

Pla's Voice(s) of Authority¹

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For all his transparency, Josep Pla presents a certain kind of challenge to his readers when he writes about his homeland. Because he is so grounded in the particularities of the Baix Empordà, and because he is so explicit about his intended audience being Catalan, anyone from outside of that experience is left to wonder about how to begin to approach this author and his writing.

Much has been made of Pla's choice of genres since he described his *Obra completa* as memoirs where many critics prefer the term autobiography. As such, the issue of generic conventions will form part of the present study not so much because of how the pretence of non-fictional modes frames Pla's stories as 'truth' but more connected with how Pla frames himself in relation to his audience. A rhetorical approach to narrative, I will argue, with an emphasis on the role of author and audience provides a revealing lens through which to view the ethics of autobiography. This is of evident concern to a Catalan readership that has adopted Pla as a national author in spite of what some consider to be a problematic political past; as well as the discovery that much of Pla's writing is neither as spontaneous and transparent, nor as true to fact, as his readers are led to believe.

What's more, a consideration of Pla's reliance on an ironic distance between his own authorial and narrative roles - as well as on a reader sophisticated enough to recognize it - absolves a non-Catalan reader of the feeling that anything less than the most intimate knowledge of the Baix Empordà and its people leaves one inadequately prepared to come to any kind of real understanding of this author and his work.

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While, of course, certain distinctions are to be made from text to text, a reader of Pla will come across a number of clearly defined 'Plas' in a perusal of his writings. While I do not disagree with critics like Xavier Pla and Enric Bou, who examine the protean construction of Pla as a public persona that spills over into his more or less fictional works, I am not primarily concerned with claims to biographical veracity. The differences that I perceive are not defined so much by who these Plas are but by what they do: that is, by their textual or critical functionality. And one can identify at least four 'Plas' in this sense.

There is, of course, Pla the person: the flesh-and-blood author who wrote things down. Then, one might argue, there is Pla, the implied author: a combination (1) of the authorial presence throughout his work, regardless of genre, and (2) information about the author's life in those texts that most deftly dress themselves up in the garb of autobiography. Of course, I borrow the idea of an implied author from Wayne Booth who offers this concept as a tool for talking about the author's role in creating meaning while admitting that we cannot access the flesh-and-blood author's mind merely by reading his or her fiction. Put another way, critics speak of the 'implied author' in order to address the sense of an authorial presence that readers derive from literary works without naively equating that authorial presence to the real person lurking somewhere behind it. This implied 'Pla' being the public figure of the author constructed over time is another way of looking at what Enric Bou would contend is the 'disguise' that flesh-and-blood Pla created for himself through a lifetime of writing (101).

In addition to the flesh-and-blood Pla to whom the reader has little to no access, and the implied author Pla, there is also the narrator Pla: the voice that tells the stories. Inside the text, this Pla comes across as a friendly guide and traveling companion: someone with whom to spend a pleasant afternoon in the shade of a tree, conversing. On this point I diverge from Wayne Booth who contends that the relationship that readers have with the controlling voice in a narrative is with the implied author, while I am more likely to imagine myself making 'friends'—Booth's term—with this somewhat less distanced narrator. And finally we have the character Pla; that is, the version of Pla, *el pagès*, that Pla the author has contrived: just another inhabitant

of the Empordà, unaffected, it seems, by years of travel abroad, disengaged from suggestions of political intrigue. Given that narrator Pla is a dramatized narrator, or character narrator, that is, a narrator who equally tells and acts in his stories, we can easily enough conflate narrator and character and extend the earthiness of the character Pla to narrator Pla's denial of any pretence to narrative artificiality; a claim that is echoed in the exasperated tone of *El quadern gris* when Pla writes, 'Tinc una tendència invencible de malfiar-me dels qui son massa artistes' (25).

Pla the author, Pla the narrator, Pla the character, flesh-and-blood Pla vs. paper-and-ink Pla. Why complicate matters with so much play of Plas? What is to be gained by such a divisive reading of such readable writing? As I read Pla and write about him I imagine his balking at so much obfuscation and his disdain of '*artistes*' echoes in my brain. My response to Pla's implicit rejection of my insistence on artifice is that a look at the different roles that 'Pla' plays opens our eyes to the simultaneous *insidedness* and *outsidedness* of his writing. This point of view is shared by J. M. Castellet, although he understands it in socio-economic terms rather than narrative ones. In *Josep Pla o la raó narrativa*, Castellet sets 'the author' apart as a social class unto himself and includes the many character narrators — he calls them Pla's 'substitutes'— of the stories in the group. For Castellet, the defining characteristic of this class is that they are 'ahora, integrats i marginals' (209). In this way they provide inside information but offer a particular outsider's point of view at the same time.

In my reading I follow Peter Rabinowitz who identifies different audiences that correspond to distinct authorial and narrative functions. For Rabinowitz, at the same time that a text lends a sense of authorial presence it creates a corresponding readerly role, called the authorial audience —one who will be the ideal listener for the implied author— believing that his stories are truthful, that his information is correct, that his jokes are funny.² Likewise, there is a narrative

² I am knowingly mixing terminology here. Rabinowitz does not rely on the idea of an 'implied author' against which to define his 'authorial audience', which he defines as the ideal audience that the flesh-and-blood author has in mind as he or she writes. I

audience that interacts with the text's narrator with varying levels of credulity. That is to say that as a member of the narrative audience, while I may spend a whole afternoon sitting on a bench listening to narrator Pla tell me the story of the shipwreck of the *Cala Galiota*, I may not believe everything he says. I may not agree with his conclusions. In fact I may not take him seriously at all. I have reduced Rabinowitz's four audiences into two (one authorial and one narrative) partly because I think that these are the two most useful categories for this analysis; but also because there is an extent to which implied author Pla constructs his narratives in a way that defies the rigidity of Rabinowitz's categories.

While Rabinowitz wants every good reader to be at once an authorial audience and a narrative one—to be at once a believing and a critical reader as well as both a believing and a critical narratee—I have decided to take a cue from Pla and simply pretend to be spontaneous. Pla's dressing up in different narrative roles allows his readers to assume more than one readerly one. His role playing games are what make it possible for him to be at the same time so unconcerned with a reader like me and so effective a communicator.

Taking the prologue of *El pagès i el seu món* as an example, implied author Pla gives us a narrator Pla, who explicitly addresses himself to young Catalans who are looking for something to do. A narrative audience is fairly obviously constructed then as Catalan—and as somewhat interested in Catalonia—but less knowledgeable than Pla. So the narrator is addressing a constructed Catalan audience in need of self-discovery through contact with the landscape while the implied author draws in a broader, more cosmopolitan audience precisely by presenting us with a narrator who makes a friendly and informative travel companion.

Pla the implied author gives us Pla the narrator who coaxes us into an admiration for Catalonia through his own apparent love of the land, mitigated only by his well-intentioned frustration with certain attitudes and practices, born of his concern for the collective well-

have chosen to carry Booth's terminology over into Rabinowitz's methods because of the general critical agreement that even the public persona of Josep Pla is a construction.

being of his community. At the same time as the authorial audience we stand with Pla the implied author looking down, so to speak, on the narrator and his companions; and we are able to appreciate him as a part of the landscape he describes. Pla would not relate so effectively with his fellow *pagesos* if he were a well-educated, much traveled, prolific national author; but he would not communicate so well with a broader readership if he were not. And so he gives us both. The distance between the different Plas provides us one way of understanding the irony that is constantly at play in his work. As much as Pla may create a sense of intimacy and even conspiracy through his narrative strategies he relies on his readers to adopt this critical distance in order for all of the levels of his narrative to play out to their fullest extent. Rabinowitz puts it this way:

[. . .] the author not only knows that the narrative audience is different from the actual and authorial audiences, but he rejoices in this fact and expects his actual audience to rejoice with him. For it is this difference which makes fiction fiction, and makes the double-leveled aesthetic experience possible. (130)

My concern with narrative functionality is not far removed from Pla's play with genre. Another way of looking at this might be to identify a reporting Pla, an editorial Pla, a non-fictional Pla of memoir, and a fictive short-story narrator Pla. The problem here, of course, is that it is a matter of longstanding critical agreement that Pla showed little respect for the limits of genre. As Xavier Pla describes it,

Pla constituye un ejemplo de autobiografía polimórfica que no cesa de interrogar constantemente al lector al situarse voluntariamente, pero siempre de forma problemática, en un espacio autobiográfico en el que toda desviación a las reglas y a las leyes del género parece ser la norma. (23)

The critic provides one of the more lucid explanations of the illusive image of Pla that emerges out of a combination of literary constructs, biographical research and public speculation. This protean Pla is then interwoven into narrative defining it—and being redefined by it—as

the author/narrator/character moves along within a text, and from one text to another.

Whether we approach Pla from the point of view of narrative structure, *genre* bending, or the constructedness of identity, I think it is clear that we have not been fooled. We know that the Pla we read is a fictive one, even *more* than one. We know that a number of the episodes that he recounts as having actually taken place did not, or at least not in the way that he tells it. But the fact remains that it was important for Pla to dress up his writing in the guise of non-fiction; and that disguise, even though we recognize it as just that, *does* something. But exactly what does it do?

Through the illusion of autobiography which means, among other things, that the implied author and the narrator share the same name, the narrator and implied author in Pla's writing are easily confused. It is thanks to generic conventions that the reader is able to discern the ironic distance with which implied author Pla views the goings on as his narrator Pla travels and tells tales. Journalism, investigation, travel guides, biographies, histories, cooking instructions, etc., all of these are textual constructs that lead the reader to expect an objective, distanced author. The affectionate but slightly ironic tone that characterizes Pla's treatment of his home and neighbors is the combined product of generic norms and narrative structures.

But there is another reason why a somewhat distanced, implied author Pla, would need his narrator to be a typical *pagès*, with his feet firmly planted on *terra empordanesa*. For Pla, contact with the local realities of the Baix Empordà is what guarantees the authenticity of what he describes. For this author, only a local can be an authority. Ironic distance may be what makes Pla fun, but proximity is what makes him believable. Take for example this assertion (almost quixotic in its insistence on the truth), which follows a long description of the coastline's geographical characteristics in 'Pa i raïm':

Si es té present aquesta informació (que és objectiva i la gent del país podrà confirmar-la), tothom trobarà justificada l'estranyesa que em

produí aquella embarcació forastera fondejada al Jonquet trobant-nos ja dins del mes de novembre avançat.' (*Contraban* 59)

Voice, authority, and authenticity go hand in hand for Pla. Pla's is clearly the most dominant narrative voice in his work; however, it is certainly not the only one. In addition to the narrator Pla, Pla's works are infused with the voices of any number of characters who, for long stretches, take over the narration of their own tales. Both narrator Pla and these other, adopted narrators, are highly localized and speak with the intimacy of neighbors. We can add to these claims to authenticity a claim to authority if we understand an exploration of narrative voicing to be a delving into who knows what and when. And when does one choose to share what one knows?

A particularly revealing example of Pla's approach to narrative authority is found in the episode called 'El naufragi de la *Cala Galiota* (Anàlisi d'un esdeveniment).' The title itself frames the narrative in non-fictional terms; and the impression is helped along by narrator Pla's explanation that these events took place while he was in Cadaqués, finishing the *Guia de la Costa Brava*. As the story goes, Pla is sought out by the father of Salvador Dalí to aid in clarifying the mystery surrounding the disappearance of la *Cala Galiota*, about which no information exists. The vessel had disappeared three months earlier and the immediate conclusion was that it had sunk in bad weather, leaving no material or human trace behind, a point that Pla makes in an especially emphatic way:

En el naufragi del pailebot *Cala Galiota* es perdé literalment tot: els homes que constituïen la tripulació i la totalitat del vaixell. Del *Cala Galiota* no se n'ha trobat cap vestigi, absolutament res: ni un tros de fusta, ni un pam del drap de les veles, ni una corda, ni el més petit objecte. Res. Tot se n'anà al fons del mar sense deixar ni el més lleu rastre. Això vol dir—em sembla—que, del naufragi, no se'n sap ni un borrall: se n'ignoren les causes, els incidents i els detalls. Així, doncs, una qualsevol espurna d'informació és inexistent. (*Cinc històries* 213-214)

The dilemma, Senyor Dalí explains, is that a debate emerged in the press as to whether it had actually been sunk or if it had found safe harbor in parts unknown. With no proof for either theory, the insurance company refused to provide the lost sailors' families either with their salaries (assuming they were still alive) or with a pension (assuming they were dead). Senyor Dalí hopes that Pla can bring closure to the debate through a combination of influential connections in Barcelona and his rhetorical abilities in the press.

The 'anàlisi d'un esdeveniment' of the title causes the reader to expect an analysis of the events surrounding the shipwreck, leading to a definitive decision and compensation for the families. I would argue, however, that what is examined in this story is the event of communication itself. The narrative that I have neatly summarized is, in fact, peppered with nonsequiturs and repetitions as the story is interspersed with Pla's and others' reflections on food, the weather, the possible origins of the last name Dalí, the health of Dalí's distant relatives, politics, bookstores, and priests. Narrator Pla takes a backseat to Senyor Dalí, who is the real narrator of the story of the shipwreck, so that the narrative becomes a joint venture as the two vacillate between equally unsubstantiated versions of events culminating in Senyor Dalí's narrating the story of a different legal case, which he ultimately admits has nothing to do with the *Cala Galiota*, except for the fact that it too presents a dilemma.

As narrator Pla wends his way through this twisted tale he writes a letter to his friends in Barcelona, he writes a convincing article for *Destino*, the case is resolved, the reality of the shipwreck is accepted, the families are paid what they are owed and finally we learn that the daughters of one of the lost sailors opened a restaurant in Cadaqués —called the *Cala Galiota*— and that it would be the best restaurant in town, except that they don't serve coffee after meals. Meanwhile, implied author Pla provides us, as the authorial audience, with enough distance to be able to observe the story as a whole —starting with his insistence on the absolute absence of any information about the occurrence— before continuing with its dubious sources of information and its multiple voices and speculations. In the midst of the polyphony we find a dramatization of what one might call '*comunicació empordanesa*'; and beyond that a microcosm of Pla's

project: the creation of a reality out of nothing. As is the case with so much of what Pla wrote, we are unsure as to exactly what happened but we know that *something* did. Through his non-fictional textual constructs (in this case letters to an influential friend and an article in *Destino*), Pla makes ‘real’ and ‘true’ the otherwise unrecoverable past.

Senyor Dalí’s words provide a conclusion to the story, and are not to be taken lightly by any serious reader of Josep Pla:

Y ara vegeu: tot aquest paper que acabem d’escriure sobre el naufragi del *Cala Galiota* demostra que en les vides dels homes i de les dones es produeixen voltes i voltes, sempre insospitades, increïbles, i que tot el que passa en la vida —bo o dolent— és inqüestionable. (242)

In an exploration of the rhetorical effects of character narrators, Jim Phelan wonders, ‘how, if at all, does the telling of a fictional character about his experience work differently from the telling of a real person about hers?’ (ix) This is a particularly suggestive interrogatory in Pla’s case where he defies any definition as either fictional or non. Ultimately this is helpful, though, since his ambiguous nature allows us the possibility of analysis from both angles. Phelan’s description of character narration as ‘the art of indirection’ is especially apt when considering this author who provides us with *a* Pla, as a disguise for *the* Pla:

The art consists in the author’s ability to make the single text function effectively for its two audiences (the narrator’s and the author’s, or to use the technical terms, the narrative and the authorial audience) and its two purposes (author’s and character narrator’s) while also combining in one figure (the ‘I’) the roles of both narrator and character. (1)

In *El quadern gris*, the young author writes of a different kind of doubling that allows for intimate understanding to take place:

Per a veure la mar —per a veure-la seriosament— és molt útil de desdoblarse. La sorda ressonància que en moments d’agitació de cor crea com un estat de confusió mental—no deixa veure res. Tampoc no ajuda la presència d’un soroll absorbent immediat. Però si hom

aconsegueix abstraire's de l'obsessió interna i de la nosa exterior, la mar esdevé un embadaliment, una força insidiosa de penetració lenta que desfà els sentits en una deliqüescent vaguetat (38).

It would be too literal and too easy to take this passage as an excuse to read the implied author Pla / narrator Pla distinction as the *desdoblament* being described here. To do so would be to discount the careful construction of a public persona that the flesh-and-blood author exercised. All the same, the combined understanding of the duplicity of character narration (*à la Phelan*) and the doubling that takes place in the careful observer (*à la Pla*) exposes a way of depicting things and experience that is as complex as it is subtle.

Rabinowitz introduces his analysis of audiences as a way of approaching 'truth' in fiction. My reliance on concepts of narrative theory that focuses on fiction may be somewhat problematic in the face the genuine historical value of much of Pla's writing. But historians are as much concerned with the truthfulness of narrative as readers of fiction. Hayden White, for example, offers reflections on narrative that produce quite a conciliatory interpretation of the liberties that Pla takes with historical truth. For White, if there is a problem with narrative, it is 'how to translate *knowing* into *telling*.' (5) White establishes a helpful distinction between narrative and narrativity, the latter being 'a discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself as a story.' (7) Is this not a more than adequate description of what Pla tries to do when he describes the part of the world that he knows best? In his preface to *El pagès i el seu món*, Pla proposes 'Un viatge relativament còmode, curt de quilòmetres i de dies, amb la modesta finalitat de descriure tal com és el que successivament es vagi presentant [. . .]' (*Obra completa* 10).³ But the landscape, the people, the events that Pla encounters do not obligingly present themselves in a narrative format. So Pla's real project, although he fails to acknowledge it, is to *narrativize* them.

³ Elsewhere I have analyzed *El pagès i el seu món* as a successful example of geographic methodology and I continue to sustain that overall a spatial approach is more adequate than a historical one for this text. All the same, for this reader, there is no text that offers a more intriguing example of Pla's project; and it is worth revisiting here.

Like the narrative theorists cited here, White also speculates as to the origins of authority in narrative. He comes up with a different answer than the narratologists do but it may move us closer to an understanding of the motivations behind Pla's particular approach to history since for White, the existence of more than one version of events is fundamental to an author's claim to authority:

Unless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened. The authority of the historical narrative is the authority of reality itself; the historical account endows this reality with form and thereby makes it desirable, imposing upon its processes the formal coherence that only stories possess. (23)

If we did not find ourselves wondering about the truth, if we were not confronted by dilemmas of fact and fiction like the ones that play out in 'El naufragi de la *Cala Galiota*,' Pla's writing would not be as rich, exciting, and perhaps not even as convincing, as it is. It might still be history, but would so many still read it?

For Pla proximity is clearly important. Why else would he insist on his strong identification with his birthplace and the people who live there, readily casting aside twenty year's worth of international travel and their assured impact on his understanding of rural life in Catalonia? Why else the emphasis on direct experience as a form of observation; and why else would such a strong narrative presence fade discretely into the background to make space for the voices of those around him as authoritative sources in their own right? And yet, distance is a necessary element of Pla's authorial enterprise: we need it in order to achieve the realism that the young author longs for in *El quadern gris*. We need both to grind our feet into the dusty paths of the Empordà and also to see it from a bird's eye view, to acquire the sort of spatial and social understanding about which Pla felt so strongly that he compiled it in more than forty volumes of text.

The result? We are not fooled but we believe it anyway.⁴ As readers we sympathize equally with the invented author and his constructed narrator. Allied with the implied author, we share his affection for narrator Pla and, as members of the narrative audience, we don't mind so much that he plays games as long as we get to play too. Readers love Pla because of his love for what he writes about. We admire him for his ability to immerse himself in the materiality of things, in their sights, smells, and sounds. Through him we recover something lost or discover something with which we otherwise never would have come into contact. While the veracity of the events that he describes may be questionable, the truth of the experience is always beyond a doubt.

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⁴ In fact, Rabinowitz acknowledges his debt to reader response theorists who 'have recognized that the act of reading demands a certain pretence' on the part of the reader. (124)

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