

# On the Island of Desolation

Adolfo García Ortega's voyages of discovery

MICHAEL KERRIGAN

Adolfo García Ortega

AUTÓMATA

478pp. Madrid: Bruguera. €17.  
84 024 2010 9

Arriving in Liverpool at the end of his first voyage, the narrator of Herman Melville's *Redburn* (1849) is disconcerted not to find any old abbeys or fox-hunts. Neither are there lord mayors, or maypoles, or any of the other "English" items which his reading has led him to expect.

It was then, I began to see, that my prospects of seeing the world as a sailor were after all, but very doubtful; for sailors only go round the world, without going into it; and their reminiscences of travel are only a dim recollection of a chain of tap-rooms surrounding the globe . . . . They but touch the perimeter of the circle, hover about the edges of terra-firma; and only land upon wharves and pier-heads.

To read this passage must always have been to wonder how far anyone really went "into" the world, but the question seems more apposite than ever. Now, it is agreed, we are all at sea, adrift in a decentred universe, men overboard, clutching at floating signifiers. The narrative certainties of the nineteenth century have gone the way of the sailing ship – to our great impoverishment, many feel. Today, instead of brigantines and schooners, ro-ros and container ships trundle along like supermarket trolleys: must we accept, then, that the romance of the sea is dead? Not if we are to judge by the Spanish writer Adolfo García Ortega's new book. *Autómata* ("Automaton") is an adventure story for an age of inter-modal transport and inter-textuality, an extravagantly enthralling – and thought-provoking – novel.

A number of different narratives have been cunningly interwoven to make this yarn, each in its turn wound around with strands of observation and anecdote. But to dwell on the novel's complexity and the ingenuity with which it has been put together risks missing the dynamism and drive which are the key to its appeal. We are always on the move – however doubtful our destination. There is a twenty-first-century sea voyage here, but there are also journeys into some of the grimmer and more grotesque reaches of the historical past. There are searches among personal letters and family photographs and forays through individual memory, as well as digressive flights of every conceivable kind. García Ortega reaches far and wide for his influences, and finds inspiration in some improbable places, from horror fiction to Hollywood biography. If *Moby-Dick* is an obvious model, the sensibility of W. G. Sebald is evident in the seamless transitions between past and present, the elusive boundaries between fiction and fact. And in a preoccupation with the need to find a credible way of commemorating the dead, of delineating their absence, and of mourning their sufferings without sentimentality. These are long-term concerns: García Ortega's 1990 novel *Mampaso* told the true story of a banal murder in his native Valladolid. In *El comprador de aniversarios* ("The Anniversary-Buyer", 2002), he imagined the lives that might have been available to the mute and crippled orphan boy whom the Auschwitz inmates in Primo Levi's memoir *The Truce* know as "Hurbinek". "I want Hurbinek to exist", the novel's narrator says.

The main job of *Autómata*'s narrator is, paradoxically, to listen – to attend to the "infinite story" which its Ishmael, Oliver Griffin, has to tell. In his unobtrusive way, however, the narrator helps by his questions and promptings not only to articulate the narrative flow but to keep us ever mindful that we are not experiencing an action but being told a story. He is visiting Madeira when Griffin approaches him with, we are told, a "narrator's suaveness", and insists on telling him about his



A detail from Abraham Ortelius's map of the Pacific, 1589, based on information from the voyage of Magellan; reproduced from *New Worlds: Maps from the age of discovery* by Ashley and Miles Baynton-Williams (224pp. Quercus. £50. 1 905204 80 9)

lifelong passion for islands and all things insular. Islands are self-contained worlds; he has always loved maps of islands for the way they unlock the imagination with their quasi-fictional qualities – they might just as well be mythical as real. The same could be said of Griffin, the Spanish son of an Irish-American father, who has never felt the same since as a boy he saw the film of H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*, and learnt that he shared the name of its protagonist. Invisibility has been his other obsession. He has never really been there, he feels, never impinged on the world through which he has moved; he has walked through life without leaving footprints of any kind.

His islands have been his only fixed point: his "north" has always been the – extremely southern-lying – Island of Desolation in the Magellan Straits. His maternal grandparents took their honeymoon in Punta Arenas, at the tip of Chile, in 1923. He shows the narrator a photograph, taken in the city's Salesian Museum, in which the couple pose with a

strange object, a life-size metal figure which was found on Desolation by a Croatian immigrant, Graciela Pavic. She had been searching for signs of her husband and sons, lost off the coast years before. Bringing this strange find back to the city museum, she had set about learning what it was she had discovered, and restoring it to working order. For this was not just a figure but an automaton, a sixteenth-century robot, designed to move of its own accord. Having befriended the young Spanish couple she met at the museum, she kept in touch with them by letter in the years that followed, and Griffin's grandfather slowly fell in love with Graciela in *absentia*, even as her grief-fuelled feelings dragged her down into insanity.

The task of untying this knot of narratives has been the purpose of Griffin's life. And it is

off as a man so as to accompany Philibert de Commerson on Bougainville's voyage. For someone who feels he has no substantial presence, that his life will leave no lasting residue, such musings on appearances, implications and might-have-beens go to the very heart of things.

This is why he is fascinated by the automaton's origins: it is another way into the question of what it is that makes a man. The ghost in García Ortega's machine is, of course, the computer of our own time: it is never mentioned, but then it does not need to be. Today we can have as many lives and identities as we want to on the internet, transcending space and time with apparent ease. And yet how real are these virtual experiences? Do computers demonstrate our power as creators or – as they beat us at chess and learn to think and feel – merely underline the limitations of humankind? This automaton's inventor, Melvicius of Prague, we are told, argued out much the same question with the legendary Rabbi Löew. Melvicius's figure was intended to be just one of an army of automata which King Philip II envisaged standing guard at the entrance to the Magellan Strait. A hellish vision, then, for those who dared to venture to the end of the world – and a symbolic warning that human endeavour might have its limits. The automaton itself is impressive testimony to man's ingenuity and enterprise, yet has also been a monument (ironically unseen) to human folly. And how far does its resemblance to a human extend? Has Griffin been the author of his own destiny in his quest for the automaton, or has that destiny simply wound him up and watched him go?

At once an intrepid explorer and a creature of fate, Sarmiento de Gamboa sums up for Griffin the "spirit of fight and failure" which has characterized the history of the Magellan Strait. He was the man originally charged with installing Philip's automaton army on the hillside, and, when that project fell through, asked to set up colonies along the strait. He dreamt of an American Athens, but ended up Governor of Nothing. Harassed by Indians, his settlers slowly starved. And, most poignant of all, they died in the belief that their leader had abandoned them even as he struggled desperately to bring them help. One man, two stories, of treachery and heroic sacrifice – and, sadly, both the tales are "true".

Griffin's own life's journey was eventually to lead to his taking passage to Punta Arenas on a Portuguese container-ship in hopes of finding the automaton and resolving his various riddles once and for all. The voyage of the *Minerva Janela* has irresistible echoes of the sea-stories of former times – even if there are ever-present intimations of bathos as memories of creaking timbers, tops'ls, yardarms and pieces of eight come crowding in. But time has done nothing to stale our sense that there is something elemental about the ocean; that the seafarer out in the middle of its infinite vastness is facing the fundamental problems of existence every day.

And that is where *Autómata* leaves us: standing on some godforsaken shore looking out