there is a constant stop-and-go progression of both plots.

Another point at which both levels of plot intersect is the revelation by the witch Cafizares that Berganza and Cipión could have been human, and that they were furthermore twin brothers. Cafizares describes how Berganza and Cipión's mother, MontIELa, aroused the envy of La Camacha de Montilla, a witch of tremendous renown who had taken MontIELa as her protegé. MontIELa's skills had begun to exceed those of her teacher and consequently La Camacha put a curse on the pregnant MontIELa that caused MontIELa to believe that she had given birth to the two dogs. This connection between Berganza and Cipión can only be made possible through Berganza's narration, and

the effect of this narration is made all the more startling by Cipión's presence. Cipión's function as listener is subverted as it is revealed that he once was an active participant in Berganza's narration.

Therefore, Cervantes' informing idea of plot is no longer the conventional ordering of actions with a beginning, middle and end; rather it is an exhilarating array of actions that revolve around the person (or dog) who perceives them. Forcione writes:

Of all the short stories it is certainly the most formless, the one in which Cervantes reveals the least concern for the coherence of the total design of his plot in Aristotelian terms, that is, as a single action progressing linearly through conflict toward a climatic anagnorisis or peripeteia which resolves both the conflict and thematic problems implicit in it. (22)

Another area where disorder is reflected is in the society that Cervantes represents. Characterization in *El coloquio* always finds its fundamental basis in a profession or a calling; individual identities are subjugated to an individual's place in society. Consequently, a character may not have a name, but will be identified as the proverbial butcher, baker or candlestick maker.

However, one quickly discovers that any sense of social place is invariably based on deceit and violence, and this is what keeps Berganza moving from one owner to another. Berganza learns that the butcher is as capable of killing a man as he is of slaughtering a cow, that the shepherds kill their own sheep at the owner's expense, and the magistrate conspires with a prostitute to entrap and extort bribes from hapless foreigners. Few professions are immune to criticism, and none escape ridicule. For example, Berganza is impressed by teachers and students, but in the same passages both dogs take the opportunity to criticize pedants of all ages, particularly those who learn Latin to impress others later with their knowledge. Poets and playwrights fall under similar scrutiny.

Exasperated, Berganza asks himself: "¿Quién podrá remediar esta maldad? ¿Quién será poderoso a dar a entender que la defensa ofende, que las centinelas duermen, que la confianza roba y el que os guarda os mata?" (311). This question is a central theme of *El coloquio* since it addresses the basis on which power is founded and more often

than not, corrupted. The only other witness to Berganza's escapades besides the disempowered Cipión, is the patient Campuzano who narrates the dialogue. However, Campuzano's sound judgement is questioned from the start by Peralta, his reluctant listener. After all, the validity of a conversation that takes place between two dogs is questionable.

Consequently, the narration begs the listener to suspend judgement of the narrator (particularly in the case of the dogs) and to come to terms with the narration *per se*. While the legitimacy of the narrator threatens to undo the fabric of the tale, the narration is woven in such a way that it develops its own intrinsic value. The narration is further legitimized by Cipión's critical stance *vis-a-vis* Berganza.

It is at this juncture of suspended belief that the reader may interpret the dogs' role as a metaphor for those voices in a society that often go unheard. Always subservient to a master, the dogs are first hand observers of the "Other" previously referred to and as a result, the strength of their perspective outweighs their lack of credibility as narrators. Since the dogs' metaphorical perspective is unique, it might be suggested that a particular voice relegated to silence by social convention or injustice is, in fact, extremely worthy of attention. The arguments set forth by the dogs are so well constructed that they merit attention. The reader is therefore required to shift his or her attention from the narrator to that which is narrated.

As previously noted, Cipión's careful criticism serves to legitimize Berganza's narration. Consequently, the ensuing dialogue between the dogs paints a convincing portrait of their society *in spite of* their unconvincing state as talking dogs.

The social structures described by the dogs are also subject to a similar process of questioning as are plot and narrative legitimacy. While Berganza and Cipión's supposed mother is on her death bed, La Camacha reveals when the curse of her children's transformation will be lifted:

Volverán en su forma verdadera  
cuando vieren con presta diligencia  
derribar los soberbios levantados,  
y alzar a los humildes abatidos  
por poderosa mano para hacello. (338)

Given the mostly grim picture of a society where power rests on false pretenses and is to a large extent corrupt, there is little likelihood of hope for Berganza and Cipión. In other words, La Camacha suggests to the dying Montiel that her newborn pups will return to their previous state as men when hell freezes over.

Cipión recognizes that any reading of the curse renders it useless and consequently the dogs powerless, since Berganza has already told several stories illustrating the events that would have released them from the curse. Cipión discusses the possibilities of both literal and figurative readings of the narration, which later lead to a reevaluation of Berganza's various encounters with society:

Y si en esto consistiera volver nosotros a la forma que dices, ya lo hemos visto y lo vemos a cada paso; por do me doy a entender que no en el sentido alegórico, sino en el literal, se han de tomar los versos de la Camacha; ni tampoco en éste consiste nuestro remedio, pues muchas veces hemos visto lo que dicen y nos estamos tan perros como ves . . . . (347)

While Cipión insists on a literal interpretation of events, he suggests that a text may in fact be read figuratively.

This suggestion is central as it leads to a reevaluation of Berganza's narration. For example, in Berganza's description of the butcher, there are several references that associate the role of the butcher with that of the soldier. First of all, the setting is a "matadero," literally a slaughterhouse. Secondly, Berganza points to the ease with which the butcher may kill beast *or* man: "Pero ninguna cosa me admiraba más ni me parecía peor que el ver que estos jiferos con la misma facilidad matan a un hombre que una vaca; por quítame allá esa paja, a dos por tres, meten un cuchillo de cachas amarillas por la barriga de una persona, como si acotasen un toro" (303).

Berganza's description of the butcher closely mirrors the unenviable reputation Spain's conquerers had gained by the seventeenth century. J. H. Elliot describes this reputation earned by Cortés and his colleagues:

It may be counted as a cost that this confidence in their cause was rated by others as arrogance, that the Castilians earned for themselves the hatred of their fellow Europeans, and that their barbarous exploits in the New World added a whole

new dimension to that vision of Spain and the Spaniards which has come to be known as the Black Legend. (10)

This “arrogance” may be compared with Berganza’s description of the butcher: “. . . todos se pican de valientes, y aun tienen sus puntas de rufianes” (303).

Another episode that lends itself to figurative interpretation is that of the shepherds. It is difficult to ignore the biblical connotations associated with the flock and its shepherd. Here, however, the shepherds no longer fit the traditional role of the shepherd in the biblical sense or even that of the idyllic pastoral tradition. They are hungry “wolves” who kill their owner’s sheep. Berganza has been deeply influenced by the literary traditions of the pastoral and the Bible, and he is consequently shocked to find the thinly veiled deceit masking the bloody reality. Considering the historical period in which *El coloquio* was written—one in which conquest and inquisition were condoned in the name of religion—it is not difficult to interpret this reading of Berganza’s life with the shepherds as a serious questioning of Spain’s “spiritual” leaders.

Just as characterization is subjugated to profession, it is also influenced by gender. Gender is firmly inscribed on one of the most striking central figures of *El coloquio*: Cañizares, the witch who supposedly holds the mystery of Berganza and Cipión’s magic transformation. Her vocation as witch is one which was considered subversive by nature; thus, her voice is an addition to the chorus of the “Other.” Since she is marginalized both by her calling and her gender, she has the most intimate knowledge of what it means to be considered subversive. While she is the most reviled figure in the story, she also holds the most fascination for Berganza.

Forcione reads Cañizares as the epitome of all that is evil, however, this becomes problematic when she convincingly describes herself and all that is evil, as part of a divine order. While Catherine Clément does not refer directly to *El coloquio*, her description of the role of the witch provides possible explanations for Cañizares’ paradoxical role:

This feminine role, the role of sorceress, of hysteric, is ambiguous, antiestablishment, and conservative at the same time. Antiestablishment because the symptoms—the

attacks—revolt and shake up the public, the group, the men, the others to whom they are exhibited. The sorceress heals, against the Church's canon; she performs abortions, favors nonconjugal love, converts the unlivable space of a stifling christianity . . . . These roles are *conservative* because every sorceress ends up being destroyed, and nothing is registered of her but mythical traces . . . the *sorceress*, serves to connect all the ends of a culture that is hard to endure and to cure all the afflictions that resist the domination of the Church . . . . She executes her transit imaginarily, perched on the black goat that carries her off, impaled by the broom that flies her away; she goes in the direction of animality, plants, the inhuman. (5-8)<sup>1</sup>

Cañizares represents a liberating freedom, but one that does not seriously threaten to undo the social fabric, because she is ultimately vulnerable to the society in which she lives. She first appears in an audience to which Berganza is performing with a circus, and in effect disrupts the performance much to the public's consternation. Cañizares is the only member of the audience who takes offense at the drummer's abusive remarks and bothers to voice her objections: "¡Bellaco, charlatán, embaidor y hijo de puta, aquí no hay hechicera alguna! Si lo decís por la Camacha, ya ella pagó su pecado, y está donde Dios se sabe: si lo decís por mí, chocarrero, ni yo soy ni he sido hechicera en mi vida . . ." (335).

Cañizares also strives to fit and survive within the narrow constraints of her society. Although she admits her calling as sorceress, she works as a nurse in a hospital, and as such is a legitimate healer and, it might be added, genuine survivor. When she discovers Berganza, however, she recalls that his transformation lies outside the natural domain of a legitimized society. When she tries to learn the secret that will undo his curse by going into a trance, Berganza is mesmerized and ultimately overpowered by Cañizares. Clément addresses the power of the spectacle that the sorceress represents: "But an audience, ready to satisfy its fantastic desire, is necessary for the spectacular side of sorcery and hysteria. It is, above all, an audience of men: inquisitors, magistrates, doctors—the circle of doctors with their fascinated eyes, who surround the hysteric, their bodies tensed to see the tensed body of the possessed woman" (10).

Terrified, Berganza drags her outside where she becomes exposed and therefore vulnerable to a public similar to that described by Clément. Her punishment consists of being exposed to a society that condemns her in public, but needs her in private. Before going into a trance she confesses her weaknesses to Berganza. She shows little pretense in admitting that her calling, not unlike the “respectable” callings of the shepherd or the butcher, relies to a great extent on deceit and violence. She openly recognizes that in order to survive, she must maintain appearances: “. . . vame mejor con ser hipócrita que con ser pecadora declarada . . .” (340).

Berganza’s vision of the witch is a grotesque nightmare that inspires both extreme fear and fascination. That this nightmare would inspire intense fear is not surprising. However, Berganza’s fascination with Cañizares is her ability to reveal the underlying thread connecting the many contradictory moral stands with which he has been confronted. It is the recognition that good cannot exist without evil; one is the function of another. Cañizares describes both order and disorder as part of a divine plan: “. . . podrás venir a entender cuando seas hombre que todas las desgracias que vienen a las gentes, a los reinos, a las ciudades y a los pueblos; las muertes repentinas, los naufragios, las caídas, en fin, todos los males que llaman de daño, vienen de la mano del Altísimo” (342). As evidenced by Berganza, it is not a simple matter to *tell* the difference between what is considered good or evil. Truth remains elusive for all. Take, for example, the case of the mathematician: “Veinte y dos años ha que ando tras de hallar el punto fijo, y aquí lo dejo y allí lo tomo, y pareciéndome que ya lo he hallado y que no se me puede escapar en ninguna manera, cuando no me cato, me hallo tan lejos dél, que me admiro” (356).

Cañizares, unlike any of the other characters directly confronts her suffering; given her position in society, she cannot escape the bottomless pit of pain in which she finds herself. She summarizes her inability to escape: “. . . y así, quedando el alma inútil, floja y desmazelada, no puede levantar la consideración siquiera a tener algún buen pensamiento; y así, dejándose estar sumida en la profunda sima de su miseria, no quiere alzar la mano a la de Dios, que se la está dando, por sola su misericordia, para que se levante” (342). It is a profound statement on the internal pain that can lead to outward destruction.

Last of all, language reflects the impulse to both unify and fragment meaning in *El coloquio*. Language centers the characters within the text and their respective surroundings, and the characters use words to identify themselves and the world around them. However, language's meaning is subject to change even in those circumstances where it is thought to be constant. Sieber illustrates how Berganza directly links one word to one meaning; at first, Berganza does not understand that the word "wolf" can be used not only to designate an animal, but also a man. Not understanding the various meanings a word can have can therefore lead to disastrous consequences. Sieber summarizes Berganza's initial linguistic innocence: "Lo que no entiende nuestro perro es que la palabra 'lobo,' como seña lingüística, se puede referir a cualquier destrozador de ovejas. Es definido por su poder destructor. Es una metáfora y Berganza, con su mentalidad unívoca, busca la cosa señalada por la palabra y no la palabra en sí" (36).

Where one would expect objectivity in the give and take nature of a dialogue, the characters trail off at the conclusion leaving Cipión's side of the story untold. Likewise, where one would expect to find authorial objectivity in the use of a third-person narrative (*El Saffar*, "Woman at the Border" 193), one discovers how prone language is to manipulation and how easily meaning gives way to misunderstandings. Cipión goes so far as to say: "Vete a la lengua, que en ella consisten los mayores daños de la humana vida" (309). If Cervantes engages the reader it is precisely at the juncture in which linguistic unity is threatened by the very words that hold it together.

Berganza alludes several times to the fact that much is *missing* from his already action-packed life story. For Berganza language can never do full justice to expressing the full spectrum of a life rich in experience and insight. Cipión constantly urges Berganza on, warning him against slander and his numerous digressions. By extension, the dogs' society tends to exclude that which it cannot understand or fears, just as it attempts to destroy the witch Cañizares.

In *El coloquio* Cervantes successfully reflects the fears and desires associated with unity of plot, language and ultimately, society. Cervantes suggests that there is a place for all in society without the exclusion of the "Other," particularly when the Other can be impossible to identify or inseparable from the already existent status quo. While

Berganza may bark and even bite at those he fears, *El coloquio* suggests that not only is there room for all, but that a unified vision is undermined by the exclusion of the "Other." This becomes particularly salient in view of the fact that not all legitimate social or literary constructions are as they appear and that appearances are highly deceiving.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that while Clément refers to an ideology that is conditioned by nineteenth century precepts, the public's reaction in both instances is remarkably similar.

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