UNAMUNO AND LA PEAU DE CHAGRIN

The slow ebbing away of life, recorded by the barometer of Balzac's Peau de Chagrin, exercised a great fascination on the Unamuno who was tormented by desire for immortality. He himself tells us that it was during the terrible agony of his exile in Paris that he devoured this book, cuyo argumento conocía with a growing anguish.¹ And it is that very book which Jugo de la Raza, the hero of Unamuno's projected novel, picks up while browsing among the book-stalls of the Seine. The novel becomes to Jugo de la Raza what the actual peau de chagrin was to Rafaël de Valentin: as soon as it is finished, he must die.

What most excited Unamuno's own imagination and compassion was Rafaël's death scene.² In his Agonia del Cristianismo Unamuno even translates Pauline's half-mad words to the old servant Jonathas who comes in to find the dead Rafaël in her arms.³ However the Spanish author refused to use this climax in the novel about Jugo de la Raza which was shaping itself in his mind in

³ OED. Something of the same idea appears in Murder in the Cathedral (New York, 1935):

Meanwhile the substance of our first act
Will be shadows, and the strife with shadows.
Heavier the interval than the consummation. (p. 23)

And Agatha, in The Family Reunion (New York, 1939), phrases it this way:

The young feel tired at the end of an action,—
The old, at the beginning. (p. 102)

² La Peau de Chagrin, in Œuvres Complètes de H. de Balzac, Paris, Calmann Lévy, 1877, xv, 239-240.
France. *Que se las arregle solo, como pueda,* he says, *solo y solitario.*

Nevertheless, Unamuno must have been well acquainted with the French novel years before his exile, for consciously or subconsciously, the end of Balzac’s story determined the death scene in *Nada Menos Que Todo Un Hombre,* written in 1916. For example just as Pauline wishes to sacrifice her life to save her lover’s and screams: *Si je meurs, il vivra!* Alejandro, in despair over Julia’s fatal illness, cries: *Antes me moriré yo.* In the French work Rafaël, in a last surge of despair and desire, throws himself upon Pauline. Death comes in an embrace of love:

Enfin, ne pouvant bientôt plus former de sons, il mordit Pauline au sein. Jonathas se présenta, tout épouvanté des cris qu’il entendait, et tenta d’arracher à la jeune fille le cadavre, sur lequel elle s’était accroupie dans un coin.

The parallel in *Nada Menos Que Todo Un Hombre* shows how deeply the foregoing passage must have impressed itself on Unamuno’s mind:

... Empezó a besarla frenéticamente, por si la resucitaba, a llamarla, a decirle ternezas terribles al oído. Estaba fría. Cuando más tarde tuvieron que forzar la puerta de la alcoba mortuoria, encontráronlo abrazado a su mujer y blanco del frío último, desangrado y ensangrentado.

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