THREE NOVELS OF JOSÉ SELGAS Y CARRASCO, 1882-1883

For Peter Bly, in gratitude for many years of friendship, sound advice, and patience.

Brian J. Dendle

Outside his birthplace, Murcia, José Selgas y Carrasco (Murcia, 1822-Madrid, 1882) is today almost totally forgotten. The son of a humble postal official, Selgas occupied sundry positions in the civil service in Murcia and, after 1850, in Madrid, where he enjoyed the protection of José Luis Sartorius, the Conde de San Luis. He was known as a poet (La Primavera, 1853; El Estío, 1853; Flores y espinas, 1879), combative moderado journalist (attacking Espartero’s rule in El Padre Cobos and Serrano in La Gorda), conservative observer of contemporary customs (Hojas sueltas, Más hojas sueltas, Nuevas páginas, Libro de memorias, Delicias del Nuevo Paraíso, Cosas del día, Fisonomías contemporáneas, Hechos y dichos, Nuevas hojas sueltas), and playwright (Una mentira inocente, 1852; De tal palo tal astilla, 1864, La barba del vecino, 1869; El vals, 1871). He also wrote numerous novels of varying length, published in diverse editions and collections (for a complete list of titles and editions of Selgas’s novels, see Eusebio Aranda).

In his own day, Selgas was both attacked and lauded by literary critics. In an article published in 1878 notable more for heavy sarcasm than for balanced judgment, Palacio Valdés found in Selgas’s novels frivolity, superficiality, ignorance, “candorosas necedades,” “tonterías.” Positive values were their capacity to entertain (“Todas las novelas son mejores que las del señor Selgas pero hay pocas que diviertan tanto”) and their facile style (“fino, delicado, transparente, nervioso”).

However, the subscription for the re-editing of Selgas’s Obras after his death was supported by such literary figures as Alarcón, Cañete, Rodríguez Rubí, Cánovas del Castillo, Núñez de Arce, Romero Ortiz, Echegaray, Tamayo y Baus, Gabino Tejado, Menéndez y Pelayo, and Antonio Arnao, as well as prominent members of the aristocracy and of Spain’s political élite. (See Alarcón, “Introducción.”)

Later critics have not been kind; thus, Francisco Díez de Revenga and Mariano de Paco echo the harsh judgment of Palacio Valdés:

De argumentos pueriles, como destacó Palacio Valdés, Selgas cultivó el melodrama sobrecargado, emocional y poético en exceso, superficial y artificioso, en lo que mucho tenía que ver su estilo de interrupciones, flirteos con el lector a la manera Karr y sus ambientes de cartón piedra, en los que lo cursi domina por todas partes [...] lo cierto es que la lectura, hoy, de sus novelas se hace insoportable por más breves que puedan ser [...]. (251)

In this article, I shall limit my discussion to three novels of Selgas published at the end of his career, some four years after Palacio Valdés’s attack: Dos rivales (1882), Una madre (1883), and Nona (1883). Page references are to the editions listed at the end.
Dos rivales

_Dos rivales_ (1882) appears at first sight to be little more than a lengthy anecdote, divided into three parts, treating in a light and superficial manner the upper class of contemporary Spain. Much of the novel consists of over-long conversations—often little more than bantering—that do little to advance the plot or to reveal character. The novelistic characters are simplistically portrayed, hardly more than puppets dominated by a single passion. They are identified only by first names, nicknames (“Goliat”), or profession (“el general,” “el diplomático”). The absence of family names indicates that we are in a world of formulized roles, of play-acting, rather than in the hardly less fictitious imitation of “reality” of the so-called “realist” novel. The protagonist of the story, Jaime “el Vecino,” although in his thirties, is a prototypical “silly young man” such as those who would feature prominently in the semi-popular British fiction of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.

In the hundred and thirty or so pages of the first part (“Un vals íntimo”), Jaime is besotted with passion for the fair Emilia. The setting is a fashionable charity ball. As in a play, Jaime’s state of mind is exposed in monologues and in a lengthy conversation with Emilia’s stepmother from whom he seeks Emilia’s hand. Humor is provided by the vain stepmother’s initial supposition that it is she whom Jaime is courting. Further humor—that of exaggeration—is provided when Jaime’s mood, always egotistical and at times cynically despising of woman, moves from his fiery wooing to horrified outrage at the indecency of the waltz, the representation of female emancipation:

Los regeneradores de la sociedad presente se queman las cejas buscando la emancipación de las mujeres, cuando, en verdad, una mujer valsando en brazos del primero que llega es la imagen más acabada y más perfecta de la mujer libre, de la mujer emancipada de todo decoro. Estoy seguro de que mi madre no valsó nunca, y si yo tuviese una hija, le juro a usted que nunca valsaría. (102-03)

(Indeed, Emilia and her partner waltz with such abandon that they fall.) With continuing excess, Jaime meditates challenging Emilia’s dancing partner to a duel in which Jaime’s death would provoke Emilia’s remorse. Jaime then decides to commit suicide. The reading of a letter from the “angelical,” self-sacrificing, and unselfishly-loving Juana, inspires Jaime to renounce his plan. On this, the chapter ends or, rather, the curtain falls.

The second part of the novel (“El fruto prohibido”) takes place three years later and is set in the thermal resort of Cestona, in the Basque Country. The bored “patients”—their maladies are non-existent—pass their time gossiping. The most amusing tertuliano, with his clowning and witty conversation, is Jaime, now married to the devoted and pregnant Juana (significantly, Juana never accompanies him, staying home to sew for the expected child). A mysterious and highly-secretive stranger (“Madame Albert”) provokes the curiosity and speculation of the spa guests, who suspect a possible relationship between Jaime and the visitor. A minor sub-plot is provided when “Goliat” (the gigantic assistant to the general, who is also apparently the lover of the general’s wife) initiates a jealous and possessive
courtship of Madame Albert.

The third part of *Dos rivales* ("Un pie en el sepulcro") is crowded with incident: a duel between Goliat and Jaime, in which Jaime is wounded in the foot, the general's terrifying of his wife by hiding in Goliat's bed, the departure of Madame Albert, followed by that of the enamored Goliat who defies the general's orders.

A lengthy letter from a friend in Paris to *el diplomático* relates Madame Albert's history. "Madame Albert" (Emilia) and her step-mother had traveled to Paris where Emilia enjoyed a dazzling social success. The two receive the protection of the millionaire Dr. Albert, a materialist and abortionist, who develops a passion for Emilia. A Russian prince courts Emilia. The highly jealous Dr. Albert prevents Emilia's elopement with the Russian by amputating her foot, which had never fully healed after her ballroom fall. Emilia—la estatua mutilada—had taken vengeance on Jaime (for jilting her?) by provoking Goliat to shoot him in the foot.

The general, no innocent himself, draws the moralizing conclusion:

—La historia es peregrina. Esa mujer debe odiar al género humano.... Valsa, tropieza, cae, y pierde un marido; se apea del coche, vuelve a tropezar, y pierde un pie y un amante.... Lo de siempre, señores: el primer mal paso. Se encuentra aquí con el novio perdido, y Juana le cuenta a ella misma el lance del vals..., lance que sirve de inocente diversión a la mujer y al marido.... Ella ve en Juana una rival afortunada, y en nuestro infeliz Vecino un loco que se burla de su recuerdo..., y concibe la idea de vengarse: Goliat le viene de molde, y punto redondo. Esa historia deben ustedes leérsela al herido. ¡Oh! Hermosa víbora, digna de Monsieur Albert. (406-07)

At the end of the novel, the conventional moral order prevails: the general's wife is confined in an asylum for the insane; Goliat is in a military prison as punishment for disobedience; and Jaime, although limping, is happily married.

*Dos rivales* is, I believe, a more subtle novel than a hasty reading would suggest. Admittedly, many of the conversations are tediously prolix. However, the vein of satire is pervasive. The upper-class hotel guests lead useless lives, unaware of any social order other than their own. The general is a bully and a manipulator; Goliat is a childish victim of passion; Jaime himself can be cynical and is often flippant. Women—apart from the self-sacrificing Juana—seek pleasure and self-gratification. However, the power basis of marital relations is not necessarily as it appears on the surface. In the final chapter of *Dos rivales*, *la viuda* perceptively notes the paradox of Juana's happy marriage:

—Cuando la mujer es buena y no es rematadamente tonta, los matrimonios son felices..., porque, amigo mío, a los hombres se les maneja fácilmente. (414)

*Dos rivales* is too obviously contrived, too "stagy," to be read as a "realist" novel. Throughout the novel, the reader (or onlooker?) is faced with a fundamental problem: what is to be believed? The opening paragraph of the novel reminds us that we are reading literature and that the tale can be read in diverse manners. Questions of interpretation are constantly
raised: the sanity of Jaime, the validity of his moral posture, the identity of Madame Albert. A further query would be: is the tale, supposedly emanating in Paris, of Madame Albert's life “true”? The information is provided in a letter to *el diplomático*. What is narrated in the letter as “truth” is, however, patently false, a fiction, for it contains information that the writer of the letter could not know (verbatim conversations between Monsieur Albert and his servant, between Monsieur Albert and Emilia, the content of a personal letter read only by Monsieur Albert). Just as the spa guests gossip and invent the secret life of Madame Albert, so also can the reader suspect that the fiction continues, that *el diplomático* has also invented his secret life of Madame Albert, a story within a story, to confound and amuse his credulous companions and also, one might add, the naïf reader. *Dos rivales*, with its unifaceted characters who quite ostensibly play roles, its *tableaux*-like settings, its teasing of the reader, suggests the stage rather than the denser “reality” of the novel of a Galdós or of a Zola.

**Una madre**

*Una madre* (1883) has as setting a village in the south of Spain (probably in the province of Murcia, to judge by the vegetation) and takes place in the period following the War with Morocco in 1859. An atmosphere of mystery is created from the beginning. The first-person narrator, temporarily stranded by the breakdown of a coach, follows a bearded man (“el difunto”, as he is called by child beggars) and his dog as far as a cemetery, where the narrator meets the saintly Father Antonio, who becomes his informer. The bearded man had apparently risen from his coffin during his funeral; unnatural events accompany him (the fig tree beneath which he sits withers; a child who had stoned him dies).

From the fourth chapter, the narrative switches to the third person. The plot now revolves around the close-knit couple of the beautiful sixteen-year-old Rosalía and her widowed mother. The widow, we are told, possesses a secret; she is happy to learn that her brother has an illegitimate son, although this will probably mean that she and her daughter will not inherit the brother’s wealth; bafflingly for the reader, the mother’s secret is not revealed in the course of the novel. Whereas the village is rife with sordid gossip, Rosalía and her mother are beyond any calculation of self-interest. Their nobility of soul lies in their “bondad y virtud” (27). Their virtues are female and domestic:

Dios ensalza a los hombres y humilla a los soberbios; en ninguna parte se conoce más pronto la pequeñez de los corazones ruines que en la grandeza de los palacios, y en ninguna parte brilla tanto la nobleza del alma como en la desgracia; la pobreza, pues, que rodeaba a la viuda y a la huérfana venía a ser como la majestuosa obscuridad de la noche, al través de la que resplandecen más vivamente las estrellas, que huyen de la claridad deslumbradora del día.

El alma del hombre se refleja en sus acciones, en sus costumbres, en sus palabras, en sus inclinaciones y en sus deseos; y el alma de la mujer se refleja principalmente en la casa, como quiera que la casa es su verdadero centro, la atmósfera que le es propia, el elemento de su vida moral, el mundo en que verdaderamente vive. (27-28)
Rosalía is tender, affectionate, and has an inner melancholy. She resists any thought of marriage with an unsuitable suitor, however wealthy. Her interests are in her piano, the flowers, birds, and fish of the garden she lovingly tends, and in the puppy César given to her by Father Antonio. Her sadness and volatility of mood, the narrator suggests, are connected to her passage to puberty:

Hay una edad, llena de misteriosas sensaciones, en que el corazón de las mujeres pasa fácilmente de la alegría a la tristeza, y de la tristeza a la alegría.

La psicología, que pretende sorprender el secreto en que se ocultan las relaciones que existen entre el espíritu y la materia, nos haría sobre este punto una disertación probablemente indigesta, mas no por eso menos pretenciosa. Nosotros, que no aspiramos a tanta sabiduría, y que tenemos por peligroso el empeño de penetrar en el fondo de aquellas cosas que Dios ha velado a la mirada del hombre, debemos contentarnos con exponer el fenómeno, sin caer en la tentación de perdernos en las oscurecidas de la substancia. La misma Rosalía no acertaría a explicarnos estos secretos cambios de su espíritu, estas transformaciones de su pensamiento, esta luz y esta sombra de su alma. (47)

In contrast to Rosalía's innocence, her forty-five-year-old uncle ("el comandante"), consumed with lust, spies on her and determines to make her his bride. The foolish and gross comandante is of violent temperament, is infatuated with himself, cynically despises women, and—worst of all—does not believe in God. His attempt to possess Rosalía physically is foiled by the intervention of the dog César. In the meantime, Rosalía and Gabriel (who, although neither he nor Rosalía know this, is the illegitimate son of the comandante) have fallen in love ("nos hemos jurado un amor eterno" [82]). Gabriel, a budding musical genius, idealistic, devoted to the memory of his saintly mother, flees in order not to compete with the comandante, who he mistakenly believes is betrothed to Rosalía. Rosalía takes sick and dies. Rosalía, on her death bed, forgives the comandante, as does also her mother. Rosalía's death is, for the mother, the will of God:

—¡Dios lo quiere! ¡Dios lo quiere! (94).

On the very same day, Gabriel dies in Madrid, after penning a letter of virtuous thoughts to his "padrino" (the comandante). The comandante, by now satanically obsessed to the point of insanity by jealousy and thoughts of vengeance (Chapter XXII is titled "Loco, loco"), has convulsions and "dies" five days after the death of Rosalía. He returns to "Ufe" while in the coffin, but has now lost the power of speech.

The reader of Una madre has by now realized that the bearded man of the initial chapters is the comandante. One year later, the narrator returns to the village and witnesses the deathbed of the comandante, still firmly impenitent. In the last chapter ("Dos lágrimas"), the dog César intervenes (a canis ex machina?), bearing a roll of papers, proof of the saintly devotion and lack of self-interest of Gabriel's mother, the comandante's long-abandoned mistress, Jacinta. The dying Jacinta's message calls on the comandante to repent. On hearing the contents of the letter, the comandante struggles to sit up and is embraced by and embraces his sister.
Los ojos del enfermo, desmesuradamente abiertos, como los del ciego que empieza a ver, se fijaron primero en mí, después en el padre Antonio, y luego en la viuda; sus labios descoloridos se agitaron, y una voz semejante a un soplo salió de lo profundo de su pecho, pronunciando una palabra apenas articulada.

—¡Dios!..., dijo, y cayó muerto.

En sus párpados a medio cerrar asomaron dos lágrimas, que brillaron un instante, rodando por las yertas mejillas. (107-08)

_Nona_ has its flaws, such as over-lengthy conversations (a shortcoming of all three Selgas’s novels treated in this study) and an occasional jejune toying with the reader (for example, the suspense created by the miniature “coffin” borne by Gabriel, which turns out to be no more than his violin case). Nevertheless, the plot holds the reader until the end and the characters, although simplistic expressions of moral attributes, are credible within the context of the novel. The pathos of the ending, although easy to parody—we recall Oscar Wilde’s ill-placed comments on the death of Little Nell—is certainly not an isolated case in late nineteenth-century fiction. I quote as an example a similar “tearful” passage from _El cuarto poder_ (1882), by Selgas’s detractor Armando Palacio Valdés:

[The saintly Cecilia realizes that her fiancé is in love with her sister] En aquellos grandes ojos extáticos, tembló al fin una lágrima, creció, vaciló […] desprendióse rodando, dejando húmedo surco sobre sus mejillas marchitas, y cayó como una gota de fuego sobre su mano, que se dejó quemar sin moverse. Poco después, se había evaporado. Un ángel la recogió y la llevó a Dios para que pidiese cuenta de ella a quien correspondiese. (I, 250)

**Nona, an embryonic detective novel?**

_Nona_ was published posthumously in 1883; the final chapter, according to the Prologue, was written by a friend who knew Selgas’s intentions. The novel is set in an unspecified period of the nineteenth century in the fictional small town of Los Remedios, in the Sierra de Espuña (Murcia). Much of the novel evokes the rhythms of country life: the passage of seasons and years, rural tasks and crops, the proverb-laden conversations of villagers. The speech and customs of the inhabitants of Los Remedios reveal no local color, save for the narrator’s joking reference—the “himno de Riego”—to the age-old Murcian obsession, water: “¡Era natural!: en aquel país de tierras abrasadas por la sequía, el himno de Riego debía ser un himno de esperanza” (173).

The opposition of city life (selfish and corrupt) and country life (open and cordial) is expressed at length by the third-person narrator and is exemplified in the conduct of the pious and charitable rural couple Martín de Cañizares and María de la Paz Pacheco (noble and honorable) which is contrasted with the behavior of the _Diputado electo_ (shallow, cynical, ignorant). Significantly, the _Diputado electo_, a _tipo_ rather than an individual, is not given a name.
Rural life is happy: “Los labradores que guiaban las yuntas, caballeros sobre una de las mulas, iban cantando, porque el día es la alegría de los que trabajan, y el trabajo la esperanza de los pueblos” (141-42).

City life is false and superficial; country life is linked to nature and is more generous:

En las ciudades la vida es solitaria; cada uno va encerrado en el egoísmo de su pensamiento; nadie piensa más que en sí mismo; los hombres se miran con indiferencia, con desdén o con recelo; las formas exteriores del trato no son más que aspectos convenidos, detrás de los que se oculta el interés, la animadversión, el envidia y ¡cuantas veces el odio! La sinceridad, esa gran puerta del alma, nunca se encuentra abierta.

En el campo ya es otra cosa: la naturaleza es más comunicativa, más espontánea que la sociedad; el paisaje es más alegre que la población; la sombra de los árboles es más risueña, más afable, más hospitalaria que la sombra de los palacios. Los hombres se ven, se conocen, se saludan y se hablan; las familias se mezclan, se confunden; las diferencias desaparecen ante la realidad de que es una misma la tierra que a todos sostiene y uno mismo el cielo que a todos cubre. En la ciudad, la casa se cierra, el dinero se esconde, la felicidad se finge. En el campo se parte el hogar, se parte el pan, se parte la alegría. En la ciudad todo es de uno, de dos, de tres; en el campo todo es de todos. En fin: las grandes poblaciones apenas tienen cielo; en el campo todo es horizonte. (166-67)

Noble sentiments are expressed in the advice given to Martín de Cañizares by his dying father:

Eres noble por los cuatro costados; pero ten siempre presente que los pobres son tus hermanos. El que tiene hambre tiene tanto derecho como tú al pan, que te comes. Esa es la ley que Dios nos ha impuesto. No adules al poderoso, porque te envileces; no ultrajes al desvalido, porque te infamas. Los que labran tus tierras, y vendimian tus viñas, y trillan tus mieses, son, como tú, hijos del que todo lo ha creado; no los oprimes, no los estreches, no los angusties, porque sus brazos son tu sustento. Los despilfarros arruinan; pero la avaricia será siempre odiosa. Eres fuerte, te sobran puños y no te falta corazón; ayuda al que trabaja, y ampara al menesteroso. La ley divina nos obliga más que las leyes humanas; primero Dios, y luego el Rey, porque antes has sido hombre que súbdito. Respetá para ser respetado. No imites jamás el ejemplo de esta nobleza opulenta que se degrada en las disipaciones de las grandes ciudades; es árbol seco que no da ya sombra; es la plebe de la antigua nobleza. (35-36)

All, of course, is not perfect in rural life. The villagers gossip, at times with malice. Villagers repeat and savor the cuentos verdes of the Diputado electo. The alcalde is cowardly during the wolf-hunt and is “ligero de cascos, farolón, mete-sillas y saca-muertos” (232). The alcalde introduces to an ignorant public the equally ignorant Diputado with extravagant promises of agua, puente, canal, and cuenta abierta in the tavern (116-17). Poverty exists:

Andaban a las vueltas chicos desarrapados, que al amanecer se encontraban tan vestidos como al acostarse, y, que, una manzana aquí, una naranja más allá, mal que bien, siempre encontraban algo con que desayunarse. Este era el pan de cada día. (142)
The plot, at first sight a simple morality tale, revolves around the family of Martín de Cañizares and Maria de la Paz Pacheco. Their beautiful elder daughter Aurora, her grandmother's favorite, spoilt, capricious, and imperious, defies her father's authority. Nona, the unwanted younger daughter, is affectionate, pious, and—if we use the jargon of a later age—lacks self-esteem. Thus, her humble interchange with her mother:

—¿Eres tú, hija mía?
Nona se detuvo; y con ese timbre que Dios ha puesto en la voz de los niños como recuerdo de la voz de los ángeles, contestó diciendo:
—No, madre, soy yo. (90)

Although no doubt such was not the author's intent, this reader confesses a certain sympathy for Aurora. To the Diputado's vapid declaration—"Yo viviría siempre en este Paraíso" (175)—as he attempts to seduce Aurora, Aurora brings the conversation down to earth as she denounces rural boredom:

Aquí es la vida muy sosa. Todos los días iguales, las mismas caras siempre, siempre las mismas gentes, siempre las mismas conversaciones; la siega, la siembra, la vendimia; el año se pasa mirando al cielo por si llueve o si no llueve, y no hay que hablar de otra cosa. Mi padre tan brusco; mi madre tan gorda; Nona tan santa [...]. (175)

Aurora's parents have arranged for her to be married to a relative whom she has never met from a distant village. "Dicen que es un pueblo donde la gente aulla" (176), she exclaims in despair.

The most interesting feature of Nona is that the novel contains a detective story. When most of the villagers are absent on a wolf-hunt in the sierra, precious jewels are stolen from the local church in mysterious circumstances. There are no obvious suspects; the only clue is provided by the tracking of a hunting dog, which is later poisoned. Aurora's suitor-cousin Fermín, a well-spoken lawyer and not the unwashed peasant she had feared, is dedicated to solving crime:

—Quiero decir (replicó Fermín sonriendo), que me indigna el crimen, que me gusta sorprender la astucia de los malvados. Descubrir al culpable y defender al inocente es obligación precisa de toda conciencia honrada, porque la justicia es el primer derecho de la sociedad y el primer deber del hombre. (217)

Gradually following the few clues available and aided by an experienced judge who "no se fiaba nunca de las primeras apariencias" (290), Fermín deduces the identity of the thief, an identity which will not be revealed to the reader until the final chapter ("Drama") of the novel. A further complication to the elucidation of the mystery is provided by Fermín's mistaken belief, based on the false testimony of a servant, that Nona, with whom he has fallen in love, is the thief's accomplice.

The chapters devoted to the solving of the crime are worthy of the best detective
fiction: fast-paced creation of suspense as clues are released, alternated with delaying chapters giving the Cañizares family's reaction to events. The sensational ending—Martín shoots the Diputado; the dying Diputado reveals the thief's identity; Aurora, the Diputado's accomplice, enters a convent—is trite and contrived, totally out of keeping with the careful preparation of preceding chapters. The explanation for this disappointing collapse into the melodramatic banality of the folletín, rather than the reasoned logic of detective fiction, is, of course, that Selgas was not the author of the final chapter.

Other features of Nona are occasional comic elements—ill-educated servants discussing philosophical implications of death (Chapter IV); the buffoonery of flustered servants' colliding with each other (Chapter XX)—, ironic self-conscious reference to the novelistic form (“Y como se dice en las novelas cayó desplomado sobre una silla, ocultando el rostro entre las manos” ([296]), and a surprising modernity in the evocation of unconscious motivation. The “courtship” by the Diputado, incapable of self-knowledge, of Aurora, at one and the same time teasingly aware and exasperatingly naïve, is presented in primeval terms of Adam and Eve and of predator and prey. The narrator's use of the term inconsciente must be one of the first in Spanish literature: “Esta ingratitud, digámoslo a la moderna, inconsciente […]” (51) (italics author's). On another occasion, the narrator's judgment is far more sophisticated in its penetration than one would expect in an ostensibly moralizing novel: “El cariño no suele ser ciego porque no ve, sino porque cierra los ojos por no ver” (54).

Conclusions

Flaws in Selgas's novels are evident. Conversations are often too long and can be flippant (Jaime's badinage in Dos rivales) or annoyingly slow to get to the point (Rosalía's prattle before she feeds the puppy in Una madre). The absence of detail—family names, historical setting—disconcerts the reader accustomed to the conventions of "realist" fiction. Certain elements of Selgas's novels suggest the "contamination" not of the folletín, as one might at first suppose, but rather of the theater: comic misunderstandings (the madrastra's supposition that Jaime is courting her [Dos rivales], the comandante's belief that Rosalía is enamored of him [Una madre]); scenes of buffoonery (Jaime's twice sitting on his own hat, the comandante's shrieking for his missing hat, all the while perched on his head); the ending of chapters on notes of suspense suggestive of the falling of a curtain between acts, rather than chapter breaks in a folletín; an over-reliance on conversation or on the reading aloud of letters to advance intrigue; and a fondness for paradox and for toying with the reader (Gabriel's violin case, for example).

Nevertheless, Selgas's novels do not merit the contempt with which they have been treated by such critics as Palacio Valdés. Despite longueurs in presentation, intrigues hold the interest of the reader to the end. A sense of mystery—who is the bearded man?—pervades Una madre; the posthumous Nona contains the embryo of a detective novel. Settings, both physical and social, offer convincing backdrops: the mountains of the Basque
Country for the thermal resort of Cestona, with its bored hotel guests; the huerta and parched sierras for the small-minded gossip of Murcian rural towns. Characterization, despite the polarization between the angelic and the demonic, poses no greater problems of verisimilitude than similar struggles of good and evil in the novels of Palacio Valdés. At times, the characterization is memorable in its vividness; for example, the lunatic obsessions of the comandante (Una madre), or the pert sauciness of Aurora (Nona).

In his attack on the novels of Selgas, Palacio Valdés conceded in the Murcian novelist’s favor his refusal to bore the reader by teaching a “transcendental” thesis. However, this very absence of overt religious or ideological commitment, which parallels Selgas’s corresponding failure to ground his novels in a precise historical moment, must surely be one of the reasons why Selgas’s novels suffer such total—and to my mind unjustified—neglect today.

Lexington, Kentucky
THREE NOVELS OF JOSÉ SELGAS Y CARRASCO, 1882-1883

WORKS CITED

Alarcón, Pedro Antonio de.


———. Una madre. Madrid: 1893. [La novela de ahora, no. 15]