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MONTAGE AND OTHER NARRATIVE AND DRAMATIC MECHANISMS IN *EL ASTILLERO* BY JUAN CARLOS ONETTI

Marta Álvarez Izquierdo

“Doctoranda” in General and Comparative Literature

Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris III)

Recommended citation || ÁLVAREZ IZQUIERDO, Marta (2009): “Montage and other narrative and dramatic mechanisms in *El astillero* by Juan Carlos Onetti” [online article], *452°F. Electronic journal of theory of literature and comparative literature*, 1, 104.120, [Consulted on: dd/mm/yy], <<http://www.452f.com/issue1/montage-et-autres-dispositifs-narratifs-et-dramatiques-dans-el-astillero-de-juan-carlos-onetti/>>.

Illustration || Elena Macías

Translation || Loli Castillo

Article || Received on: 23/04/2009 | Scientific Committee's suitability: 26/05/2009 | Published on: 01/07/2009

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Abstract || In this paper I want to analyze the assembly and the different narrative mechanisms of *El astillero* written by Juan Carlos Onetti. With this purpose, in the first point I analyze the different narrative situations which take part in the creation of two contrary worlds, the reality and the phantom world of the *El astillero*, always described in an uncertain time. The second part analyses the way that the different narrations are crossed, setting up a discontinuity effect in the narration and the duplicity of the characters. In the third part we can see how, through the different narrative voices, the narrator sets up a story marked by uncertainty and ambiguity. This uncertainty is the reflection of existence, because behind the farce what remains is the trap of existence.

Keywords || Onetti | *El astillero* | Narrative mechanisms | Ambiguity | Farce | Uncertainty.

0. Introduction

Literature enters modern times when the notions of rule and convention are replaced by formulae or operations. The linear narration is forsaken in favour of mechanisms in which the narrations present several narrative situations that are crossed. The narrator gets rid of the traditional function of setting a perspective on the different events that take place at different moments. The montage and mechanisms become an eminent form, a particular and enduring representation of these formulae and literary operations which are the mark of modernity. The process of creation of the narration becomes essential.

In 1950, Juan Carlos Onetti publishes *La vida breve*, a capital novel where Santa María appears for the first time, his mythical city that can be located near Rio de la Plata. In *El astillero* (1961) he goes on with the development of the dark and misleading universe of Santa María.

El astillero starts with the return of Larsen to Santa María five years after his departure in exile. By chance, he meets Angélica-Inès, the daughter of Petrus, the owner of a yard in ruins. He tries to seduce Angélica-Inès and accepts being the assistant manager of the yard in ruins, and has Gálvez and Kunz as employees.

We are going to see which are the new narrative formulae set in *El astillero* so as to replace the rules of the past. In the first instance, we will see that *El astillero* is a novel where different narrative situations take place. Then, we will study the way in which the stories cross each other, and the effects of this interweaving. At last, we will see that through the different narrative voices, the narrator sets up a story marked by ambiguity and uncertainty. This narrative uncertainty is the reflection of existence.

1. The shipyard: a multilinear narrative

1.1. Different narrative situations

El astillero is a novel in which the different narrative situations are closely linked to the spaces where they take place. These different spaces play a prominent role in the narrative organization of the story and in the materiality of the text. Thus, the novel is structured in 18 chapters, and the headings of the different chapters have the name of the main spaces in which the action takes place: “Santa María”, “El astillero”, “La glorieta” and “La casilla” that correspond to the four main spaces.

The narrative begins with the return of Larsen to Santa María. Larsen reappears in the city from which he was evicted five years before, and he wanders around its streets. Then, Larsen travels twice to Santa María where he goes to talk with Doctor Diaz Grey and Petrus and finally, the penultimate chapter corresponds to the last descent of Larsen to the “ciudad maldita”.

Many scenes of the novel take place in *El astillero* (chapters 2, 4, 8, 9, 13, 16 et 18)¹. In the second chapter “El astillero¹”, Larsen proceeds to Port Chantier two days after his arrival to Santa María. He goes back to Belgrano, and it is there he sees Angélica-Inès for the first time: “Larsen supo en seguida que algo indefinido podía hacerse [...]” (p.65)². It is in this space that, two chapters further, Petrus offers him the post of assistant manager of his firm, and where he will meet Gálvez and Kunz. It is also in this space that the game, that will become over the pages a grotesque farce, is set up.

In the third space, “La glorieta”, the conversations between Larsen and Angélica-Inès take place (chapters 3, 5, 7, 15, 18). It is at the time of these meetings that Larsen leads his seducer strategy and tries to seduce the daughter of Petrus. In the last chapter Larsen goes to the Glorieta, but Joséfina, the maid-servant, does not let him in because the young woman is ill. That evening, Larsen has an affaire with Joséfina.

The fourth space is “La casilla” (chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 18). It is there that Gálvez and his pregnant wife live, and it is there where Kunz and Larsen go at night to drink and to have something for dinner.

Every single space of the novel has a specific function. In each space Larsen plays a different role: “Santa María” is the past, we can see the insistence of Larsen to get back the lost and irrecoverable power. “El astillero” represents the game of domination, importance and power.

NOTES

1 | In the text the chapters are not numbered this way, but I have granted them figures in order to be able to mark them so as to locate them in an easier way.

2 | ONETTI, Juan Carlos (1993): *El astillero*, Ediciones Cátedra, Madrid.

In “La glorieta” the impossible communication takes place. And “La casilla” is the only possible form of communication, the urgency of protection and of refuge. These simultaneous scenes show four phases of Larsen in which he reduces and extends his defeat.

But apart from the different stories represented by the four spaces, in *El astillero* there is another level of codification, namely, the presence of two opposite worlds: reality and game.

1.2. Reality and game

While accepting to be the assistant manager of a ghost shipyard, Larsen also accepts the game and plays the role of the assistant manager. He does everything to make the game plausible; he calls his subordinates to ask them questions about the files he reads over again. When the end of the day at the yard arrives: “Mentía destinos plausibles al patrón si lo tropezaba al salir y daba largos rodeos, dibujaba sobre calles y aceras de tierra caminos siempre distintos e irresolutos, senderos [...]” that the narrator calls “hijos de la trampa y la duplicidad” (p.88). This same duality exists in the subordinate characters, Gálvez and Kunz, who also have accepted the game. When Gálvez settles each month the list of the yard wages, he “re”-becomes conscious of the nonsense of the game he is playing: “Cada día 25 volvía a descubrir, a comprender el absurdo regular y permanente en que estaba sumergido” (p.86)

The game that Larsen has accepted to play is a farce, a big grotesque parody that becomes comic because of its absurdity: “Le voy a ser franco. No me ocupo de la parte administrativa. Lo que hago por ahora es un estudio general, para empaparme del asunto, y examino los costos” (p.134) says Larsen to Diaz Grey speaking about his assistant manager post. Some paragraphs further on, Diaz Grey rigorously describes the farce:

Petrus es un farsante cuando le ofrece la Gerencia General y usted otro cuando acepta. Es un juego, y usted y él saben que el otro esta jugando. Pero se callan y disimulan. Petrus necesita un gerente para poder chicanear probando que no se interrumpió el funcionamiento del astillero. Usted quiere ir acumulando sueldos por si algún día viene el milagro y el asunto se arregla y se pueda exigir el pago. Supongo.
(p.138)

However, the farce that Larsen has established with Kunz and Gálvez is not the same as the one he has invented for himself playing to be trapped in the farce of the yard: “Estaba deseando levantarse y abrazar al Gálvez o al Kunz, confesarse en una frase obscena [...]” (p.88). The plan of the farce interweaves other plans that put it into perspective, giving rise to series of absurd situations, to a strange

atmosphere in which the reader finds himself bewildered: “Porque yo podía jugar a mi juego porque lo estaba haciendo en soledad; pero si ellos, otros, me acompañan, el juego es lo serio, se transforma en lo real. Aceptarlo así –yo, que lo jugaba porque era juego–, es aceptar la locura” (p.101).

In the world of the farce, Larsen earns five or six thousands *pesos*, he has a good position, assistant manager. However, beyond the farce in which they all strive to live in, reality is something completely different. The setting in which the action takes place is a landscape in ruins, a distressing scene because of its neglect, a yard inhabited by corrosion: “[...] el espacio inútilmente limitado, por los ojos de las herramientas atravesados por los tallos rencorosos de las ortigas” (p.83).

At the time of their interview, Larsen confesses to Diaz Grey: “Puerto Astillero está muerto, doctor. Apenas si atracan las lanchas, nadie llega ni se embarca” (p.137). And behind this décor in ruins, his life is full of misery and solitude: “El hambre no era ganas de comer sino la tristeza de estar solo y hambriento [...]” (p.93).

The system of oppositions in the world of *El astillero* is very complex. On one hand we observe the opposition between the farce world of the yard and the reality full of desolation. But the outside reality of this yard microcosm is also very much present through Santa María, which constantly sends us back to the past of Larsen: “[...] que el hecho de que el astillero hubiera llegado a convertirse en un mundo completo, infinitamente aislado e independiente, no excluía la existencia del otro mundo, éste que pisaba ahora y donde él mismo había residido alguna vez” (p.149).

The fluctuating frontier between game and reality creates an effect of vagueness at the bosom of the narrative. We are going to see that this uncertainty is also present in the narrative through temporal data.

1.3. The temporal uncertainty

The novel begins with a location of the story in time:

Hace cinco años, cuando el gobernador decidió expulsar a Larsen (o Juntacadáveres) de la provincia, alguien profetizó, en broma e improvisando, su retorno, la prolongación del reinado de cien días, página discutida y apasionante –aunque ya casi olvidada– de nuestra historia ciudadana. (p.59)

A prophecy is an announcement of the future, and in this case, it announces a repetition of the past in the future: the return. In the

following paragraph, the narrator crosses time and places himself “[...] cinco años después de la clausura de esta anécdota [...]” (p.59). To say it plainly, this is the moment of the narration. It is obvious that, five years after five years, it is the here and now; therefore discourse and narrative coincide in the same temporal axis. However, all the actions of this chapter are conjugated in simple past, which locates them, not in the present time, but in the past: “[...] Larsen bajó una mañana en la parada de los “omnibuses” que llegan de Colón, puso un momento la valija en el suelo [...]” (p.59). In the following paragraph: “Tomó el aperitivo [...]. Almorzó allí, solitario [...]” (p.59). This insistence in using the simple past seems especially significant, since, as we have seen, the action is taking place at the same time of the discourse, in the present of the action. With this use, the narrator separates the present of the action from the present of the narration.

The discourse positions a close link between the present and the past, but time is also regulated by other elements. The first paragraph gives prominence to the link of the narrative’s chronological system with the history of Santa María: “Hace cinco años, cuando el gobernador decidió expulsar a Larsen [...]” (p.59). The narrator often does comments on the facts or the people that are not necessary for the economy of the narrative, insofar as these characters, comments or allusions flagrantly do not modify it: “Y, finalmente, se calificó de antihistórico y absurdo el emplazamiento de la estatua, que obligaba al Fundador a un eterno galope hacia el sur, a un regreso como arrepentido hacia la planicie remota que había abandonado para darnos nombre y futuro” (p.205). However, those comments have another function; they insert the chronology of the story inside another, wider, chronology, the chronology of the historical evolution of Santa María.

And yet, this does not prevent the narrative to set up its own chronology. We know that Larsen arrives at Santa María “[...] aquel mediodía de fines de otoño.” (p.60), and he visits the Plaza bar “[...] a las siete y media de la tarde [...]” (p.61). There is a purpose on the part of the narrator so as to delimit, inside a wider chronology of the history of the city, a narrower one that corresponds to the one of the narrative. But, the precision that we have just noticed in the previous quotations does not always have its space. At certain moments, the narrator describes a deliberately vague and uncertain chronology: “Aquella noche, la de Hagen o cualquier otra, a las diez [...]” (p.130). Even if we have definite limits in the chronology of the narrative (end of autumn, beginning of the summer, without knowing the year), the facts are not carefully ordered, and can change their site: “Hubo, es indudable, aunque nadie puede saber hoy con certeza en qué momento de la historia debe ser colocada, la semana en que Gálvez se negó a ir al astillero”(p.118). This conveys to the temporal

information a confusing quality, the reader therefore finds himself rather bewildered. Furthermore, the narrator decides to place the narrative in relation to the time of the seasons, in other words, a cyclic time.

The narrative takes place in an extremely vague time, the temporal overload of the past makes the time of the narrative a time where present and past superimpose one another. The vague nature of the temporal data cannot be a reference point for the reader, to find himself with precision between different reality plans and the different plot lines that interweave each other.

2. The interweaving of the narratives

2.1. The diegetic discontinuity

What conveys the very particular textual layout of *El astillero* is that, as we have seen, the narrative is structured on the basis of spaces. We can also notice that there are five chapters that take the name of several spaces. In those chapters, the spaces interweave one another, and the plots succeed one another; and we see a Larsen who splits himself into two.

There is however a fifth space, the name of which does only appear in the heading of the last chapter where all the spaces merge: “El astillero 7, La glorieta 5, La casa 1, La casilla 7”. But although the house only explicitly appears in the last chapter, it is omnipresent throughout the narrative. The four main spaces are placed in the surroundings of the house; and throughout the narrative, Larsen finds himself constantly near this house, which is introduced as being “[...] la casa inaccesible [...]” (p.231). The aim of his return to Santa María, the acceptance of the post as an assistant manager of a yard in ruins, the game he introduces, as well as his intending to seduce Angélica-Inès, are closely linked to the house. The house represents the success and the wealth of Petrus’ empire. Larsen accepts the yard farce and wants to seduce Angélica-Inès because in this way he has the hope of being able to inherit this house and regain the splendour of the past: he imagines “[...] en la casa que no había pisado nunca, una incursión que terminaría en compromiso de casamiento, bendecido por el viejo Petrus [...]” (p.169). But he never really succeeds in setting foot in it, with the exception of the last chapter, in which he goes to the bedroom of the maid servant Joséfina, and has an affaire with her: “No quiso enterarse de la mujer que dormía en el piso de arriba, en la tierra que él se había prometido” (p.231).

In this last chapter the four spaces that surround the house superimpose themselves in a quick final succession of narrative sequences. In the novel everything converges so as to give a visual image of circles that close and compress the space, until they eliminate any possibility for hope, and for the pursuit of a way out. We can say that the spatial mechanism introduced here is visible because it is represented through the materiality of the text.

In *El astillero*, the temporal data are fragmented. In the first chapter, the day of Larsen's return, the narrator tells us: "Pero ningún habitante de la ciudad recuerda haberlo visto nuevamente antes de que se cumplieran quince días de su regreso. Entonces, era un domingo, todos lo vimos en la vereda de la iglesia [...]" (p.62). However, in the following chapter, the narrator says "Dos días después de su regreso, según se supo, Larsen salió temprano de la pensión y se fue caminando lentamente [...]" (p.62). On the one hand, there is a temporary ellipsis, because the narrator jumps forwards, and places himself a fortnight later. But, straight afterwards, the narrator flashbacks, and, describes the actions of Larsen two days after his arrival, contradicting in doing so his previous assertion. The time is discontinuous and confused because of the interweaving of the past with the present, because of the confusion existing in the temporal data, and above all because of the temporal fragmentation inside the narration.

On the other hand, the interweaving of reality and the illusory world also creates an effect of diegetic discontinuity. This mechanism provokes humour at certain moments of the narrative: humour introduces itself when reality and the illusory world of the farce interweave one another. When we discover what Larsen does in order to make this farce real, then we know the true reality: "[...] como para convencer a un indiferente testigo, de que la desguarnecida habitación podía confundirse con el despacho de un Gerente General de una empresa millonaria y viva" (p.165).

In *El astillero*, the different narrative situations interweave in multiple spaces, and time, as well as the two plans of reality, is fragmented. We can say that the mechanism that interweaves the different action lines creates the discontinuity at the bosom of a narrative that presents itself under an uncertain form where the characters are split: they play several roles.

2.2. The duplicity of the characters

The interweaving of reality and the illusory world allows the narrator to describe the characters in very different circumstances. Larsen's identity appears segmented, as if the character were described from

different optics, or points of view. In *El astillero*, the reader finds himself exposed to a series of simultaneous visions of the same character. Each role that Larsen assumes develops a possibility; in other words, in every domain of the novel, Larsen tries an impossible projection into another being: “Avanzó lentamente la cabeza, impasible, casi inocente, gozándose en su solitaria delincuencia, sospechando confusamente que el juego deliberado de continuar siendo Larsen era incontables veces más infantil que el que jugaba ahora” (p.111). Larsen’s duplicity is also present in the other characters and is characterized by the theatricality of the different situation games’ staging.

First of all, the place where the farce takes place is described as if it was the space where a performance takes place: “[...] hacía sonar los tacos sobre el piso polvoriento de la gran sala vacía” (p.88). The gestures of the characters are meticulously described by the narrator. Speaking about Gálvez: “La revelación periódica lo obligaba a interrumpirse y caminar, ir y volver por la gran sala desierta, las manos en la espalda [...]” (p.86). We are under the impression that the descriptions take the form of theatrical didascalia. It is indeed a true staging: “[...] pensó que la casilla formaba parte del juego, que la había construido y habitado con el solo propósito de albergar escenas que no podían ser representadas en el astillero” (p.123).

The characters are actors that play their roles; they perform what they are not. Larsen plays the role of an assistant manager, but also, he stages other roles: “[...] imaginaba a veces ser el viejo Petrus, manejar sus experiencias y sus intereses.” (p.87). Maybe he takes the responsibility to play roles so as to be able to play the role he would have liked to in his own past. Larsen and his role are like two mirrors that face each other and at the end bring into question one another, and so end up doubting the likelihood of his own reality.

The characters change their mask; they split and change their identity. The lexical field corresponds with the one in a theatrical performance; the word “scene” is often employed, as well as the word “mask” that constantly comes out in the narrative. The most significant example is Gálvez. It is only with death that his mask falls and that his genuine face is discovered:

[...] ahora está sin sonrisa, él tuvo siempre esta cara debajo de la otra, todo el tiempo, mientras intentaba hacernos creer que vivía, mientras se moría aburrido entre una ya perdida mujer preñada, dos perros de hocico en punta, yo y Kunz, el barro infinito, la sombra del astillero y la grosería de la esperanza. (p.221)

The staging of the game that the characters have accepted to play seems to be a theatre performance, the stage being a shipyard in

ruins. The theatricality of this illusory reality can remind the play by Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, where, in an empty setting with the exception of a tree, Pozzo and Lucky kill time while they are waiting for Godot, whom they do not know, whose coming they are not sure, but who is, however, supposed to save them. He never comes. As for Larsen: “Pero éste no era el tiempo de la esperanza sino el de la simple espera” (p.186)

3. The narration and the trap of existence

3.1. Different narrative voices

The narrative of *El astillero* is carried out by an anonymous narrator. We do not know his identity but we know that he is a citizen of Santa María because, in the incipit, when he introduces the return of Larsen he says “[...] alguien profetizó [...] su retorno, la prolongación del reinado de cien días, página discutida y apasionante –aunque ya casi olvidada– de **nuestra** historia ciudadana” (p.59) (the reign of a hundred days refers to Juntacadáveres)³.

The responsibility of the narration of *El astillero* is handed down from an observant narrator that reconstructs the story to an omniscient narrator who shows the states of consciousness of Larsen and other characters. In the first case it is a kind of investigator that masters some pieces of information, ignores other, and uses them as testimonies, sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory, in order to come to some conclusions: “**Algunos** insisten en su actitud de resucitado, en los modos con que, exageradamente, casi en caricatura, intentó reproducir la pereza [...]. **Otros, al revés**, siguen viéndolo apático y procaz [...]” (p.60). We also see that the information source he introduces is often anonymous. However, he also uses the testimonies of other characters like Gálvez, the Barman, or Kunz.

At some moments, the narrator disappears and delegates his function to other characters. Thus, several characters become narrators in turn. In chapter 10, at the time of the first journey of Larsen to Santa María, his arrival, at night, is told by Hagen:

Me pareció que era él por la manera de caminar. Casi no había luz y la lluvia molestaba. Y tampoco lo hubiera visto o creído verlo, si no es porque en el momento, casi las diez, le da por atracar al camión de alpargatas que debió haber pasado a la tarde. (p.128)

At the time of the second and last journey of Larsen to Santa María, he goes to the hotel where Petrus stays to have an interview with him. This episode is described by the Barman of the *Plaza*, and the narrator tells us the words of the barman: “Era una palabra vieja y

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3 | Juntacadáveres, translated in french by Ramasse-viocques. In this novel published in 1964, after *Le chantier*, Onetti continues the story of Santa María, only the story of Ramasse-viocques precedes in the time of the fiction, the one of the Chantier.

por eso dejé de pensar en el *Simmons Fizz* y lo miré dos veces. Ya casi todos dicen “alojarse” o “encontrarse” [...]. Este decía “parar”, sin sacarse las manos de los bolsillos del sobretodo, ni tampoco el sombrero [...]” (p.141)

Some chapters later, when Angélica-Inès goes and sees Larsen at the yard, the narrator retells the scandal scene reporting the testimony of Kunz: “Kunz volvió a su mesa de trabajo [...]. No tuvieron tiempo de hacer muchas cosas, contaba. Antes de los gritos se oyó la voz de Larsen, ensayando a la defensiva un monólogo persuasivo y dolido [...]” (p.170).

We see that even if there is a main narrator, at some moments the narrator uses the testimonies of other characters and thus increases the narrative voices.

The descriptions are really numerous, the most simple facts are often commented by the narrator in a subtle and sophisticated way that highlights some psychic aspects of the characters; it is the omniscient narrator who introduces us into the contents of Larsen’s consciousness, often in the third person: “De modo que Larsen ya estaba hechizado y resuelto cuando entró en el Belgrano, al mediodía siguiente, y almorzó con Gálvez y Kunz” (p.86); but also in direct style: “Porque yo podía jugar a mi juego porque lo estaba haciendo en soledad; pero si ellos, otros, me acompañan [...]” (p.101). It is as if the narrator immersed himself in the consciousness of the latter and was bound to represent the subjectivity of Larsen and as if they were one man.

Yet, the reader does not dispose of all the information, some dark points remain and the narrator does not succeed in shedding some light on them: “**No se sabe** cómo llegaron a encontrarse Jeremías Petrus y Larsen” (p.74). The different narrative voices, the different focalizations of the main narrator and the lack of information at certain moments of the story have as a consequence the fact that the narration is characterised by ambiguity.

3.2. Narrative ambiguity

The narrator uses a documentary style; he appears as a reliable speaker that rebuilds the story taking as a starting point his information and the testimonies of the inhabitants of the community of which he is part. We are under the impression that the narrator is a collective conscience whose identity and spatial position are impossible to work out; we even have the impression that the narrator becomes an invisible presence.

However, he is a narrator that demonstrates a false objectivity. Actually, he is subjectively involved in the narrative; it is a voice that distorts the reconstruction of the story and opens to doubt the narration itself:

Ahora, en la incompleta reconstrucción de aquella noche, en el capricho de darle una importancia o sentido históricos, en le juego inofensivo de acortar una velada de invierno manejando, mezclando, haciendo trampas con todas estas cosas que a nadie interesan y que no son imprescindibles, llega el testimonio del barman del plaza. (p.140)

The narrator does not choose between the contradictory versions that he proposes to us, he details the story with incomplete and ambiguous versions, which move us away from reality: “[...] en la versión incomparable de Kunz y que eliminaba a Gálvez como testigo [...]” (p.170).

There are three stylistic devices the narrator uses so as to highlight the uncertainty and ambiguity of the narration. To give several versions of the same fact is going to be a stylistic constant in the novel. About the salary of Larsen, the narrator says: “De modo que fueron cinco o seis mil, puntualmente acreditados en los libros [...]” (p.86). The salary of Larsen appears as a theoretical figure, which only exists on the account book of Gálvez, which Larsen will never touch since it is a fictitious salary. So, it is the hypothetical tone that dominates the narrative. Thus, the adverbs of doubt and the verbal groups like “imagine” “can be” “it had to be”, grow in number throughout the novel. The last device that is very frequent in the Onettian prose and which contributes to destroy the certainty of the described facts is the *partial discovery* or the fact of presenting *while hiding*. A huge effort is done so that the comments of the narrator seem suspicious. For example, in chapter 6 “La Casilla 1”, we can read: “El escándalo debe haberse producido más adelante. Pero tal vez convenga aludir a él sin demora para no olvidarlo” (p.91). However, about ten lines bellow, the narrator continues: “El escándalo siempre puede ser postergado y hasta es posible suprimirlo” (p.91). It is only about a hundred pages further that the scandal is reported “[...] por lealtad a un fantasma” (p.169). We can say that the narrator is an omniscient narrator, who by definition knows everything, but who is sure of nothing.

In the staging done by Larsen in front of Gálvez and Kunz, the narrator asserts that Larsen: “[...] arrancaba una hoja del calendario del escritorio de años anteriores y apuntaba las palabras más extrañas que acababa de oír [...]. Esperaba hasta oírlos salir; destrozaba pacientemente los papelitos atravesados por las palabras dudosas y extrañas [...]” (p.88). In playing his role of assistant manager of the yard, Larsen materially represents the narrative technique of the story put in place in this novel: he writes and then tears up the papers, as

in this narrative, where the narrator constructs, then “destroys” the narration, giving pieces of information that contradict those he gave formerly. The narrator gets rid of the traditional function of putting into perspective different events that take place at different moments. It is thanks to the different focalisations of the narrator that we gain admission to the consciousness of Larsen, and thus we can see that behind the ambiguity, behind the farce and behind the temporal uncertainty hides a reflection on existence.

3.3. The farce as an escape from the trap of existence

In *El astillero*, the winter and the deterioration of the shipyard are the true setting. There is the same decay for space and time. Coldness appears as an inevitable suffering that Larsen and the other characters have to face. This decay turns into a tragedy the life of the characters: “Esta es la desgracia –pensó–, no la mala suerte que llega, insiste, infiel y se va, sino la desgracia, vieja, fría, verdosa” (p.113). The setting in which the action takes place is a landscape in ruins, a forevermore dead yard, which adds to the nonsense of their farce the visual reality of their true sadness and melancholy: “Es cierto, amigo. Eso está podrido, oxidado, no funciona. Cobrarles un peso sería estafarlos” (p.202) says Larsen referring to the pieces of the yard still remaining.

Larsen is a defeated man, defeated by the sands of time, defeated by the several failures of his past and of his present, defeated by existence: “Por las tardes, los cielos de invierno, cargados o desoladamente limpios, que entraban por la ventana rota podían mirar y envolver a un hombre viejo que había desistido de sí mismo [...]” (p.197). When Larsen returns to Santa María after five years in exile, he returns to relive his past, to be what he would have liked to have been, to fill his existence.

In *El astillero*, the fear of nothingness leads Larsen to mask his insignificance through a new I that would erase the previous. He adopts the lie as a way of life because of the fear he feels towards the emptiness of existence, for he cannot live without believing in something, or at least, without pretending he believes, therefore, he decides to go completely into the farce. He has to invent a multitude of responsibilities that postpone the truth, the definitive acceptance of old age, of his insignificance; of “[...] la indiscutida decadencia de Larsen” (p.172). Since the beginning, since his arrival to Santa María, Larsen knows he is going to go in an absurd and unreal game, but it is the only solution in order to know he is alive:

Varias veces, a contar desde la tarde en que desembarcó impensadamente en Puerto Astillero, detrás de una mujer gorda cargada con una canasta y una niña dormida, había presentido el hueco voraz de una trampa indefinible. Ahora estaba en la trampa y era incapaz de nombrarla, incapaz de conocer que había viajado [...] para aquietarse en un refugio final desesperanzado y absurdo. (p.78)

Indeed this trap, in which Larsen has walked into and from which he cannot get out anymore, is the trap of existence. But the yard is a fiction, and beyond the illusory of the farce, he has to face true reality, the human condition, absurd from beginning to end.

The prevailing motives in the works of Juan Carlos Onetti are closely linked with the process of deterioration and decline of both beings and objects. In his work, the vision of a physically and spiritually exhausted man predominates, attained by the deterioration process. The yard in ruins, decomposing, is the metaphor of the ruin of the human being, condemned by his condition to deterioration until death. Therefore we can see that a pessimistic and devastating vision of the human condition hides behind the parody of the farce. The uncertainty is also the result of alienation, of the spiritual pursuit and the existential problems that the work exposes.

We can say this text is entropic (term that is used in thermodynamics); in other words, this text is constituted by a system that tends towards exhaustion: “Él, alguno, hecho un montón en el tope de la noche helada, tratando de no ser, de convertir su soledad en ausencia” (p.232). This entropy, that has an impact on the system, in the end renders the system nonexistent: the universe is a decadent universe, the time is ended, the characters are not human beings anymore and the narrative is only destroying itself while the text progresses.

4. Conclusion

When he publishes *El astillero*, Onetti goes beyond the traditional narrative methods that prove insufficient in order to assimilate the deep metamorphosis of a reality that has become contradictory, multiple and changing. The renovation of the structure of the narration is one of the most distinguishing characteristics in contemporary literature, which tries to reflect with the most accurate rigour the relation between the existence and the human being. The narratives try to represent in the most plausible way the state of isolation and abandonment of the human being. In introducing a narrative mechanism that becomes circular, where the plots seem to turn round and round in concentric circles and to interweave in a chaotic and uncertain way, Onetti proposes an alternative, a response to the crisis of the sign.

Thus it seems, in our survey, that the ambiguous and disconcerting poetics of the narration benefits the game, the farce in the yard in ruins and the fantastical employees. This parody is an answer to the fact that in a world devoid of values, there is nothing to do anymore. Such is the portrait of man that Onetti displays to us, a vision of a society in which the signs stop being ideas of perfection to turn into waste. What we make clear is the inevitable misadventure of the human being, prisoner in the void of meaning. And, indeed, as Onetti said in 1961 in the newspaper *Marcha*: “Yo quiero expresar nada más que la aventura del hombre. Gente que yo quiero mucho y es maravillosa, va a morirse sin embargo. Hay algo terrible y permanente en eso. La aventura humana no tiene por que tener lugar y época. Me alcanza con describirla.”

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