

One of 19th-Century Europe's Best Kept Secrets: The Renaissance of the Spanish Novel

Henry Thurston-Griswold

As the title of this essay suggests, my purpose in writing this text is to make public a “secret” which has been kept for far too long: namely, that the novel made an auspicious reappearance in Spanish letters in the 19th century following a hiatus of nearly two centuries, and that Spanish novelists during the last two decades of that century and the first two decades of the 20th century penned works of prose fiction which rival those of their much more famous counterparts in England, France, Germany, and Russia. Since my primary target audience is English-speaking North Americans, I will grudgingly concede the favored status enjoyed by British authors such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Oscar Wilde due to the linguistic and cultural heritage that we share. How can one explain, however, the almost total ignorance of 19th-century Spanish novelists here in the United States in comparison with other “foreign” European writers? (Stay tuned, all you lovers of conspiracy theories!) The enormous Hispanic presence in this country would appear to offer Spanish authors a clear advantage, but the current

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status of Spanish as the unofficial second language of the United States has done little or nothing to promote familiarity with some of the most distinguished artists of the Spanish language.

I began my Bookend Seminar on this topic by testing the underlying assumption that well-educated people from non-Hispanic cultures — Hispanists of course excepted — are blissfully unaware of the resurgence of the Spanish novel during the second half of the 19th century. Since the latest classroom instructional technology on Juniata’s campus, the Classroom Performance System (reportedly dubbed the Virtual Handraising System by Provost Lakso), was unavailable in Good 202, we used the old-fashioned actual reality system of a show of hands after each PowerPoint slide which contained a somewhat flattering effigy, the author’s name, and vital statistics (i.e., date of birth and of death). The results confirmed the hypothesis, which at least partially validated my topic and justified continuing my esoteric presentation. The reader is now invited to take the same self-test, which asks you to indicate your familiarity with the following European novelists. Familiarity is defined for the purpose of this assessment as having some basic knowledge of the major works and literary styles of said authors, so that one can lean back and sagely affirm: “Ah, *Madame Bovary*, what a dispassionately exquisite indictment of the decadent French bourgeoisie!” If the two Spanish authors are not included among the three authors with whom you are the least familiar, you may jump to the conclusion of this essay. If you cannot identify which of the authors are Spanish, keep on reading, and after you finish, talk to any erudite bookworm friend or acquaintance and ask him or her for two titles for each author to add to your leisure reading list.

Without further ado, the seven samurai of late 19th- and early 20th-century, non-British European narrative fiction are:

- Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880)
- Anton Chekhov (1860-1904)
- Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)
- Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936)
- Emile Zola (1840-1902)
- Thomas Mann (1875-1955)
- Benito Pérez Galdós (1843-1920)

I know, you’re probably saying to yourself right now: “Benito Who?” In addition to being the namesake of Mussolini, Galdós is

generally ranked second only to Miguel de Cervantes among Spanish novelists. In a literary career which spanned nearly five decades, Galdós published 77 novels and 22 plays. Included among his novels are the five series of *National Episodes* (46 novels), which paint a sweeping literary canvas of Spanish history during the 19th century, starting with the Battle of Trafalgar against the British in 1805 and ending in the late 1880s with his literary portrait of Antonio Cánovas del Castillo, the politician who engineered the restoration of the Spanish monarchy. Achieving even greater critical acclaim are the 24 *Contemporary Novels*, which are described by George Becker, an authority on European realism, as “a single sprawling work given over to the depiction of life in Madrid during a period of about thirty years.... His novels have a cohesiveness that is more convincing than that provided by the analytical structure of the Rougon-Macquart [Zola’s novelistic series] or by the forced unity of [Balzac’s] *La Comédie Humaine*.” (247) *Fortunata and Jacinta*, published in 1886-87 and considered Galdós’s masterpiece by most critics, is a novel that possesses the dimensions of *War and Peace*, and, with its cast of hundreds, captures the complexity and richness of life in Spain’s capital during that time period. As Becker declares in the opening sentence of his study of Galdós: “Any conception of literary realism that cannot accommodate Galdós should be abandoned as incomplete, for though elusive and unconventional as a novelist, he gives the impression of seizing reality entire.” (239)

Like Galdós, Unamuno was remarkably prolific. Proficient in twelve languages, ranging from his native Basque and the ancient Greek which he imparted at the University of Salamanca, to the Danish that he taught himself in order to be able to read Kierkegaard in the original, Unamuno is acclaimed as one of Spain’s intellectual and literary giants. He cultivated all the literary forms — novel, short story, drama, essay, and poetry. During my sabbatical in Spain during the spring of 2001, I devoted nearly six weeks to the study of Unamuno’s works written solely between the years 1890 and 1905, excluding the two novels and two canonical collections of essays, *En torno al casticismo* and *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*, which I had previously read. This period coincides with the beginning of Unamuno’s teaching career at the University of Salamanca, his marriage and parenting of nine children, and his election to the position of rector (president) of the University of Salamanca in 1900, at the age of 36. To give some idea of

the encyclopedic breadth encompassed by Unamuno's published articles during this period, which generated 109 pages of single-spaced typed notes for my research files, he examined such diverse topics as ancient civilizations, philosophy, religion, modern literatures, linguistics, education, politics, economics, agrarian policy, and life insurance.

This cursory enumeration of the credentials of two seminal figures, who are not exceptions to the rule — in fact, Unamuno is not even considered the foremost novelist of his literary generation — should suffice to give some idea of the quantity and the quality of Spanish novelistic production by the 1880s. How, then, can we explain Spain's near invisibility in the late 19th- and early 20th-century literary canon? A brief look at modern European history will shed light on the causes of the (in some cases malign) disregard of Spanish narrative fiction. My basic contention here is that the primary causes are ideologically rather than aesthetically based, hence my earlier reference to conspiracy theories.

The Imperial Spain of the 16th and early 17th centuries was the envy of Europe: the sun never set on the Spanish empire, which included colonial possessions in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, while incorporating the extensive territories controlled by the Hapsburg dynasty in Europe. Part of the price that Spain had to pay for its imperial success was the creation and dissemination of the so-called Black Legend — Spain as the fanatical and intolerant country of the Inquisition, political rhetoric reminiscent of Ronald Reagan's Evil Empire or George W. Bush's Axis of Evil. My intention is not to serve as an apologist for Spain's imperial abuses of power, but simply to point out that Spain was no more cruel or intolerant than the British, French, or Portuguese in its treatment of the Jews and of the indigenous peoples that it subjugated. England and France had expelled the Jews two centuries before the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, signed the edict of expulsion in 1492 (Marín 209), and the Spanish exploitation of indigenous groups in the Americas pales in comparison to the genocide perpetrated by the British and the United States in North America. Still, the political propaganda was largely successful in marginalizing Spain from the rest of Europe and in casting the country as the barbaric and uncultured Other, as reflected in the oft-repeated axiom that “Africa begins on the other side of the Pyrenees.”

For a variety of reasons, not the least among them the expulsion of the Jews and the Moors, Spain was unable to capitalize on the

tremendous natural and human resources that it possessed and failed to administer effectively its vast colonial empire. By the 19th century, it had become a third-rate power that lagged far behind the British and the French both economically and politically. Spain and France in particular maintained a love-hate relationship which doubtless affected France's reception of Spanish cultural production. Following the death in 1700 of the childless Hapsburg king, Charles II, a war of succession ensued in which the French Bourbon dynasty ascended to the Spanish throne under Philip V, the grandson of Louis XIV of France. Despite cordial relations throughout the 18th century and the military alliance between France and Spain against the British at the beginning of the 19th century, Napoleon's imperialist invasion of Spain in 1808 and the subsequent French occupation until 1814 drove a major wedge between these Latin neighbors. Paris had become the cultural capital of the "western" world by the middle of the 19th century, and in order to enjoy international prestige, all roads for artists led to France and required the Parisian stamp of approval. The Russian novel, for example, received enthusiastic acclaim from the French, who viewed it as a worthy emulation of the French narrative legacy of Balzac and Flaubert, but Spanish novels written by the likes of Galdós, Juan Valera, Emilia Pardo Bazán, and later novelists such as Unamuno, Pío Baroja, and Ramón del Valle Inclán, were accorded scant attention and tepid praise, a fact that was often lamented by the writers in question.

Whereas 19th-century Spanish novels were generally dismissed out of hand by a cosmopolitan Parisian elite as the inferior fruits of a retrograde society, the lack of novelistic production in Spain prior to the 1870s does merit comment, particularly when one considers the key role that Spanish writers played in the development of the modern European novel. After all, the anonymous publication in Spain of the first picaresque novel, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, in 1554, signaled a rich new vein to be explored in fiction, the seamier side of life as experienced and narrated by the *pícaro*, the lad of many masters, and it rapidly spawned numerous imitations in other European countries. A half century later, Cervantes published the first part of *Don Quixote* (1605), a masterpiece which many critics consider to be the first modern European novel. As one Hispanist has stated: "Professionals of literature, and that includes both writers and critics, consider *Don Quixote* at the center of the history of the novel.

The second-best-selling book in history, it includes and sums up everything that went before it, and it contains the germ of everything that's come along since.” (Johnson 19) Given the major impact of these and other novels during the 16th and 17th centuries, how can we explain the dearth of Spanish novels from the late 17th century until the mid-19th century?

As the title of Terry Eagleton's book *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* indicates, ideology and aesthetics cannot be neatly separated; aesthetic formulations are not free from ideological bias and serve either to support or contest the powerful who rule a given society. The novel was a particularly effective genre for expressing social and political satire, to which the picaresque novel in particular lent itself, so it should come as no surprise that the Church and the State, working hand in glove, moved to squelch any critique of their governance. The first official Index of Prohibited Books, also known as the Tridentine Index, was issued in 1564 at the Council of Trent. It compiled ten rules governing the printing, publishing, and reading of books, and decreed that no heretical or obscene books were to be published (Green 134). This censorship enforced by the Church became so extensive that the distribution and sale of many novels was effectively banned in Spain during the 17th and 18th centuries, since they were viewed ideologically as a dangerous vehicle for the expression of immoral and subversive ideas.

The neoclassical precepts of the European Enlightenment, grounded in classical treatises such as Aristotle's *Poetics*, also contribute to the low esteem in which the novelistic genre is held during the 18th century. During this “Age of Reason” the novel is considered a degenerate form of epic poetry with little to offer, since it does not figure in Aristotle's authoritative classification of literary forms. The classical period had placed the tragedy at the aesthetic pinnacle, and 18th-century neoclassicists followed suit, although the essay also blossomed during this period in which rationalism ruled. In short, there was little literary prestige attached to the novel in Europe during the eighteenth century, and the barriers to publication and distribution in Spain greatly diminished the cultivation of the genre until the 1830s.

External and internal conflicts experienced by Spain during the 19th century also had an adverse impact on the country's economic, political, and cultural development. The century begins and ends

with wars against Napoleon's imperial army (1808-14) and the fledgling Yankee colossus (1898), while in the interim Spain suffers a series of internal conflicts which greatly weaken the country and divert energy and resources from more productive enterprises. These conflicts include: struggles for emancipation which led to the independence of the vast majority of Spain's American colonial empire (1821-24), and later the loss of Spain's remaining American colonies following Cuba's final revolt in the 1890s and the Spanish American War of 1898; a series of civil wars known as the Carlist Wars (1833-40, 1846-49, 1872-76) between the supporters of traditionalist absolutism and those who favored reforms and more representative systems of government; and the Revolution of 1868, which ousted the Bourbon monarch, Isabella II, and gave birth to the short-lived First Republic (1873-74), but which failed due to internal divisions among reformers and the external opposition of traditionalists. A telling statistic which reveals the extreme instability of the century is that during the 25-year reign of Isabella II (1843-68), there were 60 changes of government. Such political chaos could not help but exert a negative influence on the cultivation of literature in general and of the novel in particular, contributing substantially to Spain's literary lagging behind the rest of Western Europe.

In the meantime, the novel began to enjoy increased popularity in Europe during the early 19th century, as manifested by the success of such writers as Viscount Francois René de Chateaubriand and Sir Walter Scott. Although there were almost no Spanish novels published during the first three decades of the 19th century, translations of primarily French and British romantic novels became popular among the still small Spanish reading public. Of the aforementioned authors alone, 46 works of the former and 40 of the latter were translated to Spanish and published prior to 1833. (Rodríguez Marín 12-13) The year 1833 is key for the rebirth of the Spanish novel. This year marks the death of Ferdinand VII, who had earned the nickname of the "Tyrant King." Following his death, the return of exiled intellectuals and writers who had opposed his oppressive regime and advocated greater freedom of expression stimulated the cultivation of Spanish historical novels in the romantic style, which had been the rage in the rest of Europe since the beginning of the century.

The growth and prominence of the novel in 19th-century Europe is closely tied to its identification with the emergent middle class

that arises from the industrial revolution. During the latter half of the 19th century, the novel expresses the collective hopes, fears, and dreams of the middle class, which constitutes both the primary reading public and eventually the bulk of its authors. The process is delayed in Spain due to the country's underdevelopment, but by the last three decades of the century, the growth of the middle class and increased literacy have created a larger market for novels. Demographic statistics attest to the dramatic change that takes place in Spanish readership during the 19th century, despite the adverse consequences of the political conflicts examined above. Spain's population grows from slightly more than 10 million to approximately 18 million inhabitants between 1797 and 1897, during which time the literacy rate increases from 6% to 40%. This translates into a growth of the reading public from 600,000 to more than 7 million during the course of the 19th century (Rodríguez Marín 80), a development that, in conjunction with the relative political and social stability achieved by the restoration of the monarchy in 1875, creates the conditions in which the Spanish novel can flourish.

The increased publication of novels in Spain coincides with the aesthetic triumph of the realist narrative mode in Europe. The realist novel is defined by its theoreticians as a human document that represents a slice of life. The objectivity of the narrative perspective is essential to produce a faithful imitation or precise copy of the real. The here and now of the middle class serves as the primary setting and subject matter of the novel, while materialist positivism and scientific empiricism provide the philosophical framework for the novelist's conception of reality. The deterministic doctrines of Emile Zola constitute the extreme case of the application of the scientific method to prose fiction. In his essay *The Experimental Novel*, published in 1880, Zola postulates the deterministic influence of race (biology), environment, and the historical moment in shaping human destinies, and he calls on his fellow novelists to adopt the objective rigor of scientists in the observation and fictional experimentation of their narratives.

Galdós is unquestionably the key figure in the development of the Spanish realist novel, and as C. P. Snow has asserted in his comparative analysis of eight European authors ranging from Stendhal to Proust, Galdós "was a great novelist, of the same kind, and of the same stature, as others in this collection. He can be compared with

Balzac, and not be diminished by the comparison. That may sound like an overstatement, but it is deliberately made. We ought to realize what we have lost by not reading him.” (217) It should be noted that neither Becker nor Snow, the authors of the comparative studies cited in this text, are Hispanists, affording them a degree of impartiality that I as an ardent Hispanist cannot claim. In addition, they both discovered Galdós late in their studies of literary realism, after years of reading the novels of the acknowledged European masters, and yet they both accord him a place of distinction among such select company. Galdós’s role in the renaissance of the Spanish novel is absolutely fundamental, and from the publication of his first novel in 1870 until the end of the century, the aesthetic trajectory of his novels blazes the trail for other Spanish novelists and enables Spain to regain the lost ground occasioned by nearly two centuries of neglect of the novelistic genre.

While Galdós helps Spain to make up lost ground, Unamuno’s oeuvre positions Spain in the literary vanguard of Europe. As can be seen in Galdós’s own aesthetic evolution, the novel moves during the last decade of the 19th century from a primary focus on the external factors that condition human behavior to a growing preoccupation with the internal workings of the human psyche. In Spain the critical labels of spiritualist, idealist, and psychological novels testify to an increasingly subjective conception of narrative fiction, as well as the conviction that the novel can serve as a means of attaining superior knowledge through its probing of the human mind and soul. Unamuno himself defines the novel as an intimate drama, and in good Nietzschean fashion, rejects materialist determinism and affirms the primordial role of the individual will to achieve immortality.

In his novel *Abel Sánchez* (1917), it is striking how completely realist narration and description of place, character, and action have been eliminated. In the novel, Unamuno appropriates the archetypal figures of Cain and Abel to symbolically reflect the profound divisions in Spanish society, but he does so by means of the very personal struggle of the protagonist, Joaquín (Cain), against the vice of envy which threatens to consume him. External action and description are kept to a bare minimum, and the drama takes place in the tortured mind of Joaquín, through both first- and third-person narration that privileges the narrative perspective of the “evil” Cain. In his earlier groundbreaking novel, *Niebla* (*Mist*), published in 1914, Unamuno proclaims his

artistic freedom from literary conventions by baptizing his narrative a *nivola* rather than a *novela* (novel). His protagonist, Augusto Pérez, anticipates the prototypical existentialist struggle for meaning and purpose, and Augusto's challenge to his creator's authority by refusing to die when his author, Don Miguel de Unamuno, has decreed his demise, prefigures Nobel Laureate Luigi Pirandello's acclaimed *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, published seven years later in 1921.

There is a tongue-in-cheek saying in Spanish: “*Después de Cervantes, nadie. Y después de Nadie, Pérez Galdós.*” (After Cervantes, no one. And after No One, Pérez Galdós.) Within the span of half a century, starting in 1830, the 19th-century Spanish novel was resurrected from a pauper's grave and ascended to the throne of Spanish letters. During the four decades that followed, it not only made up lost ground with respect to the rest of Europe, but came to play an innovative role in the aesthetic trajectory of European fiction during the early twentieth century. Although it was largely ignored by its European contemporaries and continues to suffer from relative neglect today, its undeniable artistic quality merits serious critical consideration. As recently as the late 1970s, only two of Galdós's 77 novels were available in English, and Galdós studies in Spain were greatly hampered by the censorship of the Franco regime. A recent search of amazon.com's web site indicates that 12 Galdós novels are now readily available in English translation, and most of Unamuno's fictional works have been translated to English, as well as many of his philosophical and political writings. In closing, I invite adventurous readers to sample and savor the dynamic slice of Spanish life offered in the narrative fiction of authors like Galdós and Unamuno, and to join me in dispelling the secrecy surrounding the 19th-century renaissance of the Spanish novel.



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