El mundo es actual
Pío Baroja

20 Pío Baroja: El mundo es actual

Critical Guides to Spanish Texts

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Prefatory Note
sustained itself by its claim to follow the systematic and disciplined approach of science. But in the late nineteenth century the enthusiasm for science waned sharply: indeed it is no exaggeration to talk of a widespread collapse of confidence in the ability of science to offer satisfactory explanations of the questions that mattered most to man. The rapid decline of scientific rationalism had a deep impact on the world of the novel. "The very fact that naturalism had declared itself so unequivocally made its position untenable when the scientific substructure collapsed, and quickly led to the discrediting of the realist idea in general in so far as it depended on external philosophical support."

But although the naturalistic brand of realism became rapidly discredited, realism itself was too deeply embedded in Western culture, counting too many great names among its followers—Stendhal, Balzac, Tolstoy—for the idea itself to be denounced. No writer would wish his work to be labelled unreal. What took place at the turn of the century was therefore not an abandonment of realism but its transformation; it was the nineteenth-century approach to fiction that was abandoned, not the idea of realism itself. Thus we find many novelists of the first half of the twentieth century claiming to be realists even though their approach is markedly different from that of nineteenth-century novelists.

It has become fashionable in some quarters to view the work of the new writers at the beginning of the century as a response to social and economic factors, but such an interpretation is incapable of accounting for many of the characteristics of this new literature. The crucial factors were philosophical and artistic rather than social or economic. Nineteenth-century realism was simply a convention of novel writing whose elasticity allowed for different approaches and styles. But it was built on the assumption that there existed an objective reality outside and independent of the work of art which the novelist could aspire to some measure to study and reproduce. Although few nineteenth-century novelists would accept that they were doing nothing more than copying reality, one can at any rate say that realism arose out of a belief in the evident truth of the external world. It is this belief that was questioned and even rejected at the turn of the century. The philosophy of Kant, given a new lease of life by Schopenhauer, was revived: objective reality is unknowable since the human mind acts as a filter imposing its own structures on the objects it perceives through the senses, thus conditioning our entire knowledge of the external world. We cannot in point of fact know things directly; we always and necessarily see things through the distorting mechanism of the mind. There is no world independent of our senses; what we believe to be objective reality is only subjective reality: I see things not as they really exist but as my mind tells me they exist. The only authentic reality therefore is within and not without. Twentieth-century novelists implicitly, sometimes even explicitly, repudiate an approach to fiction which is posited on an objective concept of reality and replace this with an approach in which the reality depicted is seen as the creation of the artist's consciousness. The new novelists do not reject realism, nor do they reject the world; they merely reject a realism limited to the material world. They would claim that they have achieved a more genuine vision of reality: "What all the moderns have in common—perhaps the only thing they have in common—is an insistence on the fact that what previous generations had taken for the world was only the world seen through the spectacles of habit."

To understand the nature of the change that occurs in the art of novel writing at the turn of the century it is vital to recognize that the course of fiction is altered by a new vision of experience: the world may still be there, but it is no longer seen with the same eyes. It is the changing mode of our perception of the world that lies at the root of the new novel. Twentieth-century novelists are no longer content to see the novel as a realistic representation of life—things are no longer as they seem. There is a radical insecurity in man's perception of the world, and this leads novelists to question the basis of their art and experiment with new techniques. For if the novel is no longer a representation or an exploration of an objective reality, then what is it? For many writers the newly-found freedom from the— for them—

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3 Damian Grant, Realism, The Critical Idiom, IX (London, 1979), p. 44. This succinct study is the most lucid exposition I know of the whole question of nineteenth-century realism and its transformation in the twentieth century.

straitjacket of the nineteenth-century realistic formula is a source not of rejoicing but of anxiety. They have to find a new justification for their art, and this is far from easy, given that "the subjective experience ... is the only objective experience". For if anything I care to write is acceptable, then why write at all? Why is what I write important or meaningful if I could have written a thousand other things instead? Indeed it has been said that "a complete realism is indistinguishable from a complete solipsism, since I am not an object in the world but the limits of my world" (Josipovici, *The World and the Book*, p. 312). But the best writers steer clear of solipsism, that is, of the belief that the self is all one can know, though the surrealists do not always manage to avoid the danger. The problem of the expression of reality is an urgent and pressing one for the twentieth-century novelist, and the technical innovation and experimental unorthodoxy that characterizes the work of almost every major novelist of the Western world in this century is but a search for a formula that will imbue the work with a coherent concept of its own nature, that will justify its existence. The question 'why?' turns into the question 'how?'. How can I as a creative writer best convey to my readers my own concept of the truth, of reality? The message becomes dependent on the medium to such an extent that the two are often indistinguishable, or to put it another way, the novel becomes an exploration of its own possibilities as an art-form. Indeed it is no exaggeration to say that the fictional world becomes more complex and ambiguous than the real one, not only because it is not just a supposed reproduction of a pre-existing reality, but also because it has become a mode of perception rather than an object perceived. A new contract is established between the novelist and the world: reality is still there, but not for the taking; it has to be created, because what counts now is not what

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*The twentieth-century novel*

one sees, but how one sees it. Malcolm Bradbury explains it this way:

The novel — and realism — as Trilling defines these things, do not die out in our century. But they are qualified, and that is a reminder that realism is like reality — that is, not an absolute, but a mode of perception, which is subject both to historical change and to subjective interpretation. And novels tend to draw their notions of what is realistic from prevailing and influential views of what orders human experience. (The views of Darwin and the social determinists of early sociological thought lie behind naturalism; the views of Freud and Jung lie behind the realistic psychological novel, the novel of consciousness; the views of Heidegger and Sartre lie behind many of the modern novels which heighten realistic contingency into a philosophy of the absurd.) Certainly the novel does have an inevitable bias towards realism — because it uses the most literal of literary languages, prose; because it tends to emphasize the authenticity of individual and personal experience; because it tends to deal in human relationships; because it does not really have a predetermined form (as tragedy does) but can let the form emerge. But its realism can be expressed so variously that we can speak of realism as a changing attribute of the form, not as a definition of it.

The alleged crisis of the novel in the early part of this century — to which one frequently comes across references in histories of literature — is not a crisis of the novel at all but a crisis of how novels should be written. The whole crucial question of the nature and perception of reality, when transposed into the realm of fictional writing, is subsumed in the problem of form. A new view of reality necessitates a new medium for expressing that view, and the new medium, precisely because it is born out of a new concept of reality, is in turn conditioned by that concept. But the new concept of reality is one that stresses the validity of the individual consciousness, that is, of your or my or anyone's perception of the world. Thus, while a new approach to novel writing is everywhere advocated, there are as many different approaches as there are novelists: Conrad, Faulkner, Gide,
Hesse, Huxley, Joyce, Kafka, Lawrence, Mann, Sartre, Woolf – each one has his approach to the common problem of ‘how shall I write?’ Generalizations about the modern novel are therefore fraught with difficulties. But some attempt to understand the new fictional mode is essential if we are to approach Baroja – a product of the new generation of writers – in the right frame of mind. To study the modern novel, or any one of its many representatives, in the very terms of the nineteenth-century novel is to condemn oneself to superficiality and misconception from the start. We must abandon preconceived notions about such typically nineteenth-century values as plot, characterization, storyline, orderly exposition, climax, denouement and so on, if we are to give ourselves a chance of meeting twentieth-century fictional art on its own ground. At this juncture some generalizations are mandatory in order to place Baroja in the context to which he belongs.

Man’s conviction that there is a world, Schopenhauer points out, lies within his own consciousness. It can never be proved that objective existence is independent of human cognition. Many twentieth-century novelists, Schopenhauer’s view, have come to believe that the only real existence lies within an individual’s own consciousness. Events and objects in themselves cease to have any meaning; they are important only in so far as they are perceived by or have an effect upon a consciousness. The novelistic universe is not so much given as perceived by a character. And so it is that in many modern novels the reader finds himself peering all the time, in a manner that can sometimes become quite oppressive, into the consciousness of the central character. The extreme form is to be found in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, where we read the thoughts of the characters even before they have become normal speech. A more common reflection of the notion of seeing reality as the creation of a consciousness can be observed in one of Henry James’s favourite techniques, that of using the mind of one character as a “centre of consciousness” through which all events are reflected. James thus renders his story, as he says, “not as my own impersonal account of the affair in hand, but as my account of somebody’s impression of it”. In general terms it would be true to say that the modern novel deals not with events but with mental states. There is a strong interest in abnormal human types – the eccentric, the schizophrenic, the neurotic, the morbid, the perverse, the idiotic – and even normal beings tend to be seen from a pathological standpoint. Thus the emphasis on consciousness has carried with it a strong interest in personality.

The collapse of confidence in rationalism brings in its trail the abandonment of the idea that human beings behave rationally, or that their behaviour can always be explained. By and large the nineteenth-century novel reflects a stable world, with man in control of that world. Most things were orderly and predictable, including the behaviour of the characters, whose consequent rationality has been denounced in this century by André Gide as artificial (in *The Counterfeiters*). The behaviour of characters in the modern novel appears by contrast to be often surprising, inexplicable, contradictory, even pointless. The characters are restless, indecisive, moving from extreme self-assertion to gnawing self-doubt within a short space of time, an enigma to themselves no less than to the reader. At bottom lies the modern interest in personality. The nineteenth-century naturalists had portrayed the individual as being wholly determined by his background: it was the environment that formed personality. Twentieth-century writers on the other hand regard personality as something singular, unique, not so much predetermined as always in the making. The environment is still there, not as a formative influence but as one component of the world observed by the individual consciousness. It is much more a source of disconcertment than of illumination. Baffled and frustrated individuals are commonplace in the modern novel.

Individual experience in real life is of course a continuing process: it can never be complete; it can end only in the death of that particular individual consciousness. Twentieth-century novelists have tried to reflect this in their work by refusing to present a closed experience in the manner of the nineteenth-century novelist. A climax, a denouement, a well-rounded conclusion to a well-contained action, a resolution of themes, a satisfying end: these conventions come under a mounting attack
towards the end of the nineteenth century and they soon give way to quite contrary practices. In the modern novel the flux of consciousness ends in the experience of incompleteness; the new way is to present a disturbing, expanding, unfinished experience. This openness of experience is well illustrated by such novels as Gide's The Counterfeiters, Kafka's The Trial and Mann's The Magic Mountain. Life is seen as having no design, simply an open form, an endless process. Within the events of the novel, a protagonist will indeed often attempt to resolve experiences, but usually with no final result. Many twentieth-century novels fail to resolve the problems posed and are left by their authors in a state of irresolvable suspension. This deliberate avoidance of any final resolution in the depiction of an experience is a narrative device intended to reflect a philosophical position: the belief that experience cannot be closed. "'Might be continued' — these are the words with which I should like to finish The Counterfeiters," André Gide writes in his novel.

There can be no statement of completion in a world which is contingent rather than purposeful. The essential contingency of the world, with its concomitant moral and philosophical implications, is one of the major discoveries of the twentieth-century novel in terms of the impact which it has had on technique. Novellists have looked for different ways to order experience, ways which would avoid imposing a logical consistency and a causal relevance on the elements of that experience. For an individual, his existence is given, it is in no way necessary or logical: he simply has to accept the fact that he exists. In Sartre's La Naïve, the protagonist, Roquentin, puts it this way:

The essential thing is contingency. What I mean is that, by definition, existence is not necessity. To exist is simply to be there; those who exist appear, are encountered, but their existence could never be deduced. There are some people, I think,

"Hamer's sour refusal to make ends meet in his novels, and Conrad's appendices ('the end such as it is'), are moments in a gradual change in the temper of fiction which is clearly more than temperamental. In the twentieth century, fiction will create a new fable. It will soon be telling its readers that experience is unreduced and irreducible. The novel will soon not only refuse to be 'final', but insist on its right to be not even 'satisfying'" (Alan Friedman, The Turn of the Novel [Oxford, 1966], p. 195).

The twentieth-century novel who have understood that; but they have tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary being as their cause. No necessary being, however, can explain existence: contingency is not a mask, an appearance that can be dissipated; it is something that is absolute, and therefore perfectly gratuitous. Everything is gratuitous, those gardens, this town and I myself.

The view of existence as essentially contingent is reflected in the modern novel in the way the author puts his material together. The causally-linked plot, typical of the nineteenth-century novel, was the offspring of the concept of linear causation. By the end of the eighteenth century linear causation became the accepted method of explaining the relationship between sequential events, and it controlled systematic thinking in the physical sciences and in economics, something that can be observed in the new scientific and economic determinism that led in the nineteenth century to Darwinism and Marxism. Correspondingly, novelistic plots were organized according to the principle of linear causation, with the outcome seen as the inexorable result of the working of the machine set in motion by the author. The collapse of faith in scientific rationalism, the conviction that existence cannot be rationally explained, brings with it, in the realm of the novel, a change in the manner of plotting. Tightly-knit, causally-linked plots all but disappear. The emphasis is now on the accidental, the gratuitous, the farcical and even at times the downright absurd. In the search for what is purely contingent, the distinction between what is relevant and irrelevant is almost lost; because relevant or irrelevant to what? Since man is apparently not moving towards an intelligible goal, who can say what is relevant or irrelevant?

But a novel is a created world, and in art at least a world needs a creator, who will in the process of creation impose a pattern on the formless elements that constitute his raw material. Thus, while many twentieth-century novelists may reject the convention of the causally-linked plot where every part fits into another like the cog-wheels in a piece of machinery, they have needed to employ other principles of ordering. These have been

many. Instead of being held together by a scheme of logical development, many modern narratives have only the continuous presence of a central character as the source of cohesion. Myth and symbol as points of reference to guide the reader are also employed with some frequency. A new concept of time sometimes displaces conventional chronology, giving the novel an unfamiliar but perceivable pattern. Or there may be an intensification of the depiction of a character’s inner nature, thus affording the novel a psychological unity. Some authors—Huxley, Mann, Pérez de Ayala—have even attempted to transpose to the realm of the novel techniques used in musical composition. Thus, while many modern novels do not ‘tell a story’ in the traditional sense—and we are simply wasting our time if we read *Ulysses, To the Lighthouse, La Peste, La Nausée or a hundred and one other novels just for the story—they do at any rate offer some other principle or method of cohesion. Ultimately what has happened is we have moved from the nineteenth- to the twentieth-century novel is that one set of criteria has been replaced by another, though the new criteria have turned out to be rather more complex and difficult than the traditional ones.

The breakdown of the traditional concept of reality as something absolute and unchanging leads to a relativistic view of life that brings to the novel a wave of experimenting with perspective. Truth is not absolute but relative to the observer. Many novelists cease to offer us the truth and offer instead the view of a particular mind. The angle from which the narrative is presented becomes of paramount importance; but the narrative need not be limited to one angle: many different points of view can be employed, and this is a technique known as perspectivism, a technique on which the variations are legion. Joyce’s *Ulysses has the triple vision of Stephen Daedalus, Bloom and Molly, Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet uses a different perspective for each of the four constituent novels, Faulkner’s trilogy *The Village, The Town and The Mansion shares out the narrative among different characters none of whom can tell the complete truth of the case in question, while Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves presents the interior monologues of six different persons. In these and many other cases unilateral vision is replaced by a multi-dimensional, kaleidoscopic approach, and we the readers do not learn the truth but only differing versions of it. The technique of perspectivism may be seen as the expression of a world in which nothing seems solid, secure and enduring, a world threatened by a crisis of beliefs in many spheres, moral, social, political, and by the suspicion that one being may be unable to understand another. Just as Einstein taught us that our appreciation of the cosmos and of space and time is relative to our position in the universe, so the modern novelist contends that each individual’s view of the world, of society, of other people, is dictated by his own peculiar and unique constitution. Instead of solving the secret of an existence or the behaviour of a character as the traditional novelist was wont to do, the modern novelist prefers to emphasize the mysterious and incomprehensible sides of human existence and the difficulty of meaningful communication between beings. The use of multiple perspectives is one of the most effective tools that the modern novelist can use in order not only to express the insecurity of human perception but also to convey that sense of confusion, of disintegration, of isolation, of alienation in modern man.

The realization that man occupies a marginal and insignificant place in the universe, that seen on a cosmic scale he is nothing but an irrelevance, and that he is at the mercy of forces over which he has no control, has led many writers to adopt an intensely ironic view of the human situation. What is ironic is that one side of man persists in looking for meaning and purpose while another side of him declares that his search is futile. “The metaphysical principle of irony... resides in the contradictions within our nature and also in the contradictions within the universe or God. The ironic attitude implies that there is in things a basic contradiction, that is to say, from the point of view of our reason, a fundamental and irreducible absurdity.” The irresolvable tensions in modern man between reason and emotion, between freedom and discipline, between society and the individual, between the certainty of death and the biological will to live, between the huge increase in scientific knowledge and the realization that we are not one step nearer to providing satisfying

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answers to the most basic questions, lead to the adoption of an ironic detachment as a last line of defence. "For him who sees no possibility of reconciling such opposites the only alternative is irony: a sense of irony will not make him any the less a victim of these predicaments but will enable him in some degree to transcend them" (Muecke, p. 77).

But it is not merely man who is trapped; the novelist qua artist too is trapped by the constraints of his art. For a novel purports to deal with a truth, a reality. It may be a fiction, but while we are reading it we are asked to treat it 'as if' it were true. Yet a novelist can make his novel seem true only by referring to the world we all recognize. At the same time most twentieth-century writers subscribe to the symbolist view that art is an order beyond and outside life, that it can never be an interpretation of the world. The novelist is landed with an intractable problem: the world of his book can only be the world of his own creative consciousness; yet he aspires to communicate his vision to other beings. This necessity of having to present as in some way an objective truth something that is nothing but an artefact leads in many cases to the novelist viewing his creation ironically, and communicating that irony to the reader by reminding him during the course of his work that he is reading nothing but a verbal invention. This type of ironic novel, common in the twentieth century, though not unknown in the seventeenth and eighteenth, is "literature in which there is a constant dialectic interplay of objectivity and subjectivity, freedom and necessity, the appearance of life and the reality of art, the author immanent in every part of his work as its creative, vivifying principle and transcending his work as its objective 'presence' " (Muecke, p. 78).

The adoption of an ironic posture on the part of so many modern novelists strongly suggests that there exists a high degree of artistic self-doubt. In exploring a world that he regards as meaningless, the artist may easily come to doubt the meaning and purpose of his art. If life is a deception, then art may be an even greater deception. Life does not make sense to modern man, and yet within the realm of art it is given a type of meaning. The irony of art is that it is gratuitous, an order of beauty and meaning devised by man in a senseless universe. Most great artists

aspire to confront their age face to face and to convey its nature and complexities. But an irrational age puts the artist in an impossible position; irrationality cannot be communicated in a verbal construct except by making it in some way rational. The modern reply to this, if it is a reply at all, is that art is one thing and life another, and each is independent of the other. Nietzsche went further, and in his work The Will to Power: An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values, proclaimed that art was of more value than reality: "Art is the great means of making life possible, the great seducer to life, the great stimulus of life." This is echoed by a recent critic who proclaims the "artificality of the real and the reality of the artificial", and who asserts the "paradoxical notion that we can truly experience life only through art" 11. But such energetic affirmations of the superiority of art over life sound hollow. They fail to dispel the gnawing doubts about the validity of art: in a meaningless universe, can art be anything but meaningless? If he knows not how life functions, can the artist know how art functions? Is the artist's belief in creative art as a means of self-realization a mere illusion that hides the simple fact that his work is but one more useless way of spinning out the tedious thread of time? Nineteenth-century novelists, whatever their shortcomings, had at any rate felt confident about their art and conveyed this confidence to their readers. After the collapse of confidence in rationalism and the abandonment of its novelistic offspring – realism and naturalism – the art of the novel continues to flourish, but it flourishes in an atmosphere of insecurity, disorientation and self-doubt. 12

In Spain, the novelists who break with the nineteenth-century fictional mode are Unamuno, Valle-Inclán, Baroja, Azorín and

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Pérez de Ayala. They have more in common with those European writers mentioned earlier than they have with nineteenth-century Spanish writers. They are moved by the ambition to create a new type of fiction in which the external world will enter as one component rather than as the total substance. In their search for a fresh formula they strip the novel of its objective habits. They introduce philosophical ideas, poetic evocations, and the inner strivings of the self. The renovation of content is accompanied by a renovation of form, with the abandonment of the conventional causal plot and the adoption of techniques the variety of which is subsumed in the all-pervading question of the relationship of an author to his work.

Unamuno's fiction dramatizes his own anguished struggle between mind and heart, and even in those novels where this is not done in an overly metaphysical framework, the metaphysical implications are nevertheless still there. This is the case of such novels as Abel Sánchez and La tía Tula, the protagonists of which engage in a search for a personal identity or role in life that will in some way enable them to transcend the limitations and finality of material existence. For Unamuno the novel is an exploration of and a meditation on the spiritual condition of man. But this meditation, to be valuable, to be alive, must be deeply rooted in the writer's self. "Toda novela, toda obra de ficción, todo poema, cuando es vivo es autobiográfico", he declares. Unamuno projects his own problems, preoccupations and anxieties, his own storm-tossed image of himself, in such a way that his works convey a powerful impression of the creative consciousness behind them. His occasional capricious and burlesque insertions, for which he is sometimes criticized, can be seen on one plane as an ironic comment on man's situation and on another as an assertion of the essential irrationality of the artist's task. For if true art is nothing but autobiography, then there is no art.

Unamuno's views on the novel are in several respects strikingly similar to Baroja's. Both of them make the following points: that the plot of the novel ("el argumento") is immaterial; that the creation of existential beings is the important thing; that the polished, well-finished, neatly rounded-off novel is an inferior, lifeless product; that the novel should aspire to be like life itself, "organismo y no mecanismo" in Unamuno's words. It is interesting that both of these writers, whose products are seemingly so different, should appeal to life as the basis of their art and should react against the realistic art of the nineteenth century because they found it too mechanical. Clearly what these writers understand by 'life' in art is not the same as the nineteenth-century writers understood.

Valle-Inclán seems at first to be at the other extreme: that of rejecting life as the basis for art and advocating the beauty of art as an escape from the absurdity of existence. But Valle-Inclán's attitude is nothing like as simple as that. Even his early, 'aesthetic' work reveals an ironic view of the fictional characters and their world, a view that is by extension applicable not only to humanity but even to art itself: the hero of the Sonatas, for example, is deliberately made to adopt the pose of famous heroes from romantic fiction, so that the work rather than as an escape into a romantic dream-world can be seen as a parody of it, and therefore since the hero pretends to live in just such a world, as a parody of itself. Valle-Inclán's later work, built around the notion of esesperentismo, confirms that his art is much more existential than escapist, aiming at disturbing the reader rather than at providing artistic relief from the burdens of existence. The theory of esesperentismo (grotesque deformation) may be obscure and imprecise, but its practice leaves no doubt as to its significance: its distorting vision reflects perhaps better than any other literary phenomenon the breakdown of the traditional view of reality, a reality which it clearly invites the reader to re-assess. Valle-Inclán's novel Tirano Banderas is a masterpiece of esesperentismo in narrative fiction, in which the traditional unfolding action of narrative prose is replaced by a series of almost static frames each of which captures the characters in an absurd pose.

Fragmentation, incompleteness, suggestiveness, are the hallmarks of the novelesque world of Azorín, a highly personal world where real and fictitious planes meet in a tenuous framework of autobiography. In Azorín the narrative comes as close as possible to being static, as if the confrontation with reality produced a pained passivity in the observer, who can only stare, disconcerted. A marked quality of Azorín's narrative prose is its oscillation be-
The concept of creation is at the very core of Judaism. We start by seeing the idea of creation in its own creation. We then see how the idea of creation is enclosed in the fundamental concept of the beginning of man. This is a concept that goes beyond the boundaries of time and space, and which is the product of the creative act. The creative act, therefore, is the act of creation itself. The idea of creation is thus not just an idea, but an act.

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2. Baroja's development as a novelist up to El mundo es ansi

Together with Unamuno, Valle-Inclán and Antonio Machado, Baroja has passed into literary history as one of the four greatest literary creators that Spain has produced in this century. In Spain to-day he is generally regarded as the most important modern Spanish novelist after Galdós. If this is indeed so then he has been ill-served by scholars and critics, for the amount of serious critical study of his work is paltry in comparison with those of the other 'big three'. Baroja has certainly attracted a good deal of critical attention, but this has tended to be shallow and repetitious rather than illuminating, hostile or panegyric rather than dispassionate, anecdotal and descriptive rather than analytical, concerned with ideologies rather than with art. As a result we know comparatively little of how Baroja functions as an artist, and this leads to a certain amount of puzzlement on the part of teachers and students who have to make something of Baroja without the benefit of informed criticism as a guide. This is well illustrated by the following passage from a recent and distinguished work of literary historiography:

The reader of a typical Baroja novel has to abandon many of the principles by which he is accustomed to judge the excellence of prose fiction. The most important habit that has to be unlearnt is that of supposing that close reading of a novel, paying careful attention to the way things are said, will give a better understanding of its meaning and purpose than will a rapid and superficial perusal. The common idea that in a serious novel the characters and events are bound to signify something beyond their immediate relevance to the continuation of the narrative, and the common novelistic practice of using symbolic or allusive imagery in order to give body and feeling to the author's vision, are best forgotten when reading Baroja. Where such features exist, they seem to have crept in by accident, unknown to the author.13

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Imagination and reality, and the interplay between them, are thus the cornerstones of Baroja’s novelistic art, just as they are of the art of most great novelists of any age. And even this undogmatic formula hides wide fluctuations, for a few of Baroja’s novels are anodyne in their attachment to vulgar, everyday reality, while others are excessively novelesque.

The legitimate generalizations that can be made about Baroja’s art as a whole are few, but three aspects which are of importance will be mentioned here. The first point that needs to be made is that Baroja’s method is a very fluid one, and we encounter frequent changes in his approach as we move from novel to novel. There is certainly in all his work the indelible imprint of a strong mind with a particular vision of man and life, but there is no sustained application of a particular formula. Baroja himself realized this: “Un oficio en el cual no se emplea el metro es un oficio sin exactitud y sin seguridad. Ahora hay que reconocer que el oficio de novelista no tiene metro” (OC, IV, p. 324). This, then, is the first characteristic of Baroja the writer: his artistic eclecticism, his lack of a single, sustained aesthetic of the novel.

Baroja’s versatility — his frequent changes of theme and technique — and his theoretical writings, with their endless insistence that there is no one particular technique in novel-writing, are strongly indicative of a fundamental insecurity about the nature of his art. To some extent this is true of most writers of the time and is of course due to their break with tradition and to their attempts at expressing a new view of existence. But Baroja was perhaps the most insecure writer of them all. When he writes about his art he is a mass of contradictions: he advocates a human art, yet he admits that “la novela es quizá lo que no debe ser como la vida” (OC, IV, p. 317); he believes that a writer has to search for truth, yet confesses that “he mirado también la literatura como juego” (OC, IV, p. 308); he reduces his art to the formula of imagination-rooted-in-reality, but then goes on to acknowledge that “no sé si puedo llamarme realista ..., no sé lo que es la realidad” (OC, V, p. 414).

Anguished self-doubt is the second, and perhaps the dominant, characteristic of Baroja the artist, a characteristic that he infuses into the life of many of his characters, with their constant searchings, self-analyses and instability. Baroja is unsure of his role as a writer, of what he should write about and of how he should write it. His entire production is a sustained search for a more meaningful art. This is apparent not only in the tacit admission in his writings on the novel that he never found the right technique, but also in the disparity both of subject-matter and of technique between novels. One cannot explain the existence of such disparate works as Zalacain el aventurero, El árbol de la ciencia and El nocturno del hermano Beltrán — to name but three — unless one ascribes to the author a conscious desire to experiment and explore the possibilities of his art. There is also one other peculiar habit of Baroja that supports this view of him as a writer struggling with his art, and that is his use of the prologue as a justificatory or advisory device: in quite a number of novels the reader is confronted with a prologue which purports to tell him something, usually in an ironic, lighthearted or devious way, of the work he is about to read. Indeed Baroja seems to have been not just preoccupied with the question of how novels are written but veritably obsessed by it. When reading him it is sometimes difficult to avoid the suspicion that he is talking a secret language, and that when he writes about his characters and their problems he is cryptically referring to his role as a writer and to his struggles with his art.

The third major characteristic of Baroja the novelist is irony. Right from his very first book, the collection of short stories entitled Vidas sombrías (1900), the ironic comment, the mocking tone, the taste for paradox, make their presence felt and will continue to do so to the very end of his career as a novelist. There is irony, too, in Baroja’s attitude towards many of his characters, an attitude often characterized by a curious game of association...

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14 That he was preoccupied with the technique of the novel is explicitly stated by him, though the specific nature of this preoccupation is not explained: “Yo, desde hace tiempo, me he preocupado con esa técnica, no precisamente con la general, sino con la mía propia, y con la posibilidad de modificarla ya de perfeccionarla” (OC, IV, p. 308).

15 As with other aspects of Baroja, the existence of irony in his work has occasionally been acknowledged but hardly studied. The best critical study of this subject is in Hugh Probyn’s unpublished M.Phil. thesis “Pío Baroja: Aspects of the Development of his Work 1900-1912” (University of Leeds, 1976).
dissociation between author and protagonist in which authorial involvement with the character is cut short by the adoption of a posture of ironic detachment; there is irony in the way small events happen or turn out in the novels; and there is irony in many of the titles Baroja gives to his novels. So all-pervading is the presence of irony in his work, that it could be reckoned to be one of the few fundamental principles of his art. Beneath his inclination to irony there lies an acute preoccupation with the apparently dualistic nature of reality, more specifically with the discrepancy between what one is conditioned to think and what one sometimes discovers, between one's intentions and the intentions other people ascribe to one, between one's intrinsic worth and one's position in society, between the goodness of a person's moral code and the inefficacy of his actions or vice-versa. This type of ironic contrast is extremely frequent in Baroja and stems not just from the philosophical view of man as a cosmic victim—he thinks he is in control but he is not—but also from the idea that man's own social world is based on contradiction and delusion: the ideals which we like to ascribe to ourselves as individuals, justice, love, probity, sincerity, magnanimity, self-sacrifice, are inoperative within the social structure. But there is also a less obvious type of irony in Baroja, for his ironic view of man and society encompasses the artist too. At times he erects an ironic membrane between himself and his work, he creates an ironic distance as he looks down half-mockingly at his own created world, as if to imply that this world is no more than a pretence. In a world built of subjective interpretations—and for Baroja as for many of his contemporaries objectivity is a fraud—confidence about its general validity is likely to wane, particularly when the artist realizes that his world is limited by his personality. Indeed there may come a point when the artist doubts the image which his own work projects of himself. "Cuando el hombre se mira mucho a sí mismo llega a no saber cuál es su cara y cuál su careta" (OC, V, p. 158), says Baroja, though the words could just as easily have been written by Unamuno, Azorín or Valle-Inclán.

_El mundo es anísi_, published in 1912, is generally regarded as closing the first phase of Baroja the novelist, a phase which began in 1900. After _El mundo es anísi_, between 1912 and 1930, Baroja was to devote himself almost exclusively to a long series of historical novels which deal with aspects of Spain during the first half of the nineteenth century. The eighteen novels of the first twelve years of Baroja's career as a novelist all have either a later nineteenth-century setting or, as in a majority of cases, a fully contemporary one.

Baroja's first novel, _La casa de Aisgorri_ (1900), is a little unusual in that it is in dialogue form (conceived originally as a play), but is more conventional in its use of a strongly dramatic plot based on social confrontation, with clearly implied good and evil factions, and with a carefully built-in love interest. The next novel, _Aventuras, inventos y mixtificaciones de Silvestre Paradox_ (1901), is totally different: a plotless, unpredictable, humorous tale of an extravagant and eccentric character, punctuated with brief but telling observations on contemporary society. Five years later Baroja used the same eccentric protagonist in _Paradox, rey_, a strange and farcical tale of adventure the real aim of which is to satirize European civilization, and which is not far removed from the _esperpentos_ which Valle-Inclán was later to create. Baroja's third novel, _Camino de perfección_ (1902), generally regarded as an early masterpiece, is anything but humorous: here we meet for the first time the anguished hero of the twentieth century searching for some meaningful belief, relationship or goal in a world which he sees as alien, hostile and incomprehensible. For this novel Baroja adopts the simple quest pattern of primitive epic narrative, but in his next novel, _El mayorazgo de Labraz_ (1903), he makes use of a much more novelesque, even romantic, type of plot; yet he also adopts an ironic stance which is noticeable in his use of paradox in both characterization and plotting, in the unconventional, unexpected and even aesthetically jarring ending (the complex and dramatic plot is left open), and more obviously in the way that, through a gentle and humorous parody of the traditional device of a source for the tale, he actually emphasizes its purely fantastic nature.

The next three novels to appear are those of the trilogy _La lucha por la vida_ (1904–5), one of Baroja's most famous works and one of the most intensely realistic. Here he appears to sub-
has Baroja been as spiritually close to his protagonists as in the novels of the years 1910–12; yet paradoxically never has he been artistically so far. He wilfully manipulates authorial distance to dissociate himself at intervals from those protagonists into whose anguish lives he appears to be pouring so many of his own ideas, attitudes and anxieties. It is as if he had come to doubt whether a writer could create autonomous characters and objective worlds and to suspect that the characters and the worlds were but projections of the writer. In the novels of this period he seems to be acutely aware that he is studying himself rather than the outside world. Yet Baroja as a person was certainly not an exhibitionist; and he appears to have reacted to the danger of being turned into one by retreating into irony, the clearest technique of which consists in creating for himself a second novelistic persona who will act as a foil to the protagonist.

_César o nada_ (1910), counted among Baroja’s half-a-dozen best novels, is a story of political ambition for which he drew heavily on his own experiences as a tourist in Rome and as a Republican candidate in the elections of 1909. The novel is also an analysis of the socio-political situation in rural Spain, and a political programme is put into effect during the course of the book. The use of the author’s own experiences as part of the fictional protagonist’s experiences, and the attempt to fashion a political ideology, might incline one to read the novel more or less as the author’s political manifesto. In point of fact Baroja’s technique makes such a straightforward reading quite impossible. The only authorial norm we can infer is that of irony. The writer has created a distance between himself and his protagonist, and this detachment with which he views his character periodically asserts itself in small but significant details of his portrayal. In addition, the story proper is prefaced by a curious prologue in which author meets fictional protagonist and engages in a political argument about issues that will reappear in the novel proper. The original version, published in serial form in a newspaper, also had a highly ironic ending in which the protagonist was finally shown to be a fake. Baroja’s ambivalent attitude to his protagonist is further shown by the removal, in the book version, of this rather cruel epilogue and the substitution of an open ending in which no final judgment is passed on the protagonist.

**Baroja’s development**

_The inquiétudes de Shanti Andia_ (1911), usually coupled with _Zalacán el aventurero_ as the best examples of Baroja’s adventure novels, is more of a book of authorial reminiscences with a sea yarn at its centre. There are reminiscences of Baroja’s childhood, of his family and acquaintances, of his native Basque region, and above all reminiscences of a literary kind: _Las inquiétudes de Shanti Andia_ seems to evoke the memory of his readings of Poe, Mayne Reid, Captain Marryat and Stevenson. The eponymous hero of the novel is not an adventurer at all, but simply the author’s narrator-agent, not unlike Conrad’s Marlow. Indeed an identification author-protagonist is implied in the opening pages where among other things the narrator calls himself “un tanto novelero”. But even Shanti does not seem to provide the necessary shelter behind which the author can safely manipulate his material, and the central part of the tale recedes as other narrators take over (four other characters in addition to the protagonist participate in the narration). There are also periodic shifts in time as the narrative moves from the time of the events to the time of redaction, which itself takes place at different moments, as Shanti himself warns. Again it seems as if Baroja is mirroring in his tale the creative process itself as the author moves back and forth from his real world to his fictional world. At any rate it is obvious that by this time he was incapable of sitting down and simply getting on with telling his story in an uncomplicated, straightforward manner: the preoccupation with the authorial origins of the story and with its narration had become too strong to be suppressed. “El ver mis recuerdos fijados en el papel me daba la impresión de hallarse escritos por otro, y este desdoblamiento de mi persona en narrador y lector me indujo a continuar” (OC, II, p. 997), says Shanti, providing a sudden insight into the core of Baroja’s aesthetic preoccupation: a narrator is but a reader of himself. It is this limitation which Baroja had been striving to overcome, but which in the final years of his first period, as his novels grow more introverted and autobiographical, threatens to undermine his art.

_EL árbol de la ciencia_ (1911), arguably Baroja’s greatest novel, is also the most strongly autobiographical one. It is a deeply philosophical and moving story which vividly sums up an entire age and crisis in the history of Western civilization: the collapse of
confidence in scientific rationalism at the end of the nineteenth century. But this for Baroja was not just a cultural phenomenon: it was a highly personal matter as well. He was a scientist by training and by inclination, but he was a failed scientist. Baroja had graduated in medicine, had done research for a doctorate, and had practiced as a physician but only for a limited period. He never offered any very clear reasons for abandoning his medical career, but temperamental unsuitability and a lack of faith in his own profession had a great deal to do with it. Both his scientific inclinations and his eventual recognition of the limitations of the scientific view of life are novelized in El árbol de la ciencia. The experiences of Andrés Hurtado as a medical student and later as a young doctor were Baroja's own experiences; his hopes, ideals, and anxieties must have been to some degree Baroja's hopes, ideals, and anxieties, and his frustrations and disillusion Baroja's frustrations and disillusion. Hurtado's suicide at the end of the novel, though not brought about by purely philosophical reasons, comes nevertheless immediately after his realization that science has failed to save his wife and child when nature might have succeeded, and thus symbolizes the failure of the scientific outlook on life that the protagonist has so ardently defended during the course of the novel. The closing words of the book, "había en él algo de precursor" are obscure, and could contain an oblique reference to Baroja himself. But Baroja is not content to write about himself in the guise of a fictional character: at certain points he abandons the subjective identification with his protagonist and adopts an external, objective viewpoint. The desdoblamiento which Shanti Andía speaks of as he sees himself objectivated in the pages he has written occurs here as well. This time Baroja's technique consists in creating a second character to whom the protagonist can expound his scientific philosophy of life but who picks holes in his arguments and who puts forward a counter-philosophy based on traditional utilitarianism which seems ultimately to be the more correct. Though their philosophies are incompatible, the two characters are not antagonists; indeed there is a bond of mutual respect and understanding be-

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Baroja's development

tween them. Neither of them on his own can be taken as the author's mouthpiece; but together they represent an authorial conflict. Looked upon as a statement of Baroja's own philosophy, El árbol de la ciencia is insurmountably ambiguous, for if a philosophy is built up, it is also pulled down. All of which of course goes to make of Baroja a contradictory but deeply human writer, caught in the turmoil of his own doubts and disorientation, his search for truth frustrated by the limitations of his own mind and feelings, hope countered by despondency and protest by resignation.

By the time of El mundo es anísi Baroja's preoccupation with his art had reached the point of obsession, but he was no nearer to answering his own question. And the question was whether his novels were truly studies of the outside world -- as he liked to think and more than once declared -- or whether they were merely studies of himself. Could a writer create autonomous characters and objective worlds, or should he face the truth that those characters and those worlds were merely projections of himself? La lucha por la vida had stood for an art that looked outward, an art in which the writer recognized the forces at work within society and within the world and struggled to incorporate them in his own imaginative vision. But the personal nature of this very struggle could in turn become the art itself. Comparing the novels of 1910--12 with La lucha por la vida, it is easy to see that Baroja has become more introverted, more self-conscious, less certain what he is about. His novels are threatening to become studies of the artist's self; in some respects Baroja is getting close to the threshold where art ceases to be art and becomes a purely personal document. Baroja appears to accept, yet at the same time does his best to transcend, what for many writers is an inescapable constraint upon artistic creation: that the artist's quarry is ultimately himself. Baroja's efforts are thus frantically directed towards giving an appearance of objectivity to what is an intensely subjective world. It is this oscillation between subjectivity and objectivity which gives rise to a paradox in Baroja: the more autobiographical the novel, the more difficult it is to infer the authorial norms. The closer the protagonist moves to the author, the farther the author appears to the reader. It is in his