PALACIO VALDÉS' FIRST NOVEL

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DESPITE a recent flurry of new editions and an occasional study,[1] Armando Palacio Valdés' *opus* has reached that uncomfortable and rather stagnant stage of critical evaluation which esteems it an example of *aurea mediocritas* rather than one of scintillating brilliance. Critics tend to categorize Palacio Valdés' entire *opus* as an illustration of good-humored, albeit cautious, optimism, citing *José* and *La hermana San Sulpicio* as proof. In more than one instance, however, Palacio Valdés has shown himself to be quite the reverse of a smiling Pangloss, even indulging in a certain morbid curiosity for the unhealthy and unnatural in his characters.[2]

An excellent case in point is the Asturian's first novel, *El señorito Octavio* (Madrid, 1881), which has generated little critical interest, other than to declare it anticipates the more mature Palacio Valdés.[3] Despite its defects, Palacio Valdés' first novel also contains a surprising number of good things in it. I will emphasize, here, how the neophyte Palacio Valdés develops his major theme through the delineation of characters and the description of certain key scenes. This principal theme I call the contrast between *lo natural,* which at times attains a primitive quality, and *lo artificial,* which is defined in some cases as *lo cursi,* in others as decadence and degeneration.

El señorito Octavio is a "novela sin pensamiento trascendental," a subtitle, which appears only in the first edition and, inexplicably,

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[1] See *Tristán o el pesimismo,* ed. Mariano Baquero Goyanes (Madrid: Narcea, 1971); *José,* ed. Jorge Campos (Madrid: Cátedra, 1975); and Manuel Pascual Rodríguez, *Armando Palacio Valdés (Teoría y práctica novelística)* (Madrid: Sociedad General Española de Librería, 1976).

[2] Joaquín de Entrambasaguas, "Armando Palacio Valdés," *Las mejores novelas contemporáneas,* III (Barcelona: Planeta, 1958), 35.

[3] For example: José A. Balseiro, *Novelistas españoles modernos* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1933), p. 388.

in no other. This has been interpreted as an ironic comment on the Spanish *novela de tesis,* or *novela tendenciosa,* also called *filosófica* and *trascendental.*[4] Subtitles to the contrary, Palacio Valdés' work is not without ideas, for even he admits "la novela puede servir y ha servido siempre para un fin social."[5]

What is *El señorito Octavio* about? A somewhat effeminate, young bourgeois, el señorito Octavio, becomes enamored of the Countess Laura de Trevia, married to a cold-blooded, sadistic man of Italian origin (shades of the Borgias perhaps?). Laura, however, falls in love with the peasant Pedro, her husband's *mayordomo.* Their love affair is discovered by Octavio who, in revenge, sends an anonymous letter to the Count. The final scene takes place on a mountain peak: the Count, seeing Octavio there and not Pedro, who has fled after being warned by a now repentant Octavio, mistakes the *señorito* for the lover, shoots him and then kills his wife. He then pushes both bodies off the mountain to the Lake Ausente below.

Is it nothing more than a love story, a triangle? If so, then why does Palacio Valdés interject satire and humor in the midst of this melodrama? In large part, the failure to harmonize the love story, which is, after all, the chief interest of the novel, with the satire of customs, characters and politics, is responsible for the flawed structure of *El señorito Octavio.* The title denotes Octavio should be the hero, or protagonist, but, in reality, more attention is devoted to Laura, Pedro and their difficulties. More pointedly, Octavio is most often treated satirically and only in the end, inconsistently, seems to gain the stature of a hero. It is all most unconvincing.

Yet despite these defects, it is the obvious contrast in character delineation which leads one to suspect more than a mere love story. A good example is the señorito Octavio himself. Andrés González-Blanco has criticized his characterization and dialogue as "francamente cursi,"[6] but, in my view, that is the major point to be established about Octavio. He is a *figura cursi*: his very status as a

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[4] Entrambasaguas, p. 35.

[5] "Fernán-Caballero," *Semblanzas literarias,* in *Obras,* II (Madrid: Aguilar, 1965), 1171.

[6] *Armando Palacio Valdés* (Madrid: La Novela Corta, 1926), n. pag.

señorito makes him suspect.[7] He is described as somewhat effeminate, pseudoromantic, and inordinately interested in perfumes and women's fashions. He is, moreover, an intellectual and social snob, being acutely aware of social usages. He remarks that in addressing aristocrats, "no digas señor conde o señora condesa, sino conde o condesa simplemente. El señor antes del título lo dicen sólo los criados y dependientes de la casa o las personas inferiores que no se rozan con ellos en un pie de igualdad."[8] He is, however, ludicrously self-conscious and socially awkward during his first visit to the Trevia palace (Ch. III). Octavio sneers at the materialism and raw manners of country life and yearns for the social and intellectual *soirées* of Madrid. His clothing is fashionable, but only for a provincial; his bedroom décor is a mixture of good and bad taste (Ch. I); his handwriting is a "magnífica letra inglesa" (p. 63);[9] and even his *novia,* Carmen, is a *cursi* (p. 42). In sum, *lo artificial,* here, signifies *lo cursi,* or *lo pseudo.*

Lo artificial can also, however, be understood as *lo pervertido.* The Conde de Trevia is a sadist, whose refined cruelty is inflicted not only upon his wife but even upon defenseless animals (Ch. IV, XI). The Count is also effeminate, feline (p. 16). His mistress, Miss Florencia, cold-blooded and calculating, is a fit partner for him; and Palacio Valdés, appropriately, makes their moments together crudely melodramatic (Ch. XIV).

Laura and Pedro are the antithesis of Octavio, the Count, and Miss Florencia. Laura yearns for her lost youth; she likes simple, country pleasures and is often associated with flowers.[10] It is her passion for Pedro, who is depicted as a young hunter, noble and virile, which characterizes much of her behavior. Her lover is also impetuous, much dominated by his instincts and sometimes even violent.

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[7] Enrique Tierno Galván, "Aparición y desarrollo de nuevas perspectivas de valoración social en el siglo XIX: lo cursi," *Escritos (1950-1960)* (Madrid: Tecnos, 1971), pp. 176-78.

[8] *El señorito Octavio, Obras,* II (Madrid: Aguilar, 1965), p. 15. All subsequent references are cited within parentheses in text.

[9] "... cursi viene del adjetivo cursivo, caracterizador de un tipo de letra que durante nuestro siglo pasado se tendió a identificar con la inglesa" (Tierno Galván, p. 171).

[10] See pp. 29, 31, 33, 35, 65.

Two scenes, in particular, demonstrate Palacio Valdés' interest in *lo natural* as an expression of man's instinctual and even primitive nature. In Chapter VIII, Laura accompanies Pedro to a local *romería*. During the walk, they become increasingly intimate. The setting is, appropriately, aestival, pastoral. Laura's laughter is unconsciously and innocently bacchanalian (p. 60). Pedro's behavior is also revealing: with a stone, he splits a lizard in two because it seems to be spying on them and is an ally to witches.

While Pedro and Laura dance, the village sings a melancholy ballad of a *malmaridada*. "¡Ay, del marido pedida!," they sing, and: "¡Ay, bien qu'ora la castiga!," then, "¡Ay, que su amigo l'espera!" (pp. 62-63). The parallels are obvious, but the future lovers pay no heed. In the end, Laura awakes as though from a dream, they walk home through deepening shadows and a tunnel of trees, passing the broken remains of the lizard which are still reflected in the shining, trembling waters of the great silver serpent (p. 63). It is an extraordinary scene, reminiscent of medieval romances and Lorca's "La casada infiel" and conjugal dramas. Palacio Valdés fortunately does not comment on this last, almost magical moment, replete with its sexual symbolism of a smashed lizard, a serpentine river and a tunnel of trees.

Another scene of equally implied sensuality occurs in Chapter X, when Pedro, overcome by the heat of the summer and of his loins, goes night bathing in the river to cool his body and his thoughts: "Parecía el ruido de la sangre al invadir con ímpetu lugares donde nunca hubiese entrado" (p. 69). The bathing scene, again, recalls the obscure power of the blood and passion in Federico García Lorca. Contrast Pedro's pure animal instincts with Octavio's pretentious and overly literary love letters to Laura in Chapter XII. Or juxtapose the country dance between Laura and Pedro with the more elegant, artificial one set in a magnificent and brightly lit salon and accompanied by a Strauss waltz which Octavio dreams of in Chapter IX.

The final, melodramatic scene between Laura and Pedro in Chapter XVI is autumnal but disquieting. Climbing a mountain, the lovers, like two specters, pass through a cloud of mist. The earth is far away; all is sky and more sky. For the first time, though, Laura is perturbed over her adultery, but Pedro replies: "Yo no sé si es

malo o bueno lo que estamos haciendo" (p. 97). Palacio Valdés seems to leave the question at that. The Count's brutal murder of the presumed lovers afterward could, I suppose, be interpreted as a condemnation of their conduct, but given his dissolute, revengeful character and his misinterpretation of events, this seems doubtful. The scene, moreover, with its lyrical and melodramatic overtones, recalls once more medieval romances and even the early Lope play, *Los Comendadores de Córdoba.*

In sum, Palacio Valdés treats *lo artificial* in one of two ways: he either satirizes it as *lo cursi* (Octavio) or melodramatizes it as *lo degenerado* (the Conde de Trevia). *Lo natural* also comes under this curious "binomial distribution": it is either made lyrical or melodramatic. "Natural" scenes and chapters (Laura and Pedro's mo-- ments) alternate with "artificial" scenes and chapters (the Count and his mistress; Octavio's lovemaking). "Natural" characters are contrasted with "artificial" characters. All Palacio Valdés' sympathy inclines clearly toward *lo natural,* toward the unfortunate lovers, toward passion and instinct. Was this his intent? His unfavorable reception of *lo artificial* and the lyrical-melodramatic ambience of irreality surrounding the lovers reflect what may be termed an unstated, implied thesis. If so, then Palacio Valdés' first novel is far more radical than most of his subsequent work, which often exudes a kind of cloying, middle-class morality. Why Palacio Valdés, something of a palinodist in later life, retreated from the position of this first novel constitutes another question in itself.

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