

**AN ANTHOLOGY OF
GALICIAN SHORT STORIES**

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY KATHLEEN MARCH

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Así vai o conto

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INTRODUCTION

Galician literature

Galician literature belongs to the westernmost of the three Romance languages considered today in the Iberian Peninsula to be of literary importance. These three languages derived from Latin were not the only ones which had a literature in the Middle Ages. The Latin introduced by the Roman conquest appears during that period as divided into multiple forms, some of which came to have important literatures. But, as is natural, the dialects which were most similar became fused into a single literary medium; those less specifically defined or less apt for written use were absorbed by their stronger and more fortunate neighbors. Thus, three Romance literatures of importance came to be distributed throughout the peninsular map, expressed respectively in three Hispanic languages, each formed by linguistic sets or systems: the eastern, the central and the western, which, according to their geographical origin, we shall call Catalan, Castilian, and Galician, respectively. Moving southward from their northern cradle, those three languages, when imposed on the Romance dialects spoken by people of the southern region, resulted in spoken variants which are an extension of the invading forms, *valenciano*, Andalusian, Portuguese, which in general did not produce autonomous literatures. The Valencians wrote in Catalan, the Andalusians in Castilian, the Portuguese in Galician. This situation existed only while the lands of the South remained politically dependent upon those of the North. But when a southern territory freed itself from northern control and consolidated its independence, which occurred only in the case of

the western linguistic system, the political dismemberment had consequences for the linguistic nomenclature.

Thus, although Portuguese is born as a variant of Galician, the independence of the lands situated south of the Miño River on the western edge of the Iberian Peninsula and which are to constitute the kingdom of Portugal, causes the name *Galician* to be reserved for the written language in the part of the former Roman province of Gallaecia situated north of the Miño, while the name of *Portuguese* is given to the southern variant of the same language, and which develops autonomously as the official language of a new nationality while Galician atrophies literarily as the northern territories become a regional dependency of the dominant kingdom of Castile.

For this reason, we now speak of Galician, referring to the language spoken in the Spanish provinces that today constitute the Autonomous Community of Galicia, and it is the narrative produced in this language which concerns us here.

There is, then, a primitive Galician literature which is inseparable from the Portuguese. Yet, while the ancient Romance language was marked by the mozarabic speech forms in the southern region, that is to say, in the kingdom of Portugal, that same Romance language, in the region which is now Spanish, suffered a strong Castilian influence, to the point where it came to be considered a dialect of the central system, and since the end of the Middle Ages, Castilian was in truth the literary language of the Galicians.

The Renaissance

In the middle of the nineteenth century Galician reappears as a literary language, now independent of Portuguese—which had followed its own path—but attempting to free itself from Castilian domination. It had to slowly try to overcome, as much as possible, the linguistic servitude in which the Roman form born in the northwestern part of the peninsula found itself, not exclusively in the territory of modern day Spanish provinces, but rather on both sides of the Miño, in the area of the Roman province of Gallaecia.

This modern Galician literature is inevitably marked in its origins by Castilian literature. Castilian is the only official language of the Galicians. It

is the language of the administration and the church—although the liturgy uses Latin. Thus every educated Galician must obligatorily know the Castilian language, and considers the literature in that medium as his/her own. The Galician writers of the Renaissance are educated in Castilian literature, and the most obvious references in their Galician essays are Castilian texts, in addition to the popular Galician literature with its oral characteristics, because the memory of the Galician-Portuguese medieval past has been lost and only later recovered, precariously and with difficulty.

The short story

This "regional" or "provincial" character of Renaissance Galician literature explains its limitations in the early stages. In its themes, it cultivates the typical, the rural—since it is in the country where a part of the old Galician culture has been preserved in a fossilized state—and as far as the genres, there too the most preferred are the popular ones, among which is the brief narrative, that is to say, the short story. The situation evolves according to the way in which the "national" feelings of that literature grow. But what has been pointed out explains why the short story is the prose genre used most early on by Galician writers, not forgetting the fact that there were publishing difficulties both in the economic aspect and that of social reception. The short forms, with their modest nature—lyrical poetry, brief narratives—are in the beginning more indulgently tolerated in an environment which only accepts the literary cultivation of Galician for alternative and limited purposes.

Rosalía

Thus the relative simplicity and facility of the short story, genre of great folklore tradition, favors its cultivation in modern Galician literature. The latter reaches its moment of consolidation in 1863, when Rosalía de Castro's book *Cantares Gallegos* is published, the first book of the Renaissance. This is a volume of poems of popular inspiration; but Rosalía is also the author of a *conto galego* ('Galician short story'), published posthumously.

After Rosalía (1837-1885), modern Galician literature develops, although on a limited sociological basis, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with stages of expansion or contraction, according to the greater or lesser permissiveness for the cultivation of the Galician medium which the political conditions permit.

The masters of Ourense

Among the continuers of the impulse which Rosalía gives to Galician letters, there figures a group of writers from Ourense which makes a memorable effort to constitute a narrative of a short story type. In reality, these writers are the founders of the modern Galician literary story, which emerges parallel to the task carried out by others of compiling or recreating, of fixing in written text form or redoing the popular tales which as oral literature had been traditionally transmitted, and within which we must include the aforementioned Galician short story of Rosalía.

The best known of the aforementioned Ourensean writers is Valentín Lamas Carvajal (1849-1906), who in his book of prose *Gallegada* (1887) mixes local color sketches with those of a narrative sort, in which there is a predominance of village themes. Two other skilled creators from the Ourense circle are Heraclio Pérez Placer (1866-1893) and Francisco Alvarez de Nóvoa (1873-1936). These two local colorists, each in his own way, attempt to overcome the narrative literature of a popular sort, orienting themselves along the lines of realism and naturalism. Pérez Placer aspired to be considered the "Galician Boccaccio and Zola," but in truth only his proclivity toward the erotic or the vulgar can imperfectly explain that erroneous pretension. In reality, although perhaps he had read those two authors, his picaresque scenes are folkloric, his naturalism is actually the naturalism of the spontaneous tales of the village yarn-teller. He also cultivates the sentimental story in the romantic vein. The effort of Alvarez de Nóvoa is more interesting: in his book *Pé das Burgas* (1899), he frequently departs from the traditional local-color story set in a picturesque village, and he offers us examples of stories with upper-class characters along the lines of the moderate naturalism spread through Galicia by the Spanish language stories of Doña Emilia Pardo Bazán.

A new generation of Ourensan narrators is the one generally designated by the name of the journal they founded in 1920, titled *Nós*. These writers, born in the second half of the next to last decade of the nineteenth century, have a formation which in general terms corresponds to French symbolism and Spanish-American modernism. At first they are indifferent to the *galeguista* movement, but later they join it and give it a European character that will deeply mark its literature. Vicente Risco (1884-1963), the chief ideologist of the group, writes stories of didactic and philosophical intention. But the most prolific figure is that of Ramón Otero Pedrayo (1888-1976). His narrations range from the short novel *Contos do camiño e da rúa* (1932) and the story *Entre a 'vendima e a castañeira* (1957). Otero Pedrayo gives us a very complete vision of Galician life in the city and the country, with characters of different social classes, from the earlier times and the contemporaries of the author, in a rich and succulent prose that is varied and expressive as well.

Although not from Ourense, closely related to the previous writers is the famous politician and artist Alfonso Rodríguez Castelao (1886-1950), who stands out for the classical clarity and precision of his prose and for the humor and lyricism with which he presents popular types and customs to us, far from the style of nineteenth-century realism. Many of the texts contained in his books of *Cousas* ('Things') (1926) are brief stories which are very similar, for their simplicity and sharpness, to the traditional anecdotes and apologies of the Galician people; but in the five stories gathered under the title *Retrincos* ('Bits') (1934), using great finesse, while showing considerable thought and painstaking, he elaborates autobiographical statements of outstanding qualities, particularly in the structure of the narrative and the sobriety and efficacy of verbal expression.

The 'Novecentistas'

The *Novecentistas* were followers of the members of *Nós*; born around 1900, in one way or another they correspond to the writers participating in the European avant-garde movements. More conservative in his techniques, Eduardo Blanco-Amor (1897-1979) has collected in *Os biosbardos* ('Daydreams') (1962) various stories with a child or juvenile main character,

in which one can detect influences of the romantic and naturalist schools. More analytical and experimental, the stories of Rafael Dieste (1899-1981) from *Dos arquivos do trasno* ('From the Imp's Files') (1926), revised and enriched in new editions, recall those of Castelao because of their lyricism and humor. But they have sentimentality and more intellectual play. Anxel Fole (1903-1986), who joined the cultivation of Galician later on, depends on the popular oral story from the village and on nineteenth-century realist models as well as those of modernist and postmodernist esthetic, depending on the needs of the occasion.

The period of the 'Seminario'

In 1923, a group of university students founds the *Seminario de Estudios Gallegos* in Santiago de Compostela, which is to play a very important role in the development of Galician culture. With the name of the Generation of the Seminario, a set of writers which either is formed around that Center or is in some way in contact with it, is established. Among them is Alvaro Cunqueiro (1911-1980), who is not a researcher and thus does not figure among the authors of scientific works in the publications of the *Seminario*. But he is the same age as the others who combine literary production with the administrative and directive services of that Institution. It is better to call these writers the Halley generation or the Generation of the Comet, because they are born more or less around the time in which Halley's comet, which has just reappeared, is seen (1910) in one of its periodic Epiphanies. The *Seminario* is the scientific center which characterizes the era, and Cunqueiro is friend and contemporary of other personalities who work there.

Like Castelao, Cunqueiro stands out in the short story, so that his "novelas," like the only one which Castelao wrote, are groups of short narrations, similar to the old picaresque novels. Also like Castelao, Cunqueiro combines humor and lyricism, but differing from the author of *Retrincos* in that in Cunqueiro there is no sentimental tendency. This coincides with what we have said regarding Dieste; but while Dieste usually contrasts with the intense sentiment of Castelao what we have called "intellectual play," Cunqueiro utilizes "artistic play," frequently freed from

logical thought, for the crucial moments of his narrative. He also differs from Castelao and resembles Otero Pedrayo in his usage of mythology, history and earlier literature; that is, in constructing his narratives upon a learned cultural base, albeit a distorted one, which may undo and sometimes parody the facts employed, often of exotic origin. Cunqueiro's short story is a playful combination of fantasy and the realistic, which has sometimes been called magical realism.

Today's tendencies

The short story writers which follow are in a period of maturity, such as Xosé Luis Méndez Ferrín, or they are beginning their literary careers. Méndez Ferrín produced his most original work, in the area which concerns us, with the stories which are apparently science fiction, but whose intention is social criticism, and which constitute the greater part of his book *Elipsis e outras sombras* (1974), although other collections, prior and posterior to this one, reveal a writer of great imagination and considerable expressiveness. If the taste for reworking of ancient myths and prose technique remind us of Otero Pedrayo and Cunqueiro, the names of Lord Dunsany and Borges can and have been evoked, as have been those of other modern European and American authors, in relation to the style and themes of this energetic and subtle writer.

Lately we have been seeing the appearance of new types of short narrative which at times show experimental features and recall figures of universal literature such as Kafka or Faulkner, much read at the time those texts are produced. The French objectualist school also had its impact upon our letters. Later, during the time of the decline of General Franco's regime, social realism predominated among the young writers in a form of social criticism. With the arrival of the parliamentary monarchy, we see the trend toward the imaginary and fantastic story being reborn in the West, often inspired by the old masters of decadent symbolism such as Villiers de l'Isle Adam and other "strange" authors. It is still too soon to characterize and analyze the work of these young writers, although some, who are not so young, as in the case of Juan Casal, Gonzalo Mourullo or Xosé Neira Vilas, either because they have now closed the cycle of their work or because it is

now sufficiently large, could be considered quite representative of the various tendencies which have existed and exist in this corner of the Hispanic Northwest in the literary genre which concerns us here. The selection by Kathleen March, which naturally has been made according to personal criteria but is of course oriented toward a didactic end that has been well thought out, can give the English-speaking public for which it is intended useful information about the work of some of the writers which I have cited, and others which are also included in this book, which should be seen in the important role of extending modern Galician literature beyond the confines of the Spanish State.

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