UNAMUNO AND THE AESTHETIC OF THE NOVEL*

The unusual departure from normal procedure in the novels of Unamuno inevitably suggests the theory behind the expression. Their ideological origin is so unmistakably obvious, that rather than being actual novels, these works seem a literary exercise to demonstrate Unamuno's particular conception of the novel, an exemplification of his aesthetic theory.

One novel, however, raises a special problem. *Paz en la guerra*, Unamuno's first novel, while it contains in embryo some elements of his later technique, does not have the ideological origin which is the distinctive characteristic of the later works, but represents rather the pre-theoretic phase of the author. The literary problem which this work presents is discussed much later, ostensibly as an afterthought, in the prologue to the second edition¹ and in the essays.

Unamuno's novels fall into two divisions, *Paz en la guerra*, and the remainder. The latter may all be generally classified as *nívolas* or *nivolas*, terms which the author humorously invents in *Niebla*² as both an admission of, and insistence on, the unorthodox character of the genre as opposed to the traditional *novela*. Although the invention of the term is antedated by *Amor y pedagogia*, which may be considered an early attempt at a *nivola*, and although it is used limitedly, and even then without consistency, by Unamuno himself, it is convenient to consider collectively as *nivolas* all the novels which follow *Paz en la guerra*, for they all stem from a common aesthetic principle.

"These two groups are representative for Unamuno of the two possible types of artistic procedure, which he labels, with a characteristic choice of vital imagery, oviparous and viviparous art.³

Oviparous writers, as the term suggests, are those in whom the final expression is preceded by a long process of incubation before it reaches ultimate conception. The oviparous writer is primarily an objective realist whose method is that of meticulous observation and copious documentation. This procedure, which he declares he followed in *Paz en la guerra*,⁴ Unamuno later comes to detest.

*Paper read before the Modern Language Association, at Cambridge, Massachusetts, December 27, 1940.
² *Niebla*, second edition, 1928, p. 158.
⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127: "... relato para cuya hechura procedí con tanta escrupulosidad como si se tratase de escribir una historia, pues no hay en él detalle que no
On the other hand, the viviparous creation is, by definition, born alive. It is the spontaneous expression, without any previous preparation, of the author’s creative will. This personal approach inevitably arrives at a lyrical production, and indeed the best novels, says Unamuno, are poems.  

The fundamental distinction between oviparous and viviparous art arises from the irreconcilably opposite conceptions of reality on which they are based. Oviparous expression embodies the attitude that the real is the objective, the outward, material form. Viviparous art proceeds on the assumption that reality is not the phenomenon but the noumenon, not the outward form, which is capable of apprehension only by the senses and by the reason, but the spiritual essence which conceives that form and which is a vital force incapable of analysis, for it is the artist’s individuality—his indivisible will. This purely Quixicotic tenet, which is the paramount basis of Unamuno’s aesthetic, interprets reality as the purely imaginative ideal willed into existence by the power of faith. Reality is the real man in action, the ideal, heroic being that Don Quijote, the apostle of individuality, willed to become. Thus Unamuno states the problem: “... este hombre que podríamos llamar, al modo kantiano, numénico, este hombre volitivo e ideal — de idea-voluntad o fuerza — tiene que vivir en un mundo fenoménico, aparential, racional, en el mundo de los llamados realistas. Pero la realidad es la íntima.” Reality, however, does not exist; it is not the static, objective creation, but the dynamic creative power of the individual. The creative artist, the real man, is the Don Quijote in each one of us, the very essence of our ideal will, uninhibited by the objective observer in each man, the Cervantes who is inferior to his noble creation.

Since the material world represents a false conception of reality, it must be eliminated from the novel: “La realidad no la constituyen las bambalinas ni las decoraciones, ni el traje ni el paisaje, ni el mobiliario... en una creación, la realidad no es la del que llaman los

pueda comprobar documentalmente. Y todo ello fué una verdadera empolladura de escrítor oviparo.”

5 In Prologue to Tres novelas ejemplares: “las mejores novelas son poemas.”

6 For a discussion of the problem of reality in Unamuno’s novels, see José Padín, “El concepto de lo real en las últimas novelas de Unamuno,” HISPANIA (1928), XI, 418–23.

7 Prologue to Tres novelas ejemplares.

8 Vida de don Quijote y Sancho, passim.
cricos realismo... la realidad es una realidad íntima, creativa y de voluntad."

The contrast between the oviparous *Paz en la guerra* and the viviparous *nivolas* is not, however, without qualification. Although there are external settings in the former—landscapes and intermittent Basque scenes, as well as pictures of the first Carlist War—it is for the inner life that the author reveals his predilection. This incipient tendency toward the subjective is illustrated by a striking example of the interior monologue, that of the child Rafaela on the death of her mother. In a more general sense, also, this first novel can be identified with the later productions in sharing with them a common hostility to the literary art of the dilettante, to art for art's sake. *Paz en la guerra*, Unamuno asserts, is not a "historical novel," the Dumas type of work which is for purposes of mere entertainment, but "novelized history," which serves as an incentive to virile action of social significance. In *Amor y pedagogia* one of the characters sums up in these uncompromising words the attitude of the author's second phase, in which the theory of the reality of Quixotic faith has a practical social application in the desire to redeem the abúlico: "El arte es algo inferior, bajo, despreciable... Y el buen gusto es más despreciable aún. ¿El arte por el arte? ¡Porquerías!"

In spite of these resemblances, however, the *nivolas* represent a fundamental departure from *Paz en la guerra*. Observation and documentation, so rigorously adhered to in the preceding work, are now completely rejected for they not only necessitate a retardatory, unspontaneous expression, but incorporate an objective attitude based on a false conception of reality. The author must not be detached from his expression by a laborious intermediary process of preparation nor by the critical faculty seeking conscious perfection, for the creation is the will of the author. It must therefore be expressed as immediately as possible, without interference, so as to be conserved.

9 Prologue to *Tres novelas ejemplares*.


11 *Paz en la guerra*, second edition, pp. 203 ff. Other examples may be found in the same work, p. 198, and in *Amor y pedagogia*, p. 145.


13 *Amor y pedagogia*, p. 163.
in its original incandescent state of dynamic energy. Otherwise, it ceases to be creative will and becomes reflection.

It is debatable, however, how large a role the realization of his inability to produce a successful example of the realistic novel actually played in Unamuno's formation of the viviparous aesthetic, for *Paz en la guerra* is tedious and disjointed. The implication that the *nívola* is to some extent a rationalization of his own original failure, the author himself seems to admit, for he declares quite frankly: "Digo, pues, que aleccionado por lo que me ha ocurrido y por lo que a otros ocurre, y huyendo de la especial pesadez que llevan en sí las obras producidas por oviparición, me he lanzado a ejercitarme en el procedimiento viviparo." 14 This confession, and the element of subjectivity in the first novel, point to the conclusion that in *Paz en la guerra* Unamuno was not following his own proclivities, but was still dominated by the traditional convention of the novel, to which he compelled himself to conform. The reaction apparently is accentuated by the advent of the Generation of '98 and its desire for the reformation of art. Now he throws off all pretense at conformity and launches into the production of the unorthodox *nívolas*. It is significant in this connection to note that *Paz en la guerra* is the only one of the novels antedating 1898. 15

With the guiding principle of the nonreality of the material world in view, the *nívolas* eliminate all externals, particularly settings and character descriptions, and are reduced to the conflict of naked wills without bodily covering or precise location in time and space. 16 Stripped of these objective forms, they seek also to retain unimpaired that spontaneous directness without which creative energy degenerates into "literatura." This effect is pursued by a procedure which Unamuno labels "A lo que salga." 17 Applied to the *nívola*, it signifies a resolute opposition to any evidence of premeditation in language, plot construction, or character formation.

It should be borne in mind that these two principles of immediate expression and ideal, volitional reality are complementary and inseparable. The language must not only be an energetic utterance dictated by the author's will, but it must also be a forthright, completely

14 "A lo que salga," loc. cit., p. 128.

15 *Paz en la guerra*, first edition, 1897.

16 Prologue to *Paz en la guerra*, second edition, 1923: "...fuera de lugar y tiempo determinados, en esqueleto, a modo de dramas íntimos."

17 "A lo que salga," loc. cit.
irreflective expression. This attitude is best described in "El sepulcro de Don Quijote," where, reprimanding a correspondent for his carefully corrected style, Unamuno declares: "No es un chorro que brota violento, expulsando el tapón. Más de una vez tus cartas degeneran en literatura ...".

In so far as the plot is concerned, these same principles deny the novelist the right to fashion a systematic, narrative intrigue, for that is both reflective and formal. "Mi novela no tiene argumento, o, mejor dicho, será el que vaya saliendo. El argumento se hace él solo," Unamuno declares in Niebla. This aspect of his theory and its effect on the form of the novel is perhaps best illustrated by "La historia de Don Sandalio," the "near-story" of an uncommunicative person with whom the author is accustomed to play chess. From time to time he hears references to the life of this mysterious character which suggest the unfolding of a grim tragedy. But far from seeking to bring to light this hidden story, he shuns the factual, preferring to create his own reality and leave the character with his. "No he podido columbrar nada de su vida, ni en rigor me importa gran cosa. Prefiero imaginármela." Plot is now entirely subordinated to character, for the action viewed externally conflicts with the subjective conception of reality on which the novel is to be based, and hence the attention is now completely focused on the motive which guides the action, the will of the character to triumph over abulia and achieve individuality. That ideal volition vindicates all actions, even those of a Cain, for it is the vital expression of the real man, "el que uno quiere ser." The principle of self-evolution applies equally therefore to the character, for if it is to be possessed of its own will it must evolve independently, and not be cast into a prearranged mold by the author: "Mis personajes se irán haciendo según obrén y hablen, sobre todo según hablen." This transcendental independence of the character elevates him to a rank of equality with his author with whom it is possible for him to debate and struggle, as do Unamuno and Augusto Pérez.

19 Niebla, second edition, p. 156.
20 In San Manuel bueno, mártir, y tres historias más.
21 Ibid., p. 133.
22 Abel Sánchez.
23 Prologue to Tres novelas ejemplares.
24 Niebla, second edition, p. 155. 25 Ibid., chapter xxxi and the following.
This conscious relationship between author and character which anticipates Pirandello may be traced back in Unamuno to the *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* (1905), in which he states that Don Quijote is more real than Cervantes; and to *Amor y pedagogía* (1902), in the interview between the author and Don Fulgencio. A possible forerunner may be detected in Galdós’ Máximo Manso,²⁶ for whom, in his correspondence, Unamuno confesses much admiration,²⁷ for he, too, is aware that he is the creation of his author.

The main structural element of the *nivola*, replacing the customary forms of cultivated style, narrative plot, settings, and character descriptions, now becomes dialogue, an active, dynamic component which has no set form, but adapts itself to the will of the speaker. In its main outlines the *nivola* is thus the conflict of wills expressed in dialogue, and in its technical aspect, as Balseiro says, lies midway between the novel and the drama.²⁸

Salvador de Madariaga raises the question as to whether or not this is romantic art.²⁹ Such an attitude seems to fall far short of the mark, for Unamuno’s aesthetic oversteps the limits of art and becomes purely mystic. The *nivola* is an attempt to transfer to the technique of the novel the mystic’s desire to free himself from the bonds of the material world, which is an illusion, and become identified with the source of true reality. There are two stages in this development: a metaphysical rejection of the world of the senses, reproduced in the novels in the elimination of external forms; and an attempt to identify the individual with the source of reality, the creative force, in the *nivola* represented by the independent reality of the character, who becomes the vital equivalent of his creator, the novelist. But there is a further mystic aspect to this equation of character and author. Unamuno is a mystic, but a mystic who doubts. “I doubt, therefore I exist,” a variation of the Descartian principle, is the theme of *Niebla*, and the confrontation of author and character (the distinctive characteristic of the *nivola* proper, if a rigorous segregation is to be made within the classification of the viviparous novels) amply reveals the mystic nature of this doubt. “By playing in this way with

²⁶ *El amigo Manso*.
²⁹ *Semblanzas literarias contemporáneas*, p. 157.
the illusory reality of his characters, Unamuno casts doubt upon man's essential reality," says one critic. "He is preoccupied with the question of existence as such. Is life a dream? Are we, or do we merely seem to be? Who is more real, a character of fiction or his author?"30 Or, indeed, who is God, this doubting believer seems to be asking himself here? Did God create man, or man God? Such is the ultimate significance of the union of Unamuno and Augusto Pérez. It is perfectly in accord with this attitude that Unamuno should refer to the essay "Cómo se hace una novela" as "the novel of the novel, the creation of the creation. Or God of God, Deus de Deo."31 Consequently, novel, creation, and God are synonymous, and in writing a nícola Unamuno sees himself mystically united with God.

The origin of this mystic attitude is that tragic sentiment of life, the conflict between faith and reason, between the will to be and the supreme phenomenon of death, that guides all Unamuno's thought. The destruction of form in the nícola, its reduction to sheer universals, free from detailed realistic reference, gives it an other-worldliness, a timelessness and freedom from spatial dimensions, that reproduce the author's hunger for immortality. "¿De dónde ha nacido el arte?" asks one of the characters in Amor y pedagogia, and replies "de la sed de inmortalidad."32 Unamuno's anti-realism inevitably leads to an introspective procedure which makes it a natural consequence that the characters be subjective creations, but he defends himself against the accusation that his characters are mere projections of himself with the distinction that they are not himself but are drawn from his inner reality, which is manifold.33 An important development of this method of creating the character from the author's inner consciousness, a tendency carried to its extreme in Abel Sánchez,34 is the production of a type of deformed, abnormal being.35 The figures who people the nícolas are

32 Amor y pedagogia, p. 176.
33 Prologue to Tres novelas ejemplares.
34 Prologue to Abel Sánchez: "En mi novela Abel Sánchez intenté escarbar en ciertos sótanos y escondrijos del corazón, en ciertas catacumbas del alma, adonde no gustan descender los más de los mortales."
almost invariably virtual psychopathic cases, among them notably Augusto Pérez with his metaphysical disease; Joaquin Monegro,\textsuperscript{36} consumed by the malady of jealousy, a patent case of morbid inferiority complex; and Tía Tula\textsuperscript{37} and Raquel,\textsuperscript{38} virtual monsters by reason of sexual repression.

This interest in the subconscious motives of human action, especially in regard to the question of sex, brings the nivola perilously near that naturalism that Unamuno abhors as oviparous art, a note which is heightened by the sense of fate which dominates these works. Almost all of the characters end in death, most of them as suicides, for suicide may also be an act of will, says Unamuno, the will not to be, which is just as positive as the will to be.\textsuperscript{39} Suicidal is the end even of the protagonists of Niebla and Amor y pedagogía, which contain a distinctive humorous element generally lacking in the other works.\textsuperscript{40}

The theory of the self-evolving plot and character, moreover, is not demonstrated as practicable by Unamuno, for the element of fate imposes on the nivolas an almost uniform development. This is well illustrated by the case of Ramón Nonnato\textsuperscript{41} who was born with suicide in his soul, the author tells us, because his mother died in childbirth, and who completes the inevitable course of his life by committing suicide at the close of the story. The evolution of the character, and attendant plot, is not independent of the author, but is predetermined from the very outset. But in this connection it must be borne in mind that the conception of objectivity is for Unamuno the greatest fallacy in art. All art, he maintains, is the personal expression of the author, and therefore is essentially autobiographic.\textsuperscript{42} The character is thus

\textsuperscript{36}Abel Sánche.
\textsuperscript{37}La tía Tula.
\textsuperscript{38}“Dos madres,” in Tres novelas ejemplares.
\textsuperscript{39}Prologue to Tres novelas ejemplares: “Hay héroes del querer no ser.”
\textsuperscript{40}An exception is “Un pobre hombre rico o El sentimiento cómico de la vida,” in San Manuel bueno, mártir, y tres historias más, where Unamuno takes cognizance of the prevalence of suicides in his novels (p. 260): “Y ahora, mis lectores, los que han leído antes mi Amor y pedagogía y mi Niebla y mis otras novelas y cuentos, recordando que todos los protagonistas de ellos ... se murieron o se mataron—y un jesuita ha llegado a decir que soy un inductor al suicidio—, se preguntarán cómo acabó Emeterio Alfonso. Pero estos hombres así, a lo Emeterio Alfonso ... no se matan ni se mueren.”
\textsuperscript{41}“Ramón Nonnato, suicida,” in El espejo de la muerte.
\textsuperscript{42}“Comment on fait un roman,” loc. cit., p. 15: “Il me serait impossible d’écrire un roman que ne serait pas autobiographique ... Tout être de fiction, tout personnage poétique, que crée un auteur, fait partie de l’auteur même.”
independent only in the sense that it is an idealized aspect of the author’s vitality, liberated into an idealized existence where it really lives, but it is always subject to the inherent nature of the author who creates it and whose nature it bears. In creating a character the author is merely heightening his own self-consciousness, for the purpose of art, says Unamuno, is “to discover oneself, so as to live in oneself, to be himself.” The question of the independent existence of the character is, in short, the question of free will and divine will. Unamuno creates his personages as God creates man, thinking them into an existence in which their autonomous will permits them to doubt the existence of their creator and even to defy him. But all those qualities the character possesses, even the doubt of his own and his creator’s existence, are qualities transferred from his author, who doubts his own existence and that of his creator. And, hence, in turn, that tragic doubt which besets Unamuno is the doubt which besets God: “God is silent! That is the basis of the universal tragedy: God is silent, and he is silent because he is an atheist!”

Whatever the intrinsic merits of the nivolas, viewed from a historical aspect they possess undoubted importance. The hostility to literary art, reflected in the reduction of style and plot to sober essentials, lays the groundwork for a constructive regeneration of the novel. The anti-realistic theme gives a definite impetus to a trend that originates in the modern novel with the spiritual phase of Galdós, and continues up to the present day with the stream of consciousness novels of Jarnés. Niebla stands in a direct line of development from Realidad to Escenas junto a la muerte.

L. Livingstone

Brown University

43 El espejo de la muerte, p. 19: “... afin de se découvrir, afin de vivre en soi, d’être lui-même.”
44 Ibid., p. 27: “Et Dieu se tait! Voilà le fond de la tragédie universelle; Dieu se tait, et il se tait parce qu’il est athée!”
46 It should be noted that with Jarnés the opposition to realism is on aesthetic, not metaphysical, grounds; cf. “Bajo el signo de Cáncer” (Nota preliminar), in Teoría del sueño, p. 12: “Las cosas que vemos, apenas pueden actuar estéticamente sobre nosotros. Su papel se limita al de despertadores... El mundo nos ciega con su cruda refulgencia.”