THE CONCEPT OF "ATARAXIA" IN THE LATER NOVELS OF BAROJA

Much remains to be written about the later novels of Baroja. With a few praiseworthy exceptions the tendency among critics, especially outside Spain, has been to regard him as having written himself out by the early 'twenties and thus to place exclusive emphasis on the novels of the first period. In these Baroja, hearkening to the siren-song of Zarathustra ("Thou canst, for thou willest") had found for a time a source of confident assertion with which to fend off the awareness of the vital problem which he had revealed in his first published work: Vidas Sombrias (1900). The group of novels which begins with El Mayorazgo de Labras (1903) and ends with César o Nada (1910) contains a gallery of figures united by their ability to cope with life energetically and to find compensatory exhilaration in the struggle for existence. From the attachment shown by critics to these novels in marked preference to the later ones it follows that pride of place among critical half-truths about Baroja is held by Ortega's "La acción es el ideal de Baroja" which, misleading when applied to the novels as a whole, has proved stubbornly self-perpetuating. In what follows it is proposed to examine the contrary standpoint.

The death of César Moncada symbolises the failure of the ideal to which Ortega refers. Pronouncing its obsequies in 1917 Baroja wrote:

"Yo también he preconizado un remedio para el mal de vivir: la acción. Es un remedio viejo como el mundo, tan útil a veces como cualquier otro y tan inútil como todos los demás. Es decir, que no es un remedio."

Thus, with the publication in 1920 of La Sensualidad Pervertida, a second phase in Baroja's production may be said to open. In the interval the

1 E.g., D. L. Bollinger, "Heroes and Hamlets, the protagonists of Baroja's novels", Hispania (Cal.), XXIV (1941), 91-108. L. S. Granjel, Retrato de Pio Baroja (Barcelona 1953), 183-98, 263-87.
2 E.g., R. F. Brown, "A reader's notes on the contemporary Spanish novel," BHS, XIV (1932), 118.
3 Obras Completas, IL 90.
4 E.g., D. King-Arjona, "La Voluntad y Abulia", RH, LXXIV (1928), 630. "There is to be found on almost every page of Baroja's work some indication of his love of action. He describes it as the remedy for 'El mal del vivir'." Cf. similarly Azorín, "La filosofía de Baroja" in Anis Baroja (Obras Completas VIII, 137-316). E. Giménez-Caballero, "Baroja, precursor del fascismo". (Prolegómenos a Baroja’s judíos, Comunistas y demás reyes, Valladolid 1938).
5 Obras Completas, V, 173.
Aviraneta series of historical novels had begun. The retreat into the past is no coincidence; having realised that the voluntarist ideal of action was in hopeless discord with modern conditions, Baroja transferred it to a nineteenth-century setting where, in the turbulent times of the Carlist Wars, it could still carry conviction, though no longer relevant to the modern dilemma.

Meanwhile two alternative vital attitudes had already emerged. As early as *Camino de Perfección* (1902) the solution via emotion had presented itself, first in a highly erotic form, later with voluntarist overtones in keeping with Baroja's dominant mode of thought at the time. Subsequent voluntarist heroes, up to and including César, continue to feel the tug of sentiment, to the detriment of their principles. Aviraneta, however, does not. The implication is clear. Even in the first period the voluntarist solution was largely unstable and apt to give way overreadily to the promptings of emotion. Only after relegating it to the more heroic context of the past does Baroja feel justified in presenting an ideal of action pure and simple.

After the first period, therefore, action and emotion go their separate ways; the former to be enjoyed for its own sake independent of metaphysical considerations, by Aviraneta and Zalacaín; the latter emerging alongside "ataraxia" (serenity through self-limitation) as a possible means of reaching a compromise with existence.

For, as early as *El Arbol de la Ciencia* (1911), the idea of "ataraxia" had begun to occupy an important place in Baroja's thought:

"Ante la vida no hay más que dos soluciones prácticas para el hombre sereno, o la abstención y la contemplación indiferente de todo, o la acción limitándose a un círculo pequeño".¹

This time, beside the ideal of action, now sadly curtailed in scope, is set that of self-limitation; in place of a dynamic nucleus of life-directing ideas, we find the desire to contract out of society, to prune away possibilities of effort or suffering. Unlike Ossorio, Hurtado is unable to come to satisfactory terms with life, either by action or through emotion. His death symbolises the futility of trying along those lines. After it no *positive* solution remains; retreat is the only way out.

Here the influence of Schopenhauer which, supplementing that of Kant, had preceded that of Nietzsche in the formation of Baroja's conception of the vital problem, re-emerges triumphantly. The demand for an absolute end to existence and at the same time the impossibility of its fulfilment, which Simmel puts at the centre of Schopenhauer's thought, is now foremost in Baroja's mind. The ensuing novels in large

¹ *Obras Completas*, II, 493.
part show a systematic application of the premise of *The World as Will and Idea* to human life and the world in general. "Life", their heroes discover, "is in its very nature suffering in various forms" characterised by "a necessary and constant conflict between individuals of all species"; "suffering", they learn, "is proportionate to knowledge. The more distinctly a man knows, the more pain he has". As their disillusionment increases, Schopenhauer falls into place as the natural guide and tempter along the path of abstention. He it is indeed who best defines their aspiration:—

"The will turns away from life, it now shudders at the pleasures in which it recognises the assertion of life. Man now attains to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation and true indifference". The very term "ataraxia" is adopted by Baroja from the stoics via Schopenhauer.

The contradiction between such an ideal and that of reliance on emotion prompts the question: is there, for Baroja, a real possibility that love and marriage may offer a solution? Though the implications are all in the negative from now on, he avoids giving a definite answer. A case in point is the death of Lulú in *El Arbol de la Ciencia* itself. While on the one hand it might be taken to imply failure to achieve a solution through emotion, it remains on the other hand a purely arbitrary event, in a sense even, a deliberate manipulation of the narrative. Had Lulú lived Hurtado would presumably have gone on living too, and perhaps in the end would have escaped, like Ossorio, from the vital dilemma. It is as though Baroja, although unwilling to admit the possibility of a complete escape into emotion, as he had seemed inclined to do in *Camino de Perfección*, were at the same time loath to dismiss it entirely, as we could have assumed had Lulú, for example, left Hurtado or by her conduct towards him increased his misery and sense of ultimate futility. This contradiction is an important feature of the later novels in many of which Baroja again resorts to arbitrary manipulation of the narrative in order to avoid the full implications of emotion.

In 1918 Baroja published, at the end of *Las Horas Solitarias* a brief but revealing confirmation of the turn which his thoughts had now taken. His ideal is now plainly that of "ataraxia". The novels of the phase now about to open examine this ideal with the anxious, but at the same time sceptical, regard which had been applied to its predecessor. A notable feature is their extreme authenticity. In private life Baroja had for a long time previously been practising the ascetic austerity which is so prominent in the later novels. Much of what is in them directly reflects

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his own personality and experience. But if he uses himself for copy he does at least do so with transparent and at times painful sincerity. The characters he now creates are, like himself, men who found no exhilaration in the struggle for existence, no compensation for effort in a fuller and intenser life, and who, in consequence, seek to simplify existence, to cut it down to manageable size, and so to protect themselves against its worst possibilities.

There is therefore a strong family likeness about them derived from their common inability, inherited from their creator, to base their lives on what he regarded as "mentiras vitales". In El Mundo es Ansi and elsewhere he had noted that the generality of mankind is much more apt to take to heart those illusions which lend to life an appearance of purpose and meaning than to face the truth, which has for him quite the opposite implication. But there are exceptions, and it is primarily with these that he now deals.

Murgía (La Sensualidad Pervertida) disassociates himself at the outset from the "mentira vital" of the earlier novels. Whilst giving voluntarism its due:—

"...el impulso y la adaptación al ambiente valen mucho más que la comprensión".1

he recognises himself to be on the wrong side of the fence, and rejects the path of action. But immunity from one form of vital illusion by no means renders him proof against another. Reserved, contemplative, diffident, Murgía confronts the problem of existence with none of the intensity of Hurtado or Ossorio; his filiation is rather with the similarly restrained and hesitant figure of Arcelu, whose inconsequential brush with Sacha in El Mundo es Ansi is a prelude to the other abortive attempts to establish satisfactory contact with the other sex which occur in this novel. In early life he takes up the formula of abstention practised by Hurtado in Alcolea; no meat, no wine, no excitement. The crucial question in this novel is whether by these means the attainment of a state of "ataraxia" is possible.

At grips with his new theme Baroja abandons the technique of successive strokes of misfortune which characterises El Arbol de la Ciencia and concentrates on a subtler element of perturbation—sex. Caught up in the conflicting demands of mind, body and emotion, Murgía finds "ataraxia" continually beyond his reach. In the heading of an early chapter Baroja singles out its chief adversaries: erotismo y sensibilitia. Beset by these, as much as by adverse material circumstances, Murgía struggles vainly to accommodate himself to existence.

1 Obras Completas, II, 908.
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The sexual problem, as such, he pronounces insoluble from the first. But the renunciation is purely intellectual; the physical frustration remains a primary element of disturbance, controlled only in part by his avoidance of stimulants. The unsatisfied emotional aspiration is, however, intrinsically the greater problem, which neither age nor progressive disillusionment have power to solve. Love, though deprived of its illusion by the lingering suspicion that it is just another "mentira vital," perversely continues to beckon; and, though all but precluded from making the necessary suspension of reason, Murgia diffidently responds, only to find himself finally baulked by the unmotivated ignobility of the female partner. The conflict between love and abstention remains inconclusive.

In the trilogy Agonías de Nuestro Tiempo which followed in 1925-26 Baroja again takes stock of the position, but from a standpoint based on the developments in La Sensualidad Pervertida. The central character, Larrañaga, is already middle-aged at the opening of the novel; in him resignation is presented no longer as an aspiration but as a fact. The purely physical element of perturbation (erotismo) which had proved intractable in the earlier narrative is now eliminated, and the possibility of "ataraxia" is examined in relation to only one of its former enemies: Larrañaga's repressed, vestigial, sensibility—in itself less intense than Murgia's.

The circumstances are represented by two emotional encounters, in each of which a compromise is attempted. Nelly appears to meet Larrañaga's requirements perfectly. Her passive character, which derives its attraction less from any pronounced psychological trait than from the pathos of her situation, prevents her from intruding on any of his intimate sentimental processes and causing him to raise his protective spines. Nelly, in fact, represens more than she really is; she represents the possibility of striking a bargain between abstention and emotion. When she too dies, like Lulu, suddenly, the possibility is swept away.

In the rest of the trilogy Baroja analyses the reaction of Larrañaga, now crushed and irresolute, to a fresh emotional situation in which the active partner is this time the woman, his cousin Pepita. The ironic contrast between his heightened consciousness of what is involved—the legacy of his recent experience—and the demands of his newly awakened sensibility, produces a crisis of indecision in which his character is at its highest pitch of tension. Caught between the upper and nether millstones of insight and desire, he struggles ineffectually to resolve his inner disension. Again, just as the strain appears to be slackening, the largely unmotivated decision by Pepita to return to her blackguard of a husband intervenes to block any further development. Like Murgia after the
desertion of Ana, Larrañaga remains bereft even of confidence in his ability to stay true to the ideal of abstention. The end of Los Amores Tardios is an impasse. Muñiga and Larrañaga find themselves to be infected, like César, with a "lepra sentimental" which they are unable to leave out of account, but which cannot be accommodated to their principal aim.

In the years which followed, the impasse lay unresolved. Baroja turned his hand to more of the Aviraneta series and to reportage of modern events. But the problem remained. The possibilities of simple abstention and of a compromise between abstention and emotion being ruled out, there still remained the alternative of voluntary self-limitation within the context of religious belief. In El Cura de Monleón (1938) the obvious parallel between the abstentionist state of mind and that of the religious ascetic is examined.

Olaran, as a priest supported by his convictions, seems at first much more likely to achieve a stable "postura vital" than the characters just considered. But the problem is now of another order; this time it is insight rather than emotion which disturbs the balance. In the period following his ordination, while still protected by his faith, Olaran succeeds temporarily in achieving serenity. But little by little, as he is forced closer to reality by daily contact in the confessional with human nature at its least embellished, the "mentira vital" fades and finally vanishes. The picture at the end of the novel is therefore the same as before, except that Olaran, in this instance, is only at the beginning of the real problem when the book comes to a close. For it is only then when he returns to the world in a double sense, abandoning both his priestly office and his exile in Alava, that he is obliged for the first time to face life without the support of a vital illusion. In this respect we are still no nearer to anything positive.

In the remaining novels which have a bearing on the concept of "ataraxia" Baroja seeks neither to demolish any further "mentiras vitales" nor to explore any new path towards salvation. Convinced, intellectually at least, that the impasse is inescapable, he tends to take it more for granted, without his interest in it being in any way diminished. The logical development at this point is to avoid it altogether by effecting a division between abstention on the one hand, and emotional entanglements on the other, without, however, implying the triumph of the former. Age, therefore, in the characters of Pagani (El Hôtel del Cósmico, 1946) and Jesús Martín (Los Enigmáticos, 1948) assumes special significance. Though it does not of itself bring serenity, it does at least bring immunity from disturbances of sexual origin, and authentic resignation. Meantime the emotional situations themselves have been reworked in Susana (1938) and
La sirena de Jauregui (1945). The former is composed of elements derived in equal proportions from La Sensualidad Pervertida which supplies the hero, Salazar, and Las Veleidades de la Fortuna which supplies Susana, a second and less successful Nelly. Here once more the emotional avenue of escape is explored, only to fail as dismally as before when Susana meets an arbitrary but not wholly unexpected death in a motoring accident. In the latter Fanny’s situation bears a marked resemblance to that of Sacha in El Mundo es Aní; her insight sharpened by a disastrous marriage, she escapes from the dilemma with which she is left face to face by taking her own life.

The price paid for this separation is rather high since these novels, lacking the urgency and conviction of their predecessors, are of markedly inferior quality. It is only in Laura (1939) and El Cantor Vagabundo (1950) that Baroja approaches his former level. In both these the struggle between insight and emotion is re-expressed. But with this difference: that whereas formerly Baroja had adopted a standpoint of complete sympathy with his central characters, he now for the first time appears to accept the implication inherent in his work from the very earliest, that their difficulties, far from being due to their inability to see things as they really are, derive instead from something deeper: an arbitrary psychological incompatibility with the world, or what he calls in El Cantor Vagabundo “una neurosis de angustia.”

So, abandoning his earlier technique of rationalisation, he remarks in explanation of Laura’s character:

“No eran estos hechos o los otros los que le daban una sensación de soledad, de tristeza, o de angustia, sino que la sensación la llevaba con ella sin motivo, o mejor dicho, por un motivo psicológico nervioso de debilidad de su espíritu.”

For the rest the syndrome remains the same as formerly. Laura, like Hurtado, learns insight from her studies of medicine, conceives a strong suspicion of romantic love, and practises a form of abstention, though without the moral aggressiveness of Murgia or Larrañaga. But the difference of emphasis remains, with the result that Laura is able to marry satisfactorily, no intervention by Baroja being needed to wreck her reconciliation with existence. For it is in itself only apparent, as we see from the epilogue. Laura’s sense of solitude, being beyond rational explanation and admitting no emotional consolation, is indeed “sin remedio”.

1 Another view of this is to be found in A. L. Owen, “Concerning the ideology of Pio Baroja”, Hispania (Cal.), XV (1932), 15-24.
2 Obras Completas, VII, 253.
Irremediable in the same way is the neurosis of Caravajal “El Lince”. Many aspects of his character suggest a Larrañaga grown old. But here again Baroja points deliberately to a “tristeza física orgánica” underlying his utterances, and again it is the blunt diagnosis of hysteria by the doctor which marks the final evolution. Curiously the wheel has come full circle, for we are really back to the position of Fernando Ossorio in the early chapters of Camino de Perfección in which the “mal metafísico” is identified by Schultze as mere “sobre-excitación nerviosa” and a walking tour prescribed. “El Lince” also finds his excursions salutary, but insufficient to effect a cure. Age, as we already know, brings no serenity and Silvia, conveniently desexualised like Nelly and Susana, arrives too late to stimulate even temporarily his jaded illusions.

Both Laura and “El Lince” represent a final stage in characterisation. The untenability of abstention without emotional support and the impossibility of reconciling the two conflicting demands thus set up have produced an impasse which Baroja now recognises as the consequence of a neurotic state of mind rather than of insight into things as they really are. This belated admission of the existence of neurosis in “El Lince” with its implication, for the first time, of Baroja’s scepticism as to the validity of the “mal metafísico” is of cardinal importance.

To recapitulate: it is false to lay exclusive emphasis on the idea of action in Baroja. Instead his work must be seen as falling into two periods in the second of which the concept of “ataraxia”, serenity via abstention, is examined and found to be dependent on bringing it to terms with emotion. Such a reconciliation, opposed as it is to Baroja’s own experience, is avoided by various arbitrary means, though constantly remaining in the background as an aspiration. Finally Baroja abandons pseudo-objective presentation and accepts the implication of neurosis, which for obvious reasons connected with his own temperament he had tended to minimize in earlier characters, rationalising their dilemma and compensating it by their increased sense of independence and moral superiority. It is, of course, arguable that his withdrawal from “La lucha por la vida” to the negative concept of “ataraxia” marks the end of his best work; such indeed is the fashionable belief. But, taking the whole view, it should be recognised that the later novels present an attitude different from, and complementary to, that of the earlier ones, and that full consideration of it is essential if his work is to be seen in true perspective.

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