

La noche feroz

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Ricardo Menéndez has published six well-received novels and two collections of short stories to date. *La noche feroz* is the fourth of his novels and won the Premio Casino de Mieres when it first appeared in 2006. As the title indicates, the main action in this concise work takes place within the span of a single, devastating night, set starkly against the back-drop of the Spanish Civil War. While the war does not actively impinge on the events recounted, references to it reinforce the bleakness of this unrelenting exploration of humankind's innate capacity for evil.

Set in Promenadia, an isolated village in Asturias, the book opens and closes with short episodes in which an outsider, Labeche, sets ritualistic fires, driven by mysterious impulses which come to him in a dream. In the first chapter, Labeche wakes in a barn and is unsurprised to find a drum of petrol beside him, although he cannot remember how he came by it. The violence of the ensuing fire contrasts with the gentle passivity of the cows which are its victims. In the final chapter, Labeche builds a pyre beneath the hanging corpses of two lynched men. In the flames, the circling vultures celebrate 'the return of the light, the arrival of the new day, the end of the savage night.'

In between these two fires, the relatively straightforward storyline unfolds. A young girl has been raped and killed and a band of men from the village, led by the priest, go out into the bitter November darkness to search for her murderer(s). Two strangers are travelling through the area that night, looking for work and a new start in life. The priest's dogs pick up their scent and finally hunt them down in the woods, where they are summarily hanged by the vengeful Father and his gang of parishioners. Although the reader is not told who actually committed the murder of the girl until very near the end of the book, the innocence of the two strangers is never really in doubt (and the chapters in which they are the central focus are titled *The Innocents I, II and III*). There is a horrible inevitability about their eventual capture and demise, and their pursuit throughout the long, atrocious night hangs heavily over all the other events in the story.

The central protagonist, who first appears in the second chapter, is the village schoolteacher. On foot, under a 'blood-red moon' and with a butcher's knife tucked into his belt and a pair of jet earrings in his pocket, he is heading for the house of his hosts for the evening, in accordance with the tradition that the teacher be fed by each household in turn. Greeted derisively with the nickname 'el catapotes' (scrounger), the mutual antagonism between the teacher and his host is immediately apparent. The teacher insists on being called by his real name, Homero, but his host continues to insult him. Nonetheless, hunger impels Homero to stay to dinner with the family; the brutish husband and his bedraggled wife, their youngest boy (four years old, shrieking from a cradle, encephalitic), middle son (Homero's pupil), and pregnant married daughter (carrying another man's child). Talk turns to the war (the teacher asserts he is a Bolshevik), to the reason why Homero carries a knife ('the school is a temptation to vagrants') and, finally, to the murder of the little girl. Two villagers, Ezequiel and 'Death' arrive, with the intention of getting the host to join Father Aguirre's search party. Pleading migraine, he refuses and is accused of cowardice. Wounded by this insinuation and driven by pride, later that night he forms part of the lynch mob.

Homero is not even asked to join the hunt, illustrating the gulf that seems to exist between him and the other inhabitants of the village (he is an outsider), and returns to the schoolhouse. Seated at his desk, upon which are a photograph of the woman he once loved and a copy of Dostoyevsky's *Demons*, he writes a fictionalised account of the founding of the village. Rather bizarrely, however, he later destroys his writings by eating the pages of the notebook. Over the course of the long, restless night which is punctuated by gunshots and barking dogs, all the main protagonists come to the schoolhouse. The first to arrive are the two strangers; Homero discovers the men shivering and hiding in the schoolyard. Giving them the food he had saved for breakfast, the teacher tells them of the murder, assures them that he believes their protestations of innocence and advises them to flee. Next come 'the hunters'; Ezequiel, 'Death' and the supremely menacing Father Aguirre. Homero denies having seen the two fugitives and the hunters leave. The host's arrival wakes the schoolteacher teacher from a nightmare in which the woman from the photograph appears, her face eaten away by fish. Still aggressive and threatening, the host has come to ask whether Homero thinks him a coward, before heading out in to the snow to join the hunters. Homero returns to his writing and remembers his father ('a drunk lost in his love for an ancient world, who squandered his talent playing the piano in brothels...'). Yet another knock at the door disturbs him, this time it is Irizabal, the moneylender. He also asks about the two fleeing men and once more, Homero denies having seen them. Their conversation is the only one in the book in which there is any shred of fellow feeling or human warmth,

albeit fleeting. When Irizábal turns to leave, Homero calls after him and confesses he had lied about the two strangers. Together, in Irizábal's cart, they head out into the snow to look for them. Although Irizábal tries to draw Homero out as they drive through the woods ('what is it that torments you?'), the teacher is unable to say much, only stuttering that it has to do with his father. When Irizábal probes further, asserting that the two strangers have something to do with Homero's past and alluding to his culpability for what they are about to witness, the teacher realises he will never speak again. Suddenly, Irizábal and Homero come upon the lynch party and the hanged men. Too late to make any difference to events, Irizábal ('a pure presence, totemic, uncontaminated...') offers Homero a lift back to the schoolhouse. In silence, Homero walks away from the scene, his watch, the photograph of his lost love and the jet earrings in his pocket. Finally, he allows the fragmented memory of murdering the little girl to enter his mind.

Reminiscent of a play in which the limited cast of characters appear, exit and reappear in turn, each short chapter builds in suspense towards the final appalling scenes. The lynching of the innocents seems predestined from the start and there are frequent grim reflections on the human tendency towards brutality; 'of all the pleasures known to man, there is none greater than the inflicting of pain'. Only Irizábal seems to harbour any goodness at all (and he is described as being in hell). Characters are drawn almost as archetypes, perhaps most especially the evil priest. Cowardice, deceit, cruelty and despair are, it seems, everywhere.

In contrast to the numbing hopelessness and barbarity of the story, the writing is achingly poetic and undeniably beautiful. Just very occasionally, descriptions come close to cliché (the priest's nose is like 'an eagle's beak'), but this is only a momentary distraction. *La noche feroz* is a very visual book, almost painterly, and many of the images linger darkly in the mind long after reading. Sound is important too. The text reverberates with gunshots, whinnying, barking, the howling wind and, finally, the cries of vultures. The challenge to the translator would lie primarily in rendering the lyrical, almost archaic, lilt of the prose. The culturally-specific tradition of the catapotes, the poverty-stricken schoolteacher who taught only during the winter months in remote Asturian villages, might warrant some sort of Note. Other than that, the themes addressed are universal and would easily cross the boundaries of language, time and place. This is an elegantly constructed, brooding novel which richly deserves to be made available to English-speaking readers.

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