Pereda and the Closure of the Roman à thèse: From Don Gonzalo González de la Gonzalera to Peñas Arriba

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PEREDA AND THE CLOSURE OF THE ROMAN À THÈSE: FROM DON GONZALO GONZALEZ DE LA GONZALERA TO PEÑAS ARRIBA

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In recent years, the vogue of Post-Structuralism has paved the way for a radical transformation in our assessment of Realism. Far from taking for granted the transparency of language, that is, the unmediated copy of reality through the verbal medium, today’s reader looks carefully for those gaps which render the textual reproduction of the outside world a problematic, if not untenable, concept. At the risk of falling into the representational fallacy, the Spanish roman à thèse in the 1870s—a forerunner of the Realist-Naturalist masterpieces of the 1880s—cannot thus be reduced to a tension of mutually exclusive forces embodied in a dialectics of tradition and modernity. At the same time, a sheer formalist approach fails to account for the particulars of an era that conceived of art as truth and promoted the novel to the loftiest literary form, that which could recreate the intricacies of contemporary consciousness with the best degree of accuracy. An analysis focusing on the intrinsic quality of this narrative, on the other hand, ultimately leads to its depreciation by virtue of its platitude and lack of psychological depth. When taken separately, then, neither the ideological, nor the semiotic, nor the aesthetic approaches suffice to explain the impact of the roman à thèse in the years immediately following the Bourbon Restoration in 1875.
In light of the difficulties of establishing a poetics that would do justice to the roman à thèse, I have suggested elsewhere the need for a reevaluation of the metadiscourse which accompanied these works upon their publication. By this I refer to the “colaboración sistemática de teoría y práctica” (Dorca 273), originating in the reviews that appeared in the journals of the time—most prominently, Revista de España, Revista Europea, and Revista Contemporánea. The symbiosis between the critic and the writer was instrumental in fostering a type of novel which did not so much degrade literature to propaganda—still the prevailing notion in most scholarship—as it did seek to enhance its philosophical significance: “El discurso crítico de Revilla, Clarín y González Serrano concibió la novela como vehículo cognitivo con el que aprehender un sistema de verdades sólo al alcance del artista privilegiado” (Dorca 277). The dependence upon the value of the thesis, instead of bringing about the demise of the novel, did in fact contribute to its ascendancy. As Ignacio Javier López has recently emphasized, “esta crítica ‘impura’ ha de redundar en beneficio de la novela como género pues... empieza a ser considerado como un medio literario que... hay que tratar con respeto y tomar definitivamente en serio” (11). Therefore, only by acknowledging the positive reception of the roman à thèse by its contemporaries can one begin to contest those critics who disclaim it as a pseudoartistic, monologic genre.1

A second assumption I would like to challenge here has to do with the origins of the roman à thèse as a byproduct of the 1868 September Revolution, a position pioneered by Juan López-Morillas in his article, “La Revolución de Septiembre y la novela española.” In his view, after 1868 “[l]a nueva ficción fijará su mirada en los ‘tiempos presentes’. Y comoquiera que esos tiempos son de hipersensibilidad

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1 In the opinion of Northrop Frye, “[t]he anatomy, of course, eventually begins to merge with the novel, producing various hybrids, including the roman à thèse and novels in which the characters are symbols of social or other ideas” (312). For Hans Robert Jauss, the roman à thèse “can be characterized by an aesthetics of reception as not demanding any horizontal change, but rather as precisely fulfilling the expectations prescribed by a ruling standard of taste, in that it satisfies the desire for the reproduction of the familiarly beautiful; confirms familiar sentiments; sanctions wishful notions; makes unusual experiences enjoyable as ‘sensations’; or even raises moral problems, but only to ‘solve’ them in an edifying manner as predecided questions” (25).
ideológica, de odios y suspicacias, de esperanzas y fracasos, todo ello habrá de incorporarse en la novela que está en trance de nacer” (101). The popular upheaval that forced the abdication of Queen Isabel the Second was succeeded by a chaotic transition that came abruptly to an end in December 1874, when General Martínez Campos’s coup d’état dashed the hopes for a constitutional regime that six years earlier had mobilized the Spanish people against their monarch. In January 1875 Isabel’s son, Alfonso, returned from exile to take the reins of a nation shattered in profound discrepancies. His Prime Minister, Antonio Cánovas del Castillo, was soon able to attain a certain reconciliation at the expense of curtailing democratic freedom. Not coincidentally, the first specimen of roman à thèse, Pedro Antonio de Alarçon’s El escándalo, was published only a few months after the Bourbon king was restored to power. Alarcón’s vicissitudes in completing the manuscript—he had begun his work in 1868—illustrate that the roman à thèse could emerge only at a time of stability. The revolution having thus backfired, literature, or more specifically the novel, became the battlefield for the sympathizers of the new order and the mourners of the lost cause to combat one another. In other words, the roman à thèse, rather than simply mirroring the turbulent period of 1868 to 1874, commented meditatively on Spain’s identity crisis against the backdrop of the failed revolution. In López’s precise terms, “no es la experiencia revolucionaria la que origina la novela de tesis, sino la clara conciencia del fracaso político de aquélla tras el triunfo de la Restauración” (7). Moreover, El escándalo’s antiliberal stance reveals that, at the outset, the genre purported to outline a “discurso contrarrevolucionario” (López 7) with which to bring the expectations of change to a standstill. Alarcón’s alliance with the Ancient Regime placed him among the standard-bearers of authority who relieved their fears of the Gloriosa by means of an apology of Spain’s glorious traditions.

José María de Pereda’s ideological novels of the 1870s are equally part of a counterrevolutionary discourse that opposed the values of permanence to the allure of progress. The roman à thèse has been defined in terms of a clearly articulated message aimed at persuasion: it is a type of narrative which “signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine” (Suleiman 275). Two of Pereda’s works allegedly adhere to that category: Don Gonzalo González de la Gonzalera (1879) and De tal palo, tal astilla (1880).
The latter advances a religious thesis that extols the virtues of Águeda’s faith, while condemning the Positivist materialism of Fernando. In Don Gonzalo, for his part, the author describes the calamitous effects of the 1868 Revolution upon a village, which had until then prospered under the aegis of its patriarch, don Román. The fact that Pereda decided to discontinue the production of romans a thèse after De tal palo seems to accord with the temporal limits of the genre, set by the Naturalist conversion of Galdós in his La desheredada (1881). This chronology notwithstanding, I will argue in this paper for the possibility that Pereda revisited the political ideals expressed in Don Gonzalo for their inclusion, almost twenty years later, in his most representative novel, Peñas arriba (1895). In it Marcelo’s determination to settle in Tablancan as its acclaimed ruler poses a striking contrast to don Román’s self-imposed exile in Don Gonzalo. In doing so, not only did Pereda reinstate order in the rural community after the tumultuous postrevolutionary period, but also he avenged don Román’s failure by keeping the contagious revolt at bay. The intertextual dialogue between the two novels is thus so pervasive as to go beyond the thematic similarities we encounter throughout Pereda’s fiction. Since Peñas arriba brings the ideological discrepancies in Don Gonzalo to a close, I propose that this “novela perediana por excelencia” (Clarke 14) be also read as his roman a thèse par excellence.

At the beginning of Don Gonzalo González de la Gonzalera, Coteruco functions as a model community under the leadership of don Román Pérez de la Llosía, a well-to-do landowner and heir of a family “de bien notorio abolengo en el país” (59). Don Román’s reliance upon the authority principle is tempered by his generosity and his charitable impulses, as well as by his unabated faith in—and complicity with—the Catholic Church. His belief in a patriarchal system has enabled him to maintain the social cohesion in Coteruco and to guarantee the welfare of his people. In a long introductory chapter, the narrator describes exultingly the bountiful fields surrounding the village, the excellency of its inhabitants, their irreproachable morals, all these a direct consequence of don Román’s provision: “Éste era el único galardón que apetecía; el exclusivo fin a que aspiraba en sus dispensiosos desvelos el generoso Pérez de la Llosía” (63). Also responsible for this success is the fact that the peasantry has respected Coteruco’s hierarchical organization, abiding by their role as members of the working class, while at the same
time unaware of the possibilities for change looming on the horizon. Don Román, in his conviction that only the ignorance of his vassals will preserve their happiness, has taken pride in leaving them uninformed about the doings of the world: “El mayor bien que al cielo debían aquellos aldeanos que le rodeaban, era su sencilla y honrada ignorancia. Sostenerlos en ella era su principal cuidado” (60–61). Despite the negative vision of the populace as an uneducated—and uneducatable—mass, the introduction in Don Gonzalo does indeed emphasize the idyllic in Coteruco.

However, unlike most of his novels in the 1880s and 1890s—among them, El sabor de la tierruca (1882), Sotileza (1885), La puchera (1889), and Peñas arriba (1895)—the term “novela idilio” coined by Montesinos to define Pereda’s art does not apply to Don Gonzalo beyond the preliminary chapter. Enrique Miralles highlights the ephemeral quality of the idyllic in Don Gonzalo: “Sólo unas páginas sueltas, durante la parte introductoria, prestan sugerencia a la felicidad de la vida aldeana, pero tan pronto se desencadena el conflicto, la égloga se esfuma y ya no hay lugar para prestar atención a las excelencias del lugar” (Gonzalo 40). In reality, no sooner do the winds of change arrive in Coteruco than the harmony, which had presided over don Román’s government, falls to pieces. From that point on, Don Gonzalo veers towards a political roman à thèse, the postulates of which condemn explicitly the new order brought forth by the 1868 Revolution. Lucas, don Gonzalo, and the Rigüeltas have applied their venom on the gullible coterucanos by appealing to the lower instincts of the latter—especially their greed and gluttony. These advocates of the Gloriosa have resolved to offer wine and roasted calf for free at the tavern as their means of indoctrination. It is precisely the tavern, “la más desprovista y menos concurrída” (63) in the entire valley, that suddenly becomes the focus of corruption; the narrator describes vividly the predatory effects of “[la] absorbente vorágine que se engullía a los hombres de Coteruco en cuanto salían dos pasos más allá de los umbrales de sus puertas” (181). With their demagogy, it has taken only a few months of campaigning for the revolutionaries to overthrow the old regime and replace it with a fraudulent oligarchy disguised as a democracy. Somewhat hyperbolically, don Román bemoans “[l]a ridícula vanidad de un mentecato, infernalmente explotada por dos o tres bribones,” which “bastó para trocar, en ocho días, a los hombres más honrados y virtuosos, en un tropel de inmundas bestias” (340). In his early pre-idyllic narrative,
Pereda was not prone to idealize his contemporaries and remained impervious to the Romantic Volksgeist, thus differing from his admired Fernán Caballero. As manifested by don Román, in order to dominate the populace, one has to assimilate their habits and even resort to pure force when the situation calls for it. “Aventajarlos en todo . . . hasta en fuerza bruta” he advises (192).

Given the hostility between liberals and reactionaries enacted in the Spanish novel of the 1870s, Don Gonzalo González de la Gonzalera might have been written with the idea of providing a conservative response to Galdós’s Doña Perfecta (1876). In the latter, the evil resides in the regressive forces of Orbajosa headed by arrogant dowager doña Perfecta and her obedient acolyte, don Inocencio, the priest. To such formidable enemies the educated but inexperienced Pepe Rey will succumb at the end, his assassination at the hands of one of Perfecta’s servants signifying the annihilation of progress. On the contrary, Don Gonzalo deals with the destruction of a patriarchal community in the name of a false revolutionary principle endorsed by a group of outsiders who have subverted don Román’s authority to satisfy their selfish needs. Pereda’s fervent regionalism renders him unable to identify the culprit as pertaining to Coteruco’s establishment, as was the case in Galdós. Equally present in both novels is the motif of the return to the motherland, although again incarnated in a different value system: while in Doña Perfecta the cosmopolitan Pepe Rey cannot adjust to the intolerance of his compatriots, for Pereda the returnees Lucas and Gonzalo are the ones to blame for disrupting peace in their native Coteruco.

As a way to further challenge the assumptions of Doña Perfecta regarding the strife between those who defend the Revolution (Rey) and those who condemn it (Orbajosa), Pereda was careful enough to set the action of Don Gonzalo vis-à-vis the course of historical events. In the introduction, the narrator informs that “estamos al comienzo del año memorable de 1868” (59), whereas “al finalizar el mes de septiembre” (242), in chapter xix, Coteruco is already on the brink of repudiating don Román to embrace the Gloriosa.² The

² Miralles’s careful study of the similarities between fiction and history concludes by stating that “el nervio central de la trama política atraviesa las mismas etapas que vivió la nación ese año memorable” (Gonzalo 32). I agree with the importance he places on this correspondence for the understanding of the thesis.
analogy allows for an examination of Don Gonzalo in terms of political allegory seeking to counteract the message in Doña Perfecta. If Orbajosa came to represent “toda España” (87) in the eyes of a critic like Clarín, no less round was don Román when admitting that the uprising in Coteruco was to be examined likewise from a nationwide perspective: “Quien ve un pueblo,” he tells don Frutos, “ve una nación entera” (243). The symbolic interpretation of Pereda’s novel adds to its distinctive quality of roman à thèse, transcending, much the same as the Galdosian paradigm, the geographic boundaries of a town or a region for the purpose of commenting on the whole Spanish nation.

As Pereda inveighs against the farce acted out by a group of revolutionaries in Coteruco, he ultimately encourages the collapse of their aspirations. In chapter xxiii, the mayor don Gonzalo has don Román arrested without evidence of a possible fault. The arbitrariness of his decision, stemming from a feeling of jealousy with regard to his unsuccessful attempt to marry don Román’s daughter, brings about an utmost rejection in Coteruco, particularly in the decadent don Lope. Once abandoning his indifference to politics, don Lope runs after Patricio Rigielta as he escorts don Román to the capital for his trial. No sooner does don Lope set foot in Santander than he is able to convince the local authorities of the crime committed against don Román. The arrival of a group of patriarchs for the defense of their fellow, on the other hand, quickly settles the matter in favor of the aristocrats. Don Román is freed, whereas Patricio and the soldiers are severely reprimanded for their actions. Upon recounting the incident, Patricio regrets that the old guard still remains too powerful for the revolutionary cause to prevail: “Con las gentes que imperan allá, con sus miramientos y blanduras de señorío . . . ¡Vaya usté a hacer revoluciones como Dios manda!” (302). The counterrevolution finally takes place in chapter xxv, when the coterucanos resort to violence at the club to protest the blatant demagogy of their leaders. The incident, the narrator informs, results in the definite loss of the “ya bien cercenado prestigio de los hombres que habían arrastrado al pueblo a tales desvaríos” (292). The misfortunes of the culprits bring poetic justice to the denouement: Lucas is sent into exile in exchange for a “destinillo subalterno” (309) that don Román has generously obtained for him; Patricio is stabbed to death in the heat of the elections (329); his son, Gildo, declines into incurable madness soon after the tragedy (338); lastly, don Gonzalo
ties the knot with Osmunda, Don Lope’s ire-prone niece, who will soon turn her husband into a puppet (337–38). “Más tarde o más aína,” one of the witnesses comments, “la mano de Dios cobra las deudas” (338).

But even if Don Gonzalo denies the outcome of the Revolution in its nostalgia for a patriarchal regime, this does not imply that the expectations of the roman à thèse have been entirely fulfilled. In other words, just because the message has been openly displayed before the eyes of the reader it does not follow that Pereda has perfected the conventions of the genre. As a matter of fact, it may be said that the author’s occasional shortcomings weaken the effectiveness of the thesis. Among these, I would mention first of all Pereda’s penchant for the burlesque, with which he ridicules the so-called elements of progress that have exploited the good faith of the people for the sake of their own ambition. The novel’s intense sarcastic vein, in some passages inseparable from the farce, poses a challenge to its didactic content. As much as Don Gonzalo can be read as a political allegory grafted onto a specific generic mold, that of the roman à thèse, it partakes equally of the conventions of the parody and the satire. By insisting on their disabilities (Lucas walks with a limp), their grotesque manners (don Gonzalo’s counterfeit language), or simply their humble origins, the author runs the risk of overcriticizing the antagonists. Furthermore, his inability to endow the enemies of order and tradition with at least a trace of dignity may fail to—rather than help—persuade the reader into accepting the novel’s value system. The roman à thèse, Susan Rubin Suleiman shows in her Authoritarian Fictions, shares in a “realistic mode” which is “based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation” (7), and as such was perceived by the foremost critic of the Spanish novel of the 1870s, Manuel de la Revilla. To him, it constituted “la novela más adecuada a los gustos y necesidades de la época” on account of its being “vivo retrato de la agitada y compleja conciencia contemporánea” (121). Were the characters to become overtly one-dimensional, their ideological significance would decrease to the point of ceasing to convince the reader of the truth the author intended to convey. Pepe Rey and doña Perfecta, in their contradictions, will always exceed in artistic interest that of the caricature-like don Gonzalo González de la Gonzalera—his name itself bordering on the ludicrous.
Alongside the scarce credibility of the characters, other textual instances signal themselves detrimental to the instructional goals of the narrative. In particular, the conclusion of Pereda's novel remains problematic in the sense that don Román, not without conceding the defeat of his political ideal, determines to abandon his beloved Coteruco and settle in Santander with his daughter, Magdalena, and his son-in-law, Álvaro: "Iremos a la ciudad, donde, con otra vida y otras costumbres, y viendo otras caras y otros objetos, tan diversos de los que me han rodeado durante tantos y tan felices años, quizá se vayan curando mis heridas poco a poco" (341). Although the decision is psychologically attributed to a profound disenchantment coupled with vague feelings of revenge, by the time don Román has conceived of his plan the Revolution has already failed and the safety of his family is no longer in jeopardy. One may assume, moreover, that Coteruco, then "foco de la pestilencia que iba llevando la muerte, de pueblo en pueblo, a todo el valle" (344), feels more than ever the necessity for a leader who could restore the town to its former being. But Pereda, rather than bestowing upon don Román the responsibility of bringing the idyllic back to Coteruco, condemns his protagonist to an exile that will result in the eradication of the patriarchal system along with its indubitable benefits. In doing so, the author passes up the opportunity to seal his novel so that it could comply with the poetics of the roman à thèse: the aim "for a single meaning and for total closure" (Suleiman 22). In several occasions the coterucanos go as far as to suspect the legitimacy of don Román's plan of leaving them in the dark: "Después de todo, don Román los había traído engañados, y en su derecho estaban alejándose de él" (221). Don Román has his doubts too, blaming himself for his lack of effectiveness: "Mi obra ha sido imperfecta. ¡Ceguedad humana! ¡Tanto blas- nar de linces, y no penetrarnos ojos más que la costra misera- ble de las más comunes dificultades" (230-31).

Don Román's sudden flight to the city cannot be reconciled either with his misgivings about living in an urban milieu. In presenting his characters, the narrator makes it clear that don Román's attachment to Coteruco is deeply grounded in his personality. Neither a provincial soul nor a chauvinist without a cause, don Román spent two years of his youth abroad with the idea of testing the strength of his rural convictions. He came back "más apegado que nunca a sus aficiones campestres" (60), ready to accept his role of political leader. So engrained in his nature is the affection he has for Coteruco
that, even when taking leave of his possessions, he contemplates a return as soon as the situation stabilizes in the future: "Y si Dios es servido de encauzar un día este torrente de groseras y corruptas pasiones, tornaré a mis lares queridos" (341). The possibility of a comeback brings at least some consolation to the tragic fate of the coterucanos, bedeviled at the end by a plague of biblical proportions: "El cielo no podía menos de fulminar su maldición sobre el rebaño que, pudiendo, no había librado a su pastor de las garras del tigre" (333). In any case, Pereda’s idea of surrendering the restoration of harmony for a merciless divine punishment can barely appease those committed to the novel’s political message. This community of ideal implied readers of the roman à thèse—to use the terminology introduced by the aesthetics of reception—will call for don Román’s restitution because they feel for his estrangement in the capital, far from his domains and out of touch with the vicissitudes of his people.³

Insofar as there is no satisfactory resolution of the conflict, Don Gonzalo, though certainly far from the textual and intertextual complexity of the modern novel, allows nonetheless for a certain plurality of interpretation. For all the diatribes against the Revolution engendered by Pereda’s fear of progress, Don Gonzalo manifests the open-endedness of its design, its character as a work in progress in need of closure. The apology of patriarchy lying at the core of Pereda’s fiction would be seriously compromised if don Román simply vanished into a mediocre life in the city. Sooner or later, the author will have to come to terms with this dilemma and provide an alternative solution.

In his study of the contemporary reception of Pereda’s works, José Manuel González Herrán expounds how the majority of Peñas arriba’s reviewers commented upon the legitimacy of the thesis. “El tema que casi monopolizó el debate,” he writes, “fue el que planteaba su tesis” (419). Given the explicitness of the message, the discussion

³ In a striking contrast that reinforces the peculiarity of don Román’s temperament, the narrator tells us that Magdalena and Álvaro do not seem to have any qualms over residing in Santander: “Digamoslo con franqueza: ni a Magdalena ni a su marido causó la menor pesadumbre este discurso de don Román. Dejar las soledades del campo, casi en el corazón del invierno, por los atractivos del mundo, nunca desagrada a los jóvenes; y mucho menos si son recién casados, y ricos y venturosos, y, por contera, prestan con el sacrificio un gran favor a un padre sin segundo” (342).
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thus drew more upon sociopolitical than literary models. “Pocos fueron los que se preocuparon de analizar en qué medida aquellos presupuestos ideológicos . . . afectaban la valía artística de la novela” (431). The connection of Peñás arriba to the roman à thèse was later noticed by Montesinos, to whom some passages in Pereda’s masterwork “reanudan argumentos inconclusos en otros libros” (248), Don Gonzalo among them. For Miralles, and spite of differences in perspective, both narratives “pulsan una misma cuerda” (Peñas xix). In the introduction to his edition of the novel, Clarke suggests likewise the need for its reevaluation in reference to “los debates de las novelas de tesis de los años setenta” (58–59). Keeping these precursors in mind, this section will specifically relate Peñás arriba to Don Gonzalo for the purpose of dwelling upon their intertextual play. Besides highlighting the dialogic component, I will also show the loose articulation in Don Gonzalo coalescing into a unified, tightly woven text in Peñás arriba and the implications of such a process vis-à-vis a poetics of the roman à thèse.

The first evidence of Peñás arriba’s ascription to the previous romans à thèse by Pereda has to do with the time of the events. Although published in 1895, the action takes place in 1870, only two years after that in Don Gonzalo. When don Celso is instructing Marcelo about his duties, he warns him against ever taking for granted the success of his enterprise. Don Celso exemplifies his point with the fall of his close friend don Román two years ago: “Dos años hace, en cuanto vinieron estas políticas nuevas que hoy nos gobiernan, en un abrir y cerrar de ojos se le fueron [the coterucanos] de las manos” (335). This may be the only chronological reference in Peñás arriba, but it suffices nonetheless to establish a correlate with the first phase of the post-revolutionary period depicted in Don Gonzalo.

Aside from the temporal coordinates, Peñás arriba refers to other arguments advanced in Don Gonzalo. To begin with, the reader feels the same anxiety about the perilous consequences of the Revolution on the inhabitants of rural Spain. Tablanca’s doctor, Neluco, echoes the dangers of the Gloriosa in a fashion reminiscent of don Román’s. He explains to Marcelo how the political fever has not rooted in the village owing to don Celso’s foresight: “Por eso no se conocen aquí ciertas plagas, relativamente modernas, de los pueblos campestres, ni han entrado jamás los merodeadores políticos a explotar la ignorancia y la buena fe de estos pobres hombres” (213). But if the prerogatives of don Celso were to be shattered by the
liberal triumph, the social malady that once ruined Coteruco would befall Tablanca: “¡Desdichados de ellos el día en que les falte la fuerza de cohesión, hidalgo y noble, que les da la casona de los Ruiz de Bejos!” (213). Coteruco and Tablanca are similarly embedded in feudal principles, with the alliance of the aristocracy and the church—don Román and don Celso on the one hand, don Frutos and don Sabas on the other—securing the means of subsistence. Left defenseless by poor instruction and inherited poverty, the peasantry will get by as long as they place their faith in the providence of their leaders. Just in case they are not willing to do so, the patriarch himself ought to make sure at all costs that his mandates are obeyed. In don Celso’s words, “[h]ay que armarse a veces de mucho aguante, eso sí, porque en un rebaño, ¡zancajo! no todas las bestias son de una misma condición” (154).

It is ultimately the reappearance of characters that, other than pointing to the important intertextual presence in Peñás arriba, attests to its character of obra in nucleo. In a climactic episode that follows the death of don Celso at the end of chapter xxviii, a number of patriarchs from all over the region arrive separately in Tablanca to mourn his loss and attend the funeral. The first to make his entry is don Recaredo (497–98), the extravagant nobleman who was introduced in Los hombres de pro, a short novel published by Pereda in 1876. Directly after him come “el ilustre caballero don Román Pérez de la Llosia y su yerno don Álvaro de la Gerra” (498–99), followed by “el perínclito señor de la Torre de Provendaño” (499), and the second-to-none don Lope del Robledal (501–02). As soon as don Román comes upon don Lope, he takes him aside to find out the latest news from Coteruco: “La santa avidez con que el noble expatriado de Coteruco aprovecharía aquella providencial ocasión de saber algo más de lo que sabía sobre el estado de cosas de su pueblo nativo” (502).

While the lunch conversation revolves around Marcelo, don Román cannot help recounting his tragic story as advice to the young heir (504). He goes on to lay before his peers “lo que le costaba aclimatarse a la vida de la ciudad” (504), his desire to “respirar el aire oxigenado, puro, de la Naturaleza,” and even the nostalgia for his compatriots: “Necesitaba también la presencia y hasta la compañía de aquellos hombres rústicos, aun con sus ingratiudes” (504). His homesickness notwithstanding, don Román is convinced that the exile has had positive effects: the coterucanos, “a solas con su
pecado,” have reflected on their mistakes, “y ya le echaban de menos” (504). The self-vindication of the patriarch contrasts to his past apprehensions, thus clearing the obstacles for a coveted return in a not–so–distant future: “Si no había vuelto ya a Coteruco, era porque quería hacerse desear un poco más, para asegurar mejor la curación de sus ‘locos’ ” (504). His reappearance—and to a lesser degree that of don Recaredo, don Álvaro, and don Lope—should not be hence merely construed as a means to strengthen the organic realism of the novel à la Balzac or Galdós, for instance. It constitutes, above all, a rhetorical strategy intended to fill in the ambiguities contained in Don Gonzalo, a communication to the audience that the dethroned don Román is ready at last to strike back and finish his mission.

The advantages of the patriarchal regime over the constitutional make up the ideological fabric in both novels as well, albeit with a subtle difference: while in Don Gonzalo the author cries over the destruction of don Román’s government, in the latter it is don Celso who, on his deathbed, hands over the scepter to his successor Marcelo thus demanding from his subjects the continuity of the system: “Éste es; de la mi sangre neta, y amo y ya señor de esta casa . . . Para él todo vuestro respeto y vuestra lealtad de hombres honrados y agradecidos” (468). Before agreeing to rule Tablanca, however, Marcelo will have to overcome his qualms over settling there for good. The psychological process seeking to grant verisimilitude to Marcelo’s conversion is precisely the backbone of the novel, what supports its narrative structure and guarantees the correct reception of the thesis. A sum of Pereda’s beliefs centered on the dialectics of country and city, Peñas arriba merges into the Bildungsroman in order to narrate, in the usual form of a retrospective first-person protagonist, Marcelo’s gradual acquaintance with La Montaña until his decisive transformation.

The relevance of the first chapter lies in familiarizing the reader with Marcelo’s background and personality. His father, don Celso’s brother, fled Tablanca in his youth to pursue his dreams of acquiring a fortune of his own. Upon the death of his progenitor, Marcelo decides to adopt the leisurely existence of a señorito—well-off, single, and prodigal: “Me daba la gran vida con el caudal que había heredado de mi padre” (107). The personification of the urban animal, the “buen madrileño” (108), he enjoys the vitality of big cities no less than he abhors the mountains. His only stay in Santander was as
a tourist (108), one of these “tipos trashumantes” ridiculed by Pereda in his collection of _cuadros de costumbres_ of the same title published in 1877. With all these precedents, don Celso’s invitation to pay him a visit in Tablánca ought to be rejected without much hesitation. However, in a surprising twist of events, Marcelo agrees to a short stay at his uncle’s to escape a certain monotony in his life: “Comenzaba yo a notar a la sazón cierta languidez de espíritu, cierta inapetencia moral” (110). In a sign of the importance Pereda bestows upon the characterization of his protagonist, the reader will also learn that Marcelo is bound to the journey by a more impelling reason, that of establishing emotional bonds with his father’s birthplace. Although he has never set foot there, he uses possessive adjectives to refer to “nuestra casa solar” (104), “[n]uestra casa de Tablánca” (104), “mi casa solariega” (109), as though it belonged to him by virtue of inextricable blood ties. By the same token, the household becomes an obsession before he makes up his mind to visit: “La visión, a mi modo, de la casa de Tablánca, con sus montes y sus fieras, no se apartaba un instante de mis ojos” (111).

These prolegomena put forward, the rest of the novel narrates, step by step, Marcelo’s rite of passage from dissolute urbanite to rural patriarch. The initiation ceremony takes place during the strenuous walk to Tablánca, which Pereda describes in detail in chapter ii. In it, he comes across the source of the Ebro near Reinosa only to lament how it will soon change its course and leave the province, bringing “el beneficio de sus aguas a extraños campos y desconocidas gentes” (115). Marcelo’s reaction is that of anger: “Da grima,” he exclaims, “pensar en la conducta de este renegado montañés” (116). Paradoxically, the river that abandons its origins to nourish other territories can be identified with Marcelo, another “renegado montañés” leading a meaningless existence in Madrid instead of contributing to his native land. Strategically placed at the initial stages of his development, this symbol-laden incident suggests proleptically his ulterior regeneration as he is introduced to the region.

The spiritual journey continues with Marcelo’s increasing appreciation of the magnificent mountain area circling Tablánca. His sensitivity towards the environment is spurred by excursions with don Sabas or Neluco—_Peñas arriba_ carries traits of an itinerant novel—leading to his communion with an abstract nature replete with metaphysical undertones: The “gran libro de la Naturaleza” in which Marcelo will soon read “solo, de corrido y muy a gusto” (234). Clarke
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has asserted the sublimation of the countryside in Peñas arriba—a Modernist trait, in my view: “En la postura regionalista de Pereda existía una posible dimensión de invención o recreación de La Montaña” (31). Regardless of his raptures before the picturesque landscape of La Montaña, though, Marcelo’s conversion could not be duly accounted for unless the author dealt with more earthly considerations impinging upon his protagonist. There are instances when Marcelo seems to be agonizing over his permanence in Tablanca, given the lack of comfort, the simplicity of the people, the scarcity of entertainments, and the much feared winter. On the other hand, he has encountered akin souls in his uncle, don Sabas, Neluco, and the erudite “señor de la torre de Provendaño,” with whom to converse about intellectual matters. The humble obedience of the people, along with their dignity, reinforce his plan to give up Madrid’s vanity fair. In any case, aware perhaps of Marcelo’s doubtful metamorphosis, Pereda availed himself throughout the novel of a female figure, Lituca, who as a last resort provides Marcelo with the necessary stimulus to abide by his decision. He puts his convictions to the ultimate test with a temporary move to Madrid in chapter xxxiii. The lifestyle there however has ceased to captivate him: “Cada día que pasaba me era menos agradable el desairado papel de comparsa anónimo que había hecho yo en el montón decorativo de esa incesante farsa de la vida” (540). His expected marriage to Lituca completes the idyllic scenario, while warranting the transfer of power—and ultimately its continuity: “Gran barro, indudablemente, para formar una compañera a su gusto un Adán como yo, en un paraíso de la catadura de Tablanca” (529).4

4 For Montesinos, Lituca is an unconvincing character, detrimental to the message: “Es lo afectivo lo que en definitiva decide de sus destinos [Marcelo’s], con lo que, en cierto modo, la intención social de la novela se debilita o aparece como algo sobrepuesto por artificial a ella, cosa que de seguro no estaba en los planes del autor” (250). He does not take into account, however, that the preservation of the system depends upon a successor to the same bloodline. Marcelo, if only to carry forward his mission, needs Lituca to eventually bear him an heir. The same situation can be found in Pardo Bazán’s La madre Naturaleza between Gabriel Pardo de la Lage and his niece, Marcelina Pardo, as Ignacio Javier López has called to my attention. Neither does Montesinos appreciate the process by means of which Marcelo finds himself irresistibly attracted to Lituca’s charms, an unwitting development in his personality that resembles that of don Luis de Vargas in Valera’s Pepita Jiménez.
Blending the *Bildungsroman* into the thematic unity of the roman à thèse enables Pereda to stick to its conventions of verisimilitude. Therefore, Marcelo’s transition is not so much a device to channel the narrative as it is the core of the novel itself; in other words, the validity of the lesson is made dependent upon the plausibility of the protagonist’s adjustment in Tablanca. I concur with Miralles that Pereda is formulating a political program in response to the rise of Regionalism and *Regeneracionismo* in turn-of-the-century Spain. The critic points to “[el] regionalismo doctrinario, cifrado en las tesis regeneracionistas que pone en boca de Neluco y que una década antes venían defendiendo los foros regionalistas como mejor remedio a los males del país” (*Nacionalismos* 224). And yet what makes the roman à thèse viable as such is not so much the doctrine as it is Marcelo’s epiphanic conversion. The energies of the *tablantqueses* have been directed towards the goal of persuading Marcelo since his arrival, either by hinting at it or simply by straightforward admonitions: Tarumbo (197), Pedro Nolasco’s daughter (221), Lituca (222), Neluco’s sister (242–43), “el señor de la Torre de Provendano” (275), don Sabas (302–03), don Celso (316–17), don Román (503–04), and Neluco (515). Marcelo comments occasionally on this insistence: “La tesis a que tan acostumbrado me tenían las buenas gentes de aquellos valles” (242, emphasis mine); “[l]o singular de esta tesis, tan manoseada por unos y otros, era para mí la solemnidad y la hondura del sentimiento con que me la exponían en todas partes” (243, emphasis mine). Marcelo’s final triumph should not undermine the difficulties of his enterprise, especially when considering don Román’s fall in *Don Gonzalo*. In *Penas arriba*, the unsuccessful attempts by “el señor de la Torre de Provendano” to institute a patriarchal organization are another reminder of the complexity of the task. But in the end, when Marcelo heeds the advise of his community, the evolution of his personality is complete, as he has gone from “cortesano muelle, insensible y descuidado” to “hombre activo, diligente y útil” (553) in the course of a few months. Digressions and a few subsidiary stories notwithstanding, Pereda has complied with the aim for closure that characterizes the roman à thèse in a satisfactory manner by knitting together narrative voice and focalization in a first-person retrospective account of an apprenticeship.

The symbiosis between theory and practice in Spain during the 1870s was responsible for the reactivation of the epistemological dimension of narrative. In the eyes of critics like Revilla, Clarín, and
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Urbano González Serrano, no artistic discipline could apprehend as comprehensively as the novel the multifaceted modern consciousness. On the other hand, the fact that the rise of the *roman à thèse* coincided with the Bourbon Restoration signals its character as a political discourse that pits enemies (Alarcón, Pereda) and apologists (Galdós) of the failed Revolution against one another. In *Don Gonzalo González de la Gonzalera*, Pereda gave way to his fears of the liberal cause with a biblical lament over the self-destruction of an idyllic community following the flight of its dethroned patriarch to the provincial capital. Seventeen years after the publication of *Don Gonzalo*, Pereda, in 1895, decided to revisit his political principles in what is usually regarded as his most representative work, *Peñas arriba*. In it he asserts the legitimacy of the patriarchal system when he justifies the assimilation of the urban Marcelo into rural mores. The preservation of an Arcadia in the heart of La Montaña counteracts the calamitous consequences of the revolutionary triumph in Coteruco—the demise of the old regime, don Román’s self-imposed exile, etc. In securing the ideological closure of *Don Gonzalo* in *Peñas arriba*, not only does Pereda confer textual unity to his latter work, he sanctions his political creed as well. In sum, he develops the generic conventions of the *roman à thèse* to their fullest by showing the interdependence of narrative form and didactic content.

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