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VI. Pere Calders and his Mexican Exile

Here Lies Syncretism: Marvelous Seny in Pere Calders' Aquí descansa Nevares

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HERE LIES SYNCRETISM:
MARVELOUS *SENY* IN PERE CALDERS'
AQUÍ DESCANSA NEVARES

PATRICIA HART

*"He passat la meitat de la meua
vida a Catalunya i l'altra meitat a
Mèxic. És un balanç que m'omple
d'estupor ..."*

Pere CALDERS

Introduction to *Aquí descansa Nevares*

The basic plot of Pere Calders' 1967 novella, *Aquí descansa Nevares*, could appear in a Mexican newspaper today: a small band of urban poor are forced from their shacks on the hillside during the rainy season by an inundation of mud, rain, and raw sewage. In their desperation, they follow an improvised leader, Lalo Nevares, whose vision of utopia is living in a stone house with a real floor. After months of overlooking a fancy cemetery from his shack, Nevares has conceived the idea of crossing the gate that separates slums from Necropolis, and moving his band into the pantheons where the city's wealthiest deceased rest in peace. For a brief time, Nevares and his followers know what it is like to escape from the rain into solid dwellings that do not leak, and initially, the group happily accepts the new living arrangements, with Nevares and his wife, Lupe, occupying the most comfortable pantheon of all. Overwhelmed by flood damage and armies of homeless poor, the authorities leave the invaders alone, while the cemetery guard and the gravediggers and gardeners reluctantly cooperate with them to minimize damage.

Gradually, however, the group begins to realize that some of the dwellings are better than others, and as their newfound revolutionary spirit continues to inspire them, they organize a mausoleum lottery to divide up the monuments. Lalo Nevares and his wife are reduced to "un panteó de la classe mitjana benestant, que potser en un altre cementiri hauria brillat per les mènsules que adornaven la façana, però que allí feia la impressió de quedar curt" (83). Hurt by the "la ingratitud humana," and unwilling to "anar molt a menys," Lalo and Lupe abandon the cemetery just hours before the police arrive to kick out the invaders (83).

Calders' readings of the Latin-American Boom authors are evident in this short but complete tale. The community of cemetery-dwellers immediately calls to mind Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, while Lalo Nevares's entrepreneurial spirit is bathed in light refracted from Gabriel García Márquez's Buendía clan and Carlos Fuentes's Artemio Cruz. The Mexican stories that preceded "Nevares" by ten years in 1957's *Gent de l'alta vall* each evoke specific monuments of Mexican and other Hispanoamerican contemporary literature—both magically real and not. For example, "Fortuna lleu," which can be read as a prequel to "Nevares" if one chooses, shares key elements with Vicente Leñero's *Los albañiles*. I will have more to say about this story after discussing "Nevares." "La vetlla de donya Xabela" echoes García Márquez's "Funerales de la Mamá Grande," among other things. Readers of "Primera part d'Andrade Maciel" cannot help thinking of the whole body of literature, film, and song about the Mexican Revolution, but most especially *Los de abajo* by Mariano Azuela, whose Luis Cervantes reminds us of Calders's "Periodista." "La verge de les vies" calls to mind first Juan José Arreola's classic tale, "El guardagujas," and then a variety of tales, both real and fictional, about the Mexican capacity for mythologizing a painted image. "La batalla del 5 de maig," by contrast, puts a humorous twist on such serious explorations of deceptions in history as Usigli's *El gesticulador*, and ends up evoking *Bienvenido Mister Marshall* as much as anything Mexican. But Calders uniformly distorts each one of these echoes and forges from them something uniquely his, with his commonsensical humor and gift for observation of the ironic in Mexican life.

But it would be a serious mistake to think that Calders simply produces a pale imitation of the Boom authors. Significant differences separate Calders from his American colleagues, and other influences are quite apparent as well. For example, it is hard to imagine the ragged, necropolitic invasion in "Nevares" without thinking of *Viridiana*, by Luis Buñuel, whose work Calders must surely have known. The mixture of the surreal and social realism in Buñuel's Mexican films like *El ángel exterminador*, *Simeón del desierto*, *Los olvidados*, and *La vida criminal de Archibaldo de la Cruz*, to name just a few, are as apt comparisons as García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Juan José Arreola's *Confabulario*. Neither should theater be ignored. I have already mentioned Rodolfo Usigli, but Chilean Egon Wolf's play *Los invasores* is another interesting companion for analysis with "Nevares." These are but a few examples of what was clearly Calders's wide reading of Latin-American authors. The Catalan "library" behind Calders's works is, logically, even vaster, and will be discussed briefly later in this article.

But influences and sources cannot even be limited to Hispanic or Catalan ones. Calders was also fluent in French and English,¹ and although many other authors surely had impact on Calders, I would like to mention just two of the most obvious. Faulkner, whom Calders read in Mexico and who was assimilated by the Boom writers long before he was widely translated and read in Spain, can be heard in "Nevares" through echoes of *As I Lay Dying*, and John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* and *The Pearl* inform both Calders's style and also his method of getting close to the characters. Like Steinbeck, Calders first investigates and reports on his subjects, and then tries to get inside their heads and lives. In his thoughtful introduction to "Nevares," Joan Melcion interprets this method as Calders remaining distanced from his characters:

Calders es mostra distant, comprensiu si volem, però distant. Ell no renuncia en cap moment a la seva condició d'europèu ni, per tant, a la d'observador. Intenta de descriure'ns, amb tot el detall que calgui, allò que ha vist, però adopta un punt de vista analític i, conseqüentment, crític . . . (21)

However, one should not take this even for a moment as lack of insight on Calders's part into the motivations, behaviors or thoughts of his characters. On the contrary, all of the thoughts and actions portrayed are believable, and the characters are carefully, if economically, drawn. Consider, for example, this brief characterization of Don Monxo, the elder statesman of Lalo's slum neighborhood, who watches Nevares build his first shack of shiny tin:

L'ancià parlava poc i, abans de dir res, meditava calmosament tota la frase, canviant de lloc una vegada i una altra les parts de l'oració, escurçant-la perquè a l'hora de servir-se'n tingués la desitjada concisió ancestral.

—Sota la llum d'un dia clar, tot fa bonic—digué sense mirar de front—. Però ara que vingui la temporada de pluges, deixarà entrar l'aigua, com les altres. (43)

In this spare passage, Calders manages to convey volumes of information about Don Monxo's taciturnly pessimistic personality, and his impassive stoicism, imposed upon his ancestors and him through centuries of suffering and want.

Another good example of Calders's ability to get inside the characters emerges in the following efficient sketch that explains why Lalo's neighbors refuse to go along with his plan to invade the cemetery until they are flooded from their shacks:

¹Joan Melcion mentions this in his introduction to "Nevares," 17.

Tampoc no temien les autoritats, per creure-les distants i gens interessades en els seus afers. En realitat, el que els aturava era la convicció que les coses bones no es realitzaven mai, o bé que ho feien a canvi d'un dolor, generalment més gran que allò que els era donat. (54)

Here Calders clearly places himself within the minds of his characters, and explains their behavior convincingly. So if the difference between Calders in his Mexican fiction and a contemporary like Juan Rulfo is not really distance from the characters, as Melcion would seem to imply, then what is it? A close reading of *Aquí descansa Nevares* provides a number of helpful answers to this question.

Of course the most obvious thing that separates Calders from Rulfo and others is language. Thanks to the help of a fellow exile—poet Josep Carner—Calders found a job with a publishing company, and frequented a group of intellectuals that included Mexicans, exiled Spaniards, and others.² With his economic needs met, Calders was able to continue writing his fiction exclusively in Catalan, though his work and friendships of course put him in the perfect position to read the best emerging Latin-American fiction.

Language, then, predetermines the intended reader of this fiction—Catalans in exile or at home—and the language holds a set of associations that are largely separate from the American experience, unlike Castilian's inevitable syncretism. When Calders chooses to Catalanize the spellings of his Mexican characters's names (don Monxo, donya Xabela, Apol.linar, Xon, etc.) he moves them closer to his readers' consciousness. The names have a definite Mexican flavor, but by spelling them phonetically for his Catalan readers, Calders makes the characters subconsciously more accessible. This decision is far from being a trivial or casual one, as Catalan fiction set in Barcelona frequently conserves the Castilian forms and spellings of names of the non-Catalan characters, reflecting the coexistence of both naming systems in Catalan reality.

But beyond this, every word in the Mexican stories comes with a history of experience, architecture, gastronomy, and art behind it, as Roland Barthes demonstrated so lucidly in *S/Z* in 1970. By writing in Catalan, Calders inextricably intertwines all of the Mexican stories he tells with Catalan experience.

However, there are less obvious aspects to "Nevares" that separate it from a work like *Pedro Páramo*. In my title I coin the phrase, "marvelous *seny*," to describe Calders' syncretic blend of Catalan literary tradition and language with Mexican characters and

² As told by Melcion, 16.

experience. This is not a flippant phrase, but rather one that distills for me the essence of Calders's Mexican fiction. Let me demonstrate now what I mean by this. In attempting to pinpoint the difference between Calders' authorial positioning and that of his American colleagues, Joan Melcion states:

Els escriptors americans volen aproximar llur literatura a la màgia de la realitat americana; Calders vol fer entrar aquesta realitat dins el món de la seva literatura. (21)

This is evidently true, as by the very act of writing in Catalan, Calders chooses an audience that by definition excludes the subjects of his fiction. However, this is only the beginning. To understand what Calders' "marvelous *seny*" might be, it is necessary to provide brief definitions of "lo real maravilloso" and "realismo mágico" as they first emerged in their American context.

Franz Roh's 1925 essay, "Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism" was translated into Spanish and published in José Ortega y Gasset's influential *Revista de Occidente* in 1927 in Madrid, and was widely disseminated in Latin America. But it was Alejo Carpentier who first described the American "real maravilloso" in 1949 in his prologue to *El reino de este mundo*. Carpentier, a cosmopolitan like Calders, had participated in the surrealist experiment in France in the 1930s, but felt that "lo real maravilloso" was more than a movement in Latin America; it was an inherent characteristic. As Zamora, and Faris put it, for Carpentier "lo real maravilloso," "...inheres in the natural and human realities of time and place, where improbable juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America's varied history, geography, demography, and politics—not by manifesto" (75).

In his famous prologue, Carpentier describes "lo real maravilloso" not only in terms of unusual temporal and spatial juxtapositions, but also literary ones. Carpentier calls Bernal Díaz's chronicle the only honest-to-goodness chivalric novel ever written and points out that at the same time that Bolivian tyrant, Melgarejo, could make his horse, Holofernes, drink buckets of beer, José Martí was able to write one of the best essays about the French impressionists that has ever appeared in any language, and Nicaragua, with its largely illiterate population, produced Rubén Darío, whose work transformed all poetry written in Spanish (105). Therefore, when we begin to discuss Pere Calders's syncretic blend of Catalan language and tradition with Mexican experience, we discover that we are not as far from the American origins of "lo real maravilloso" as might have been supposed initially. And although *Aquí descansa Nevares* lacks any frankly supernatural events that would place it within the category of Hispanoamerican

magic realism that Angel Flores described in the early 1950s, it shares the stylistic refusal to express surprise at unusual events that characterizes fantastic literature, for example. As Flores said:

Once the reader accepts the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision. ...The practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent 'literature' from getting in their way... (190-1).

The aura of marvelous unreality created in the reader of Lalo Nevares's funereal invasion is not shared by the characters, who view their situation in purely pragmatic terms. The strength of their pragmatism, and the narrative's insistence on their common-sense approach, is what leads me to say that the narrative is defined by "marvelous *seny*." Let us consider several examples of this.

During the occupation of the cemetery, one wealthy but sickly family brings in a corpse for burial. The patriarch of the family squatting there, one Celso Rosales, far from being superstitiously upset by the addition of a dead body to his dwelling, is fascinated by the workmanship of the coffin it arrives in:

Quan Celso Rosales veié el taüt de més a prop, tan envernissat i ple de detalls sumptuaris, pensà: "Quin bell armari en sortirà!" I alçant la veu sense adonar-s'en, afegí:

-Tanta falta que ens fa! (77)

Then Calders adds with puckish humor:

Marcat per l'aventura, Celso Rosales lligaria per sempre més les coses dels morts amb les necessitats dels vius, incorporant-se així, sense sospitar-ho, a les filosofies d'una més elevada tradició. (77)

Thus, Calders uses a lack of superstition on the part of Rosales to emphasize the irony of a situation in which wealthy but morally bereft characters spend huge amounts of money and energy to comply with a Christian burial tradition, while ignoring the more substantive Christian ethos that would encourage them to give aid and sympathy to the homeless poor seeking shelter in this city of the dead.

This marvelously pragmatic *seny* is also seen when the initial decision to overrun the cemetery is first considered:

No era pas el veïnatge de la mort el que temien, ja que estaven acostumatats des de petits a contemplar-la a través de les calaveres de sucre, amb el nom de cadascú escrit al front, que es regalaven mútuament el Dia de Difunts. Hi jugaven unes quantes hores o uns quants dies i després mossegaven els cranis blancs, amb una gana que era llur companya de sempre; així, la diversió, la fam i la mort anaven juntes d'una manera que els era familiar. (53)

After the flood, the notion of profanation or fear is weighed again by Nevares's band against their homelessness and desperation, and common sense quickly wins out. We see the battle between bureaucratic stubbornness and marvelous *seny* clearly illustrated in the following conversation between the cemetery guard, don Cosme, and Nevares:

—Mira que no podeu torbar el descans dels que jauen en aquest lloc!

—Ara venim a descansar nosaltres...

Entraren ordenadament, sense presses. Alguns es treien el barret i les dones es persignaven amb devoció.

—No podreu descansar amb els morts a sota —deia don Cosme provant de convèncer-los.

—Amb tants i tants anys de món, només devem trepitjar tombes. Tota la terra deu ser un enorme embolic d'ossos. (57)

It is not that the characters are not superstitious or respectful of death, as we see by their removing hats and crossing themselves; however, they do not have the luxury of letting superstition interfere with survival. The "marvelous *seny*" emerges in another conversation in which don Cosme attempts to convince Nevares that it would be terrible for a baby to be born there:

Quina manera de començar la casa per la teulada! Us assemblereu als impacients que entren al cinema quan encara no ha acabat la sessió anterior, enduts per la frisança de seure. Un cop vist el final, tota la pel·lícula passa sense pena ni glòria. (73)

Nevares's mental response is a classic gem of marvelous *seny*. "Anava a respondre que, abans d'entrar al cementiri, ja tots ells sabien el principi i la fi de l'argument general" (73).

As we re-read the story in the light of the suggestion that Calders's Mexican characters are filtered through his youthful immersion in Catalan *seny*, don Monxo's spare condemnation of Nevares's childish shiny tin shack takes on other dimensions; "deixarà entrar l'aigua, com les altres" (43). Because the commonsensical reactions of Calders's Mexican protagonists serve specifically to point out social injustices and hypocrisies, we are reminded of Luis Leal's insistence that, in contrast to avant-garde literature, magic realism is not escapist (234). "Aquí descansa Nevares" is definitely a narrative with explicitly-stated social messages. In fact, the novella ends with Lalo Nevares trying in his simple but intuitive way to sum up the injustice implied by the juxtaposition of wealthy, carefully-groomed cemeteries and slums. "No sé ben bé com anirà," he begins confusedly. "No sé, tampoc, com explicar-t'ho. Però vindrà un dia que els cementiris seran per als vius"

(84). At this point the reader might even be experiencing a momentary annoyance, feeling that Calders has been too explicit in stating the moral of the story, especially on reading the subsequent authorial comment, "Lalo ignorava que, de vegades, Déu posa la profecia en llavis dels humils" (84). However, what follows is not quite what the reader expects. Lalo, of course, means that it is criminal for a society to expend resources on an intricate cult of death for the wealthy while the poor go without basic necessities. But what follows twists our expectations just enough to make us forgive the momentary didacticism:

Com un teló de fons massa gran per al seu minúscul drama, la ciutat a la qual s'acostaven anava teixint ciment i acer, posava llosa sobre llosa, per empresonar subtilment uns quants milions de persones que tenien, com ells dos, la il·lusió de les parets segures. (84)

This twist is the last good example of marvelous *seny* in the story, as in one deft stroke it forces the reader to analyze the plight of armies of city dwellers who at first glance appear to be in a better situation than Lalo Nevares and his tribe. It is also easy to extend the final words across the Atlantic, and read into them a denunciation of the repression of Spain by Franco, enduring seemingly endless dictatorship as the price of an illusory security.

If one chooses to read "Fortuna lleu" as a prequel to "Nevares," the irony is continued even further. In "Fortuna lleu," a character named Lalo gets into a drunken fight with his *compadre* Trinidad, who hits him on the head with an iron bar, then hits him twice more on the ground "perquè no pateixi" and buries him in cement in a construction site. Thus the connection between cement, burial, and security is carried to grotesque ends. Trinidad then goes to inform Lupe of Lalo's tragic and "accidental" death, and promptly moves in Lupe's "secure" city apartment with her.

Carpentier, Flores, Leal, and many other theorists of magic realism returned again and again to the chivalric novel as one of the sources of the Latin American mixture of the real with the marvelous. When Bernal Díaz tried to describe the splendor and strangeness of indigenous Mexico, he resorts unconsciously to structures absorbed through his readings of the *Amadís*, and other marvelous adventure narratives. For Carpentier, Bernal is the first to capture the wonder of the culture clash between European and Native American. Cabeza de Vaca's moving and fabulous tale is no less strange than some of contemporary science fiction. And while Motolinía describes the impossible profusion of plants and animals with which his new parishioners heap the stage for a fifteenth-century mystery play production of the story of Adam and Eve, we are again transported to

the mythical kingdoms inhabited by knights-errant. When in the confusion an ocelot swipes at Eve, we sense that Motolinía is only half joking as he tells us that since the disaster occurred prior to the Fall, Eve was not seriously hurt (46). Thus, the tradition of the magically-real in America is imbued with humor, awe, and reference to escapist fiction in what is nevertheless serious chronicle intended to be read and understood as history.

If the chivalric tradition is essential to our reading of the magically real, then one could hardly make a case for Pere Calders' marvelous *seny* without reference to Joanot Martorell. As readers of the *Quijote* well know, Tirant lo Blanc was a knight errant who fought, loved physically, ate, defecated, and died in his bed at the end. It is not surprising, then, that Calders' Mexican narrations never cross the line from the marvelous into the magically real. Calders understands odd juxtapositions, the irony of colliding cultures, and situations where centuries seem to have stood still. But there are no flying burros, insomnia plagues, or incredible shrinking patriarchs here. Each of the Mexican tales contains strange and unusual events, but ones Calders claimed to have lived himself during his exile.³ Ironically, it is in Calders' Catalan-located fiction that he is more likely to have supernatural twists. Just one example of this would be his delightful children's tale in Spanish, "Cepillo," in which a little boy adopts a large brush to replace his banished dog, and the brush surprises him by coming to life and actually behaving like a dog. Calders' Mexican tales, rather, are in line with the oft-repeated boutade that there is no such thing as magic realism: within the Latin American reality, García Márquez, Rulfo, Arreola and the rest produce plain, unadjectivalized realism. As Isabel Allende put it in an interview with Michael Moody:

Vivo en un continente donde no hace falta inventar mucho, porque la realidad siempre nos sobrepasa, es una tierra de huracanes, terremotos, maremotos, catástrofes políticas . . . Nuestra historia es alucinante y nuestra realidad a menudo lo es también. (44)

In the light of this assertion, let us consider one small segment of the story in detail. When the wealthy but sickly Carrandi-Alatiel family forges its way up the muddy mountainside to lay to rest yet another of its dying breed, the narration is replete with ironic inversions and juxtapositions. The description of the family pantheon is one good example:

Era un enginyós compendi de l'arquitectura mundial de totes les èpoques i així

³ See both his and Joan Melcion's assertions in the prologue to "Nevares."

com, vist de front, recordava vagament l'Acropolis d'Atenes, mirant-lo de costat feia pensar en la piràmide de la Lluna, coses difícils de lligar i vençudes només pel geni creador de l'home. (74)

This fabulous mixture of styles is improbable but not, as anyone who has been to Mexico can testify, impossible. Several delightfully ironic inversions then occur as don Cosme reflects on the high mortality rate among the Carrandi-Alatiels, who are among the most assiduous clients of the cemetery. The family "omplia el monument amb una regularitat admirable," thinks don Cosme, applying vocabulary of less morbid businesses to the Thanatorium. He is not surprised by their braving the elements. In fact, "si en alguna ocasió deixaven transcórrer massa temps sense presentar-se, el vell guardià pensava que devien haver tingut una desgràcia" (74).

Amaryll Beatrice Chanady wrote in 1985:

Since the magico-realist narrator adopts a point of view that differs from our own, we cannot identify with him to the same extent as in the fantastic. While the reader accepts the unconventional world view, he does so only within the context of the fictitious world, and does not integrate it into his own perception of reality. (163)

This clearly applies to "*Aquí descansa Nevares*," as the Catalan readers for whom it was written must apply their own *seny* to the marvelous events of the narration in order to fully create the marvelous *seny* announced in my title. For those of us readers who are not Catalans by origin, the narration guides us into experiencing by empathic effort the *seny* we may not have been born into.

"Os amo, idealismo y realismo," wrote Pablo Neruda, distilling as he did the competing forces that pull at all works of art ("La verdad"). "Como agua y piedra/ sois/ partes del mundo/ luz y raíz del árbol de la vida." The idealism inherent in Catalunya's forty year struggle for autonomy under the Francoist dictatorship is impossible to separate from the hard-headed realism that enabled the Països Catalans to preserve their culture and language in the face of adversity. A blend of the ideal and the real defines Latin American magic realism, but the appearance of this blend in *Aquí descansa Nevares* is much more than an adopted mode of writing that Calders took from the nation that sheltered him when his own cast him out; it was his birthright as a spiritual colleague of both Tirant and also Companys. Calders' experiments in marvelous *seny* are examples of art forged from adversity, an alchemic miracle as awe-inspiring as any Amadis ever witnessed.

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