Jerónimo Tristante's *El misterio de la casa Aranda* ("The Mystery of the Aranda House"): Tracing the Beginnings of the Police Procedural

Jeffrey Oxford
Midwestern State University

Jerónimo Tristante (Murcia, Spain, 1969) is best known for his series of detective fiction novels protagonized by Víctor Ros. Regarding such, one critic has aptly noted that Tristante's "prose is fresh and agile, his chapters short, and his reading explosive" ("Reseña"; all translations in this essay are mine). Such, in addition to the author's overall adherence to the spirit and intent of the historical novel genre, has resulted in those novels—now numbering half a dozen—being adapted and eponymously broadcast over fourteen episodes by RTVE (Spain's state-owned, public media services) and La 1 (Spain's TV channel 1) over two seasons in 2014 and 2015.

El misterio de la casa Aranda ("The Mystery of the Aranda House," 2008), the first novel of the series, details the conversion of Víctor Ros—a young thug wannabe—from a life of petty criminality to a mentorship, and employment, under a much older and seasoned police officer to his eventual, simultaneous, and successful resolution of the mysteries surrounding the "haunted" Aranda house and a series of unrelated murder cases involving prostitutes, all in Madrid, Spain, during the summer of 1877. Combining the narrative techniques of both the historical novel and the police procedural, the work offers significant details and cultural perceptions of the burgeoning importance and influence of the sciences and the scientific method on the world of criminology of late-19th century Spain, a time period when artists—writ large—were attempting to make their art parallel the contemporaneous worldview grounded in a scientific, evidence-based understanding of the universe and humans' place in it.[1] In this essay, then, I propose to examine how Tristante, in his first Víctor Ross novel, melds those two genres into one narrative—although at times taking slight poetic license with certain historical facts—to create a literature that is entertaining, enlightening, and, in the majority, historically accurate.

As a literary genre, the police procedural has over the years become one of the most popular variants of detective fiction not only in Spain, but in many countries—for example, in the U.S.: *Law and Order*, *Blue Bloods*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Chicago P.D.*, *NCIS*, etc. Critics have pointed to Wilkie Collin's *The Moonstone* (1868)—in which a Scotland Yard detective investigates the theft of a valuable diamond—as an early antecedent of the genre,[2] and Lawrence Treat's 1945 *V as in Victim,* as the first true police procedural.[3] Although obviously—given its name—the police procedural by necessity focuses on a policeman/policemen investigating crime(s), another commonly accepted characteristic includes that "it must be one in which the mystery is solved by policemen using normal police routines" (Dove 2). George Dove further notes that "there [must] be a main-character detective in the procedural, but he or she does not solve the crime without the collaborative efforts of other police"; in fact, the critic adds, the term *procedural* refers to the methods of detection employed, the procedures followed by policemen in real life. Where the classic detective solves mysteries through the use of his powers of observation and logical analysis, and the private investigator through his energy and his tough tenacity, the detective in the procedural story does those things ordinarily expected of policemen, like using informants, tailing suspects, and availing himself of the resources of the police laboratory (Dove 2).

Dove continues to define the police procedural as a very disciplined genre: one with "the accepted conventions of [. . .] the happily married policeman with family problems" (112), a seven-step narrative framework consisting of "the Problem, the Initial Solution, the Complication, the Period of Confusion, the Dawning Light, the Solution, and the Explanation" (239), and a denouement consisting of "the fictional policeman [...] up in the stuffy squadroom [sic] beating out his report (in triplicate or quadruplicate as required by regulations) with two fingers on the squad's ancient typewriter, hoping to finish in time to get a few hours' sleep before his next shift begins" (250). Gonzalo Navajas has studied the police procedural in Spanish literature, and he highlights the importance of the investigators' use of reasoning and the essentialness of the clarity of "a principle story that predominates over other plots and secondary elements" (226). Other critics have noted other essential characteristics of the genre. Kathleen Thompson-Casado, for example, argues that at "the very core of the procedural [is] a generally positive account of police work as well as police attitudes" (73), and Nina Molinaro postulates that "the police procedural prescribes solidarity within the police force" (111).

Tristante's novel closely follows the majority of the paradigmatic characteristics. Víctor Ross is a policeman and investigates the mystery surrounding the Aranda house with his partner Alfredo Blázquez. Even though the two of them are quite different in personality, age,

and investigative methods, they do very much demonstrate a collaboration and solidarity in the principal investigation. Although normally in a police procedural the story's main character is the more experienced cop and the partner is the less experienced one, in this case, Víctor is the much younger of the two—by some four decades—and can only be considered "more experienced" with regard to his having successfully infiltrated a radical cell in Oviedo and "saved" Spain's government in 1868. Víctor very much agrees in a solving of crimes through a reasoning, deliberative, and thoughtful process, even to the point of telling his partner, "I believe in demonstrating through proof who is the true criminal. I think the police force uses too much brawn and too little brains" (45) when Alfredo asks him, "How else do you get the criminals to confess except by 'working them over'?" (45). Certainly, Tristante's novel presents a positive account of police work; it would be difficult to find anything in the narrative which presents even the faintest negative reflection on "the thin blue line" of late-19th century Spain. And, finally, Tristante has produced a novel that generally fits within the confines of the traditional and somewhat formulaic police procedural paradigm interested in concluding with a restoration of justice and a sense that all is right once again in the world.

Having said, such, however, it is my argument that Tristante also ingeniously, and subtly, subverts widely accepted characteristics of that model to create a narrative form that both harkens back to that style and mimics more modern narrative techniques. Víctor Ross, the main character and a fairly recently-minted police investigator, is actually not solely in charge of the investigation of the *mystery of the Aranda house*; his partner, Alfredo Blázquez—with many more years as an investigator on the force—is, as per police commissioner Horacio Buendía, an equally empowered partner. Another distinction that sets Víctor off from the more typical police procedural protagonist is his civil status. According to Dove, the main character of a traditional police procedural is always a happily married policeman, even if he does have family problems (112); such is definitely not the case with Víctor. He is not married, has not been married, and— until the last pages of the novel—seemingly has no intentions of ever getting married because he realizes that Spanish norms of the time regarding class separation preclude his ever being able to receive in marriage the hand of the Arandas' daughter.

A quiet and nonconfrontational disobedience to superior's orders seems to be another character trait that distinguishes Víctor from the typical detective protagonist of traditional police procedurals. The police commissioner tells Víctor not to get involved in the investigation of the deaths of Madrid prostitutes, that "policemen should protect decent people and not lowlife" (66). The detective, however, is unable to accept such and continues to work behind his superior's back, eventually solving those murders as well. In fact, his investigations of those murders— alone, and without the help of his partner Alfredo—form an equally important second plot of the novel, two clear violations of the genre's paradigm.[4] Furthermore, Víctor's compassion for the prostitute, Lola, whom he frequents, affects his ability to act and react with indifference as mandated by late 19th-century Spain's class-based rules of comportment; his disenchantment and disagreement with those norms ultimately lead him to withdraw from all human contact upon solving the murders of Lola and the other prostitutes. Such, however, is in direct opposition to a character trait that José Colmeiro notes as a fundamental requirement of all detective fiction, not just detective fiction: "[T]he detective is unemotional in reasoning […]. There is no place in him for compassion for the victims" (60)

Another key area in which *El misterio de la casa Aranda* diverges somewhat from the normal rules of the police procedural is through the lack of a narrative ending with the detective "beating out his report (in triplicate or quadruplicate as required by regulations) with two fingers on the squad's ancient typewriter, hoping to finish in time to get a few hours' sleep before his next shift begins" (Dove 250). The famous novelist P. D. James notes that detective fiction narratives are "celebrations of reason and order" (196), and many critics of the genre have even likened the stories to fairy tales because both help satisfy humanity's "yearn for order to be restored […and quest for] achieving at least a measure of justice, though it too is never perfect or complete in this broken world" (Haack). Tristante's novel, however, subverts the part of that paradigm while maintaining allegiance to the second because the novel ends not with Víctor typing up a report of the crimes (the novel is set in 1877, so "typing up" the report would be expected) but with him on vacation on a beach in San Sebastian with his wife—the Arandas' daughter— almost a year later and receiving a telegram from his superiors informing him of his being officially named the youngest police inspector in Spanish history, at which point his wife "congratulates" him with news of her pregnancy. At no point in the novel does Víctor submit a summary report to his superiors—neither in oral nor written form—although the novel certainly has a "fairy tale" ending.

Like the police procedural, the historical novel is also one of the most popular genres of fiction; in fact, *The New York Times* in 2019 noted its popularity in an article entitled: "Why Are We Living in a Golden Age of Historical Fiction?" (O'Grady). The novelist Donna Hatch quotes "a recent survey [in which] 80% of avid readers listed historical novels as one of their top three favorite types of books to read," and the historical fiction

author Joyana Peters cites another survey as reporting that "25% of all respondents across the range of all ages read a historical fiction book last year." Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that Jerónimo Tristante would combine the characteristics of the police procedural and the historical novel in his work.

But what are the main characteristics of a historical novel? The Historical Novel Society states, "To be deemed historical […] a novel must have been written at least fifty years after the events described […or] written by someone who was not alive at the time of those events and therefore approaches them only by research" ("Guide"). Such a definition, then, makes a clear distinction between Realist novels of the 19th century and current historical fiction. Both are now read due to their presenting believable and plausible representations of the past, although obviously "fiction" is not *ipso facto* necessarily 100% verifiable. As great a novelist as Benito Pérez Galdós, Leo Tolstoy, or Charles Dickens may have been (to name only three "canonical," 19th-century Realist authors), in accordance with the Historical Novel Society's definition, their works cannot be considered historical fiction even though they do have tremendous importance for anyone wishing to study a certain period.

Two other characteristics of historical fiction are that "[g]etting the facts right is one of the principal jobs of the writer of historical fiction. […One should] avoid gross anachronisms" (Gooden) and "egregious anachronisms are unacceptable" and that the genre's "intention, beyond providing reading pleasure, is to enhance the reader's knowledge of past events, lives, and customs" (Sarricks). The historical author M. K. Tod notes seven elements that "all writers" of historical fiction have to consider in bringing the past to life: character, dialogue, setting, theme, plot, conflict, and world building. Clearly, Tristante uses these as the point of departure for his novel "The Mystery of the Aranda House," and the work presents a fairly faithful presentation of the world of 1877 Madrid: The multitude of authors, philosophers and poets present at the various *tertulias*, speeches, and other meetings throughout the novel were all very much alive and active in the Madrid cultural scene of the day. "Lo que dirán" ("What others will say") and separation of society by class divisions was quite prevalent at the time. The *chotis*, or German polka had been introduced in Spain in the mid 1800s and was still quite the rage in late 1870s Madrid social society ("El Chotis"). Bull-fighting was already a controversial topic and legislation was being variously adopted or repealed based on who was in power.[5] Robin-Hood style banditry was, indeed, wide spread throughout the Spanish countryside and traveling alone through the Spanish countryside was somewhat taking your life—and certainly your possessions—in your hands; in fact, stopping such rural crime was a major charge given to the Guardia Civil upon their creation in 1844 ("Historia"). In September 1877, there was, as recorded in the novel, a devastating flood in "many points of Spain […] that had leveled areas as far apart as Guadalajara and Ciudad Real," leaving "more than 100 families homeless" in Madrid alone (Tristante 256), a fact almost casually glossed over in the narrative that was quite devastating in reality. And hypnosis, as represented in the novel, was even more controversial than it is today, then often seen as merely sensationalist exhibitions by magnetic healers and occultists (Graus).

The entire mystery of the Aranda house centers on Spaniards who had gone to the Americas to seek their fortune and who later returned to Spain, an actual sociological phenomenon that was changing not only Spain, but a number of countries across Europe: In the decade of the 1830s, European emigration adopted the characteristics of a phenomenon of the masses (Livi Bacci 2012). The great transoceanic stampede of

> Europeans can be considered as the beginning of a habitual migration. In those 50 years [of mid 19th-century], there was a displacement of more than eight million people across countries. In this first period, the migratory casuistry was promoted primarily by a decrease in the productivity of agricultural lands and the modernization of the agrarian society. […] The future was on the other side of the ocean (Valero Matas et al.)

And although the greater massive migration in Spain actually occurred *after* the events of the novel, certainly the social implications of such were already being anticipated in 1877. In fact, between

> 1880 and 1935 [… there was] a departure of approximately four million Spaniards […]. The departure […] was of such magnitude that the government, the media, and intellectuals pointed out the depopulation and the problems that Spain would face from the loss of its citizens, especially those of working and reproductive age. […] In the case of Castilla, the population loss varied between 19 and 20% […]. (Valero Matas et al.) Other "slight" modifications of history also are presented in the novel, although certainly none of them rise to the level of "egregious anachronism." Fingerprints, for example, were not recognized as individually distinct until 1880—a discovery of the Scott Henry Faulds (Tredoux)—and applied to the field of criminal investigations for the first time in 1891 in Argentina by Juan Vucetich Kovacevich ("History of Fingerprints").

And although the Spaniard Federico Olóriz was the one to perfect dactyloscopy, he did not propose this change until 1903 (Bertomeu Sánchez). Consequently, while

Víctor Ross's use of such dactyloscopy in his investigations would have been impossible in 1877, such does help to highlight the cultural transformation that was occurring in relation to the importance of the sciences to solving life's issues and the ushering in of the Industrial Revolution to Spain—much later than in the rest of Europe. In fact, the installation of a steam engine in a Barcelona cotton factory in 1832 is widely recognized as the beginning of the Spanish Industrial Revolution ("On the Industrial").

The Spaniard Mathieu Joseph Bonaventure Orfila (1787-1853) was, indeed, an important forensic doctor who is "credited as one of the first people to use a microscope to assess blood and semen stains" ("Mathieu") and is widely revered as the "Father of Toxicology," but he actually lived almost all his adult life in France. It is important to remember, that in 1875, "Krausism, positivism, and the equally original symbiosis named by Adolfo Posada (1860-1944) as kraus-positivism […] are minority trends whose energy mobilizes only the liberal, progressive intellectuals, not the dominant classes of the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie" (Lissorgues). Having said such, however, in the novel under study, Víctor Ross does very much move in those circles, as do his superior, the police commissioner, and much of the narrative public at large, all who generally "feed much more on the traditional orders of a structured Catholicism, recognized by Article 11 of the 1876 Constitution: 'The apostolic, holy Roman Catholic religion is that adopted by the state'" (Lissorgues). To read Jerónimo Tristante's "The Mystery of the Aranda House," then is to read the cultural setting of late 19th-century Spain in all its philosophical, scientific, religious, and artistic manifestations.

In conclusion, Jerónimo Tristante's *El misterio de la casa Aranda* adopts, adapts, and subtly distances itself from both the traditional police procedural and the historical novel. Its main character is a police officer employing traditional police investigative techniques based on reason and logic in a novel with a fairy-tale-like ending where the guilty are punished and order returns to the world. At the same time, although the author may take slight liberties with the historical accuracy of the dates of some scientific discoveries and uses in Spain, such are not egregious anachronisms and certainly aid in portraying the cultural ambiance of 1877 Madrid. In short, with *El misterio de la casa Aranda* Jerónimo Tristante has produced a novel, in 2008, that goes beyond the traditional and somewhat formulaic police procedural paradigm, ingeniously modernizing the widely accepted characteristics of that model to create something that both employs that genre as its point of departure while simultaneously offering a well-written, dynamic historical novel that foreshadows a type of crime fiction that is currently coming to maturity on the Spanish national scene—a historical police procedural.

ENDNOTES

1 Take, for example, the late 19th and early 20th century literary movement of naturalism: "In its simplest sense *naturalism* is the application of principles of scientific determinism to literature" ("Naturalism"). Others, such as Koch Harris, have described naturalism as a scientific experiment in a literary petri dish (28).

2 See, for example, Blake (54).

3 See, for example, Landrum (15, 33, 48).

4 Although police procedurals certainly may have more than one plot, the genre paradigm demands that the focus of the novel be on the investigation surrounding one crime or various related crimes, such as multiple murders, directly tied to the one investigation. For more discussion of such, see, for example, Primasita and Ahimsa-Putra.

5 For a more in-depth study of the topic, see Shubert and Sanchis Martínez.

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