Metaphor and Meaning: Reflections on a Central Episode of the *Guzmán de Alfarache*

The world Guzmán de Alfarache inhabits is best characterized by an image its creator Mateo Alemán used in a wood etching included in all his works illustrating a spider who threads her way toward a snake which appears to be asleep.[1] The emblematic motto is "Ab insidijs non est prudentia" (There is no prudence sufficient to withstand deceit"), suggesting, according to Francisco Rodríguez Marín, that the snake was not really asleep, but vigilant, on guard, without realizing that danger would come from above.[2] That this characterizes Guzmán's world is clear because it is not only referred to directly twice in the novel but provides the key to a central episode in the life of the young rogue Guzmanillo and is repeated a surprising number of times in that episode which will be the focus of this paper. The image is crucial to an understanding of this famous, variously interpreted novel and, as Francisco Maldonado de Guevara and Joseph Silverman recognized, it is a metaphor for the entire work.[3]

The novel follows the autobiographical form established by the *Lazarillo de Tormes* and typical of the picaresque novel. It is the account of how a young boy becomes a rogue and then a galley slave, and is told by the galley slave himself following a religious conversion which has made him see his life as evil and has inspired him to write in order to "make a perfect man" (p. 557) by showing us his evil life that it may serve as a "lesson to undeceive" his readers (p. 101). The episode, central to his life and the lesson we receive, spans both parts of the work and is based on vengeance. It is first important to examine the descriptions of the spider-snake emblem as they appear in the work.

The emblem is first used as the narrator—Guzmán, galley slave—describes young Guzmanillo, a porter in Madrid, already a rogue.[4] An illiterate shoemaker, for whom Guzmanillo has been working, asks the rogue to teach him to write his name so that his patron will be impressed. Guzmanillo, humiliated by his own lowly occupation and angered by the pretentiousness of the shoemaker, bursts into a diatribe on the evils of the world. The narrator then concludes:

> All men steal, all men lie, all men cheat . . . Everything is mixed up, fleeting, confused. You will not find any man with another, we all live in ambush for each other like the cat for the mouse or the spider for the snake, which finding the snake careless, grasps the snake by the neck and holds on, not letting go until it has killed the snake with its poison (p. 279–280).

The elements of this image illustrating the motto that no vigilance is sufficient to withstand deceit are those of a careless predator caught off guard and attacked by another predator from an unexpected direction. These elements will be present in one form or another each time the image is suggested.

The second direct use of the spider-snake emblem is occasioned by Guzmán's tale of the theft of his belongings as he had traveled as a youth from Rome to Siena, "happy and careless" (p. 568). Before beginning the story the narrator reflects on the condition of mankind:

> Each and every one for his own ends wants to use deceit against him who is sure of himself, as an emblem declared illustrated by a sleeping snake and a spider which descends secretly to bite her [the snake] on the neck and kill her, the motto of which says "No prudence can resist deceit." It is folly to think that the prudent can prevent someone who is stalking him (p. 563).

This version is slightly different; here, the snake sleeps as the spider descends. But the basic elements remain: a predator becomes a victim because of her own carelessness.

Everything in Guzmanillo's life has prepared him to accept this view of the human as well as the animal world. As in the *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the young Guzmanillo is constantly victimized until he learns to victimize others and trades evil for evil. The extended episode central to this theme deals with Guzmanillo's relationship with his Italian uncle.

After Guzmanillo has left Madrid, many adventures later, he arrives poor and wretched in Genoa seeking his father's well-to-do family in the hope that they will help him. A wealthy relative takes the boy home and puts him to bed, planning to play a cruel trick on the impoverished youth. Guzmanillo, exhausted and deceived by his relative's kindness, sleeps "like a dead man" (p. 358) and is awakened in the darkness and attacked by four men dressed like demons. He is tossed in a blanket and left for dead, covered with his own excrement.[5] On reflection, the narrator expresses his belief that all men since Adam and Eve are equally evil: "The first father was treacherous; the first mother, a liar . . ." (p. 355).

This episode clearly uses the same elements as the emblem but in human form. An unsuspecting and sleeping predator (Guzmán has already become a rogue when this occurs) is made a victim by his careless confidence and preyed upon by others who are more deceitful than he. Following his experience, Guzmanillo flees Genoa and the narrator tells us that he will take revenge "as you will see in the second part" (p. 361).

In the second part of the novel the episode comes full circle as Guzmanillo, 7 years older and grown wealthy through a successful robbery, returns to Genoa. This time his unsuspecting relatives do not recognize him as the youth they had mistreated and, believing he is a wealthy

relative who will enrich them, they take him home. Guzmán plays along with them, building their confidence by his innocent demeanor, all the while making elaborate plans for his revenge. Guzmán, the narrator-galley slave, interrupts his narration to tell several stories about vengeance. These stories are very important because they use the same patterns as the emblem and provide another vision of the same sort of behavior we are witnessing in the young rogue.

The narrator first makes a philosophical statement on vengeance:

> No slight should be thought little of, nor should a man who wounds another sleep, for vengeance rises from beneath the earth where it always hides. Powerful men should never confide in their power nor the valiant in their strength for time changes everything. A little stone can overturn a great cart and when the offender seems to be most secure the offended party will find his best accommodation (p. 688).

This is clearly a return to the emblem and reflects Guzmanillo as he patiently awaits the right moment to attack. The image is multi-leveled; the reader recalls the original emblem, the narrator suggests alternate forms of the same image as cited above, the character Guzmanillo acts out the same pattern, and in two of the stories told by the narrator the exact same pattern is followed. Guzmán-narrator is clearly building to a climactic moment.

The first story on vengeance shows a rich woman whose honor has been sullied by a spurned suitor. All the while planning her horrible vengeance, she pretends defeat and marries the fellow. After several days and nights with him, she knifes him to death as he sleeps, confident that he has triumphed. Like the spider, she attacked her predator-turned-victim when he least expected it. The man, like the snake, grew careless and slept (690–691).

The second story, told to Guzmán by a crazy man, portrays the man's vengeance carried out on a dog who had bitten his leg. Even after his leg has healed the man thirsts for vengeance, and finds his opportunity as the dog sleeps in the sun. He takes a great stone and drops it on the dog's head. The dog dies horribly, "giving out great howls and jumping into the air" as the man tells him, "Brother, brother, whoever has enemies should not sleep" (p. 693). Again we see the sleeping predator, grown careless and made a victim by another.

Following these stories and one other which will be discussed below, Guzmán takes up the tale of his revenge against the uncle who had mistreated him on his first visit to Genoa. The details are elaborate, the stealth supreme and the uncle is robbed of all his wealth. The predator has become a victim, the victim a predator.

It is clear that the image of mankind as predatory dominates the novel and is not limited to a specific emblem of a spider and a snake. The situation illustrated in the etching is repeated again and again in many forms with the same basic view of the world. What is most impor-

tant about these stories and these visions of man is that they reflect the opinion of Guzmán, the autobiographer, narrator of the novel, who is a man purporting to have been converted to a new way. We must now examine the conversion of Guzmán in order to understand what this "new way" means.

Guzmán had been condemned to be a galley slave because of his crimes. We are told that aboard the galley his suffering leads him to see the light and to reflect upon his condition:

> Do you see here Guzmán, the peak of the mount of wretchedness to which your ugly sensuality has raised you? You are now on top and ready to fall to the depths of hell or, by simply reaching out your hand, touch heaven . . . Turn and see that even though it may be true that your faults have brought you here, put those trials in a place where they will benefit you . . . (p. 890)

The narrator continues, telling us that he had spent the night crying and speaking of his possible redemption until he fell asleep and "when I awoke I found I was another, not myself with that old heart of before" (p. 890). Guzmán put his heart in God's hands and began a new life. An account of his new life is promised us in a third part of the work, but we do have several examples of his behavior in the concluding episodes of the work we are reading.[6] The "new way" provides final reflections of the same victim-predator image we have seen all along.

For the first few days following his miraculous change he is servile and careful of his behavior, "watching with a hundred eyes over every trifle" (p. 899). But soon the other galley slaves, jealous of his advancement to servant of a relative of the captain, set him up and he is falsely accused of theft. Humiliated and punished he accommodates himself to his misfortune, confident that he will soon rise "because it was not possible for me to sink any lower" (p. 903). Soon he overhears his fellow slaves' plans to mutiny. Pretending to join them, he gains their confidence and then denounces them when they are least expecting betrayal. They are captured and horribly tortured to death, and Guzmán is freed. The novel ends with Guzmán awaiting his release. The familiar spider-snake image occurs here in both Guzmán's betrayal by the galley-slaves and in their betrayal by him. Guzmán is still playing the same roles after his conversion as before.

The ambiguity of Guzmán's conversion has not gone unnoticed by readers of the Guzmán. What needs to be stressed is that the voice of the converted man is heard throughout the life story, for it has been the narrator, the converted Guzmán, who has delivered his constant message of a negative world in which no vigilance can avoid the deceit of a predatory mankind, and in which men are constantly stalking other men awaiting a careless moment in which to attack.

The two most revealing reflections of the hopelessness of Guzmán's message are the reference to a "watchtower." In order to live, man must

be constantly on guard; we have seen the results of carelessness, yet watchfulness is really of no avail in the end because, as Guzmán comments, "an enemy is a watchtower who guards with 100 eyes like the dragon upon the tower of his malice, to judge our works from afar" (p. 291). Guzmán's attitude is clear when we realize that his book had been called "*Watchtower of human life*" before people had started calling it "*Rogue*" as he tells us (p. 546). The reader may wonder what the promised third part of Guzman's life story will be like when it is clear from his ideas that in his world goodness cannot exist where men have contact with each other. Perhaps this explains the meaning of the third story which, with the two already discussed, makes up Guzmán's digression from the narration of Guzmanillo's revenge agaisnt his uncle.

The third story tells of Juan Gualberto, a well armed and accompanied nobleman who is on the road to Florence when he meets an enemy. The enemy, who had killed Gualberto's brother, unarmed and defenseless, prostrates himself begging for mercy. Gualberto is moved by the plea and forgives his enemy. He then obliges his enemy to accompany him to a church in Florence where they stand before the crucifix and Gualberto asks Christ to forgive him as he had forgiven his enemy. Christ miraculously "humbles his head, lowering it" and Gualberto then becomes a monk and lives out his life in a saintly manner (p. 694). Perhaps what Guzmán is telling us is that the only defense against the deceiful, predatory world, is retirement away from humankind. The entire novel has as its lesson that it is impossible to live in the world.

The key metaphor of the novel has been the deceitful attack upon an unwary victim, himself a predator caught off guard. The controversy surrounding the meaning of the *Guzmán* has been heated and critics have debated at length the message of the novel. Perhaps Wayne C. Booth's comments in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* are most appropriate here. In his discussion of Henry James' "The Liar," Booth recognizes the kinds of ambiguity that an unreliable narrator creates:

> It is customary in critical controversy over James's meanings to attribute such differences to the stupidity or carelessness of all readers except those who see the "true" interpretation. But in dealing with such a story mutual accusations are likely to be pointless. No amount of care, no amount of intelligence, no amount of background reading, can yield the kind of security about "The Liar" that all readers can feel about "The Beast in the Jungle."[7]

In the Guzmán, no amount of discussion can really solve the problem of narrative intention, and perhaps the ultimate unwary victim has been the reader himself, victim of a predatory narrator. In his prefatory remarks, Alemán writes a long declaration to the discreet reader and to the vulgar reader. He calls the vulgar reader an "enemy . . . biting, envious and avaricious" (p. 91). Throughout the book the narrator Guzmán sustains a kind of war with his readers, accusing them of

believing him evil and a liar.[8] If Guzmán's words express his sincere conversion, his actions do quite the opposite. The reader is never sure if Guzmán is teaching us how to live or not to live or if he is telling us that in his world there is no way to live well. And if we return to our original emblem on the etching, we can see that the techniques that Guzmán employs in his narration to obscure the ultimate meaning of his work are carried out in the illustration. The ambiguous narrative is illustrated by an equally problematic portrait, as Joseph Silverman has so clearly pointed out.[9] Alemán points with his right hand to the emblem we have discussed at length as he stares out at the reader. What goes almost unnoticed is the coat of arms in the upper left corner, a false coat of arms, pretending to a nobility which Alemán, of Judaic ancestry, could not possibly possess. The same deception practiced again and again within the novel is also attempted upon an unwary reader by the creator Alemán.

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NOTES

1. Joseph Silverman studied the origin of this emblem and found that the symbol, which Alemán included in both parts of his *Guzmán de Alfarache*, in *San Antonio de Padua*, *Ortografía castellana* and *Sucesos de d. Fray García Guerra*—all his works—is derived from a text in Pedro Mejía's *Silva de varia lección* (J. Silverman quotes from J. García Soriano, ed. [Madrid, 1934] II, 23) which had been derived from Pliny's *Natural History*, Book X, Chapter XCV. Joseph Silverman, "Plinio, Pedro Mejía y Mateo Alemán: La enemistad entre las especies hecha símbolo visual," *Papeles de Son Armadans*, LII, CLIV (1969), 30–38. Pedro Mejía was a poet, historian and scholar who lived and wrote from 1499–1551.

Silverman also refers to the etching in his article "Some Aspects of Literature and Life in the Golden Age of Spain," *Estudios de literatura española ofrecidos a Marcos A. Moríñigo* (Madrid: Insula, 1971) 133–170.

The image is also briefly discussed in Richard Bjornson, *The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction* (Wisconsin: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 51–53.

The edition of the *Guzmán de Alfarache* used in this paper is in Francisco Rico, *La novela picaresca española* (Barcelona: Ed. Planeta, 1967), 81–922. Translations are mine except for the two passages referring to the spider-snake image which are somewhat adapted from Silverman, *op.cit.*, and Bjornson, *op.cit.*

2. Francisco Rodríguez Marín, *Discursos leídos ante la Real Academia Española*, 2ª ed. (Sevilla: Francisco de P. Díaz, 1907), p. 51, n. 63 quoted in J. Silverman, "Plinio . . . ," *op.cit.*, p. 31.

3. Francisco Maldonado de Guevara, "Emblemática y política," in *Cinco Salvaciones* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1953), p. 130. Maldonado calls the novel itself a great emblem. He also notes that the third part, which Guzmán promises to produce, will have to be an ascetic epilog of renunciation. According to Maldonado, Mateo Alemán's social anguish was knowing that despite vigilance against deceit, one could never defend oneself completely (p. 131).

4. Guzmanillo, the young rogue, leaves his home and travels for some time before reaching Madrid. Chapter II, Book II tells us that he went to Madrid and arrived "hecho pícaro" (having become a rogue), p. 257.

5. It is difficult to resist a contrast between a similar episode in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and this episode, so typical of the master work of the Spanish picaresque tradition. When

Sancho Panza is tossed in a blanket, his tormenters are four wool carders described as "merry fellows all of them, well intentioned, mischievous, and playful." It is daylight and following his release Sancho is given water and wine by Maritornes and offers of help from his master, don Quixote. The spirit of the Quixote is far from the scatelogical bleakness of Guzmán's suffering from which he emerges in black of night, filthy and completely alone. See *Don Quixote* in *The Portable Cervantes*, Samuel Putnam, trans. and ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), Chapter 17, p. 181–182.

6. In his "Preface" to Joan Arias' *Guzmán de Alfarache, The Unrepentant Narrator* (London : Tamesis, 1977), Joseph Silverman notes that "It is now widely accepted that there is something depressingly sordid in Guzmán's behavior shortly after his religious conversion," p. xv. Richard Bjornson, *op.cit.* notes, similarly, "Guzmán's decision hardly reflects the disinterestedness and charity of a genuine convert. He displays no compassion when seven of the mutineers are brutally executed and others mutilated . . . As an informer Guzmán not only helps to preserve this corrupt and unjust [galley] system; he is also preserving himself," p. 61.

The end of the novel takes place after the conversion and we would suppose that Guzmán's actions during that time would change from the young rogue's actions even through the narrative voice is the same throughout.

7. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), 352.

8. In Arias, *op.cit*, Chapter II, called "Guzmán de Alfarache and his readers," discusses the problem of Guzmán-narrator's hostility toward his readers and the many ways in which Guzmán distracts his readers from the fact that what he says does not always correspond to what he does. He also delivers some strangely negative messages for a man who has seen the light.

9. J. Silverman, "Plinio . . ." *op.cit.*, p. 37, points out the falseness of the coat of arms portrayed and the emblem as a symbol of Alemán's tortured existence.

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