THE GOODBYES OF "CLARÍN"

Michael Nimetz

The purpose of this article is to explore certain links between Leopoldo Alas's "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" and Zola's novel, *La Débâcle*.

Initially, one might entertain some doubts about bracketing these works. The first is of modest length, a mere eleven or twelve pages in most editions. *La Débâcle*, on the other hand, is Zola's longest novel, filling 537 pages in the Fasquelle/Le Livre de Poche edition.[1] The first has four major characters—Pinín, Rosa, "*Cordera*," and the pathetic Antón de Chinta—while *La Débâcle*, in its sweep from eastern France to Paris, mobilizes whole armies of soldiers and civilians. "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" depicts the several faces of solitude, from contented to despairing, whereas the France of 1871, chastened by defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and jolted by its bloody aftermath, the Paris Commune, cannot afford the luxury of solitude but must, instead, reconstruct itself from the ashes of military humiliation and Napoleonic myth. Zola's novel is addressed to his country, is amply documented insofar as historical fact is concerned, and is freighted with a symbolism that might best be described as organic and sociological: the rotten limbs of the French body politic will give way to vigorous, new growth, rooted in the soil itself and in those who work it. Zola summons his countrymen to a vast collective undertaking. His orientation is towards the future.

Alas's story, conversely, seems addressed to himself alone: it expresses an intimate grief and a disillusionment with life, and its symbolism is largely theological. Its orientation is towards the past. Where *La Débâcle* clearly emphasizes time and place—the Prussian invasion of 1870—in "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" the world is the invader, insinuating its way into the paradise garden in the shape of a train and its picket of hissing telegraph wires—the serpent of the Book of Genesis in its latest disguise. Alas suggests that the slaughter of the innocent occurs in every generation, transcending time and place.

Alas reviewed *La Débâcle* in the Madrid paper *El Imparcial* on July 18, 1892, and any notion that he might have read Zola's novel superficially is quickly dispelled by the exactness of his remarks. Readers of *El Imparcial* learned a great deal about *La Débâcle* from Alas's two columns of concentrated prose, and not a word seems dated. But the trick is to glean something of Alas's state of mind at the time of this review, with "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" so close to publication.[2]

The meatiest and most personal part of the review absolves Zola of certain charges often lodged against him:

> ...los que ya de antiguo nos oponíamos a ver en las novelas de Zola la consecuencia necesaria de un verdadero pesimismo metafísico, no podíamos apoyarnos antes sino en consideraciones de filosofía estética generales, y no como ahora, en claras muestras que da el autor de consuelo posible, de esperanza, en personajes como La Carolina de *L'Argent* y sobre todo en esta *Débâcle*, en que, a pesar de tanta sangre, de tanto estrago, de tanto horror, de tanta miseria, de tantas tinieblas, la impresión general y final, la nota que domina, no puede decir el que algo observe, que sea de desesperación, de pesimismo, de misantropía.

There follows a clarification of the word "pessimism":

> Téngase en cuenta que el pesimismo no consiste en reconocer desgracias, miserias, dolores, males particulares; en este punto, el optimista más alegre (y los optimistas pueden ser alegres y tristes) llegará acaso tan lejos como Schopenhauer, si es fiel observador de la vida y sabe sentir y comprender. Carlyle, el optimista por excelencia, como todo el que crea en la gran trascendencia misteriosa de la realidad, llega tan lejos como un Leopardi al reconocer la *infinita vanidad de todo*... lo aparente, lo transitorio.[3]

That Zola, in *La Débâcle*, alters his usual course by accentuating the positive insofar as man's innate capacity for good is concerned ("La idealidad en la virtud") is no crime of lèse-majesté against Naturalism: "En este punto Zola es el mismo que siempre, tan *naturalista* como el primer día, y como tiene que ser todo escritor sincero, serio, noble."

In other words: whether a writer is an optimist or a pessimist by temperament is beside the point. What matters is his accuracy as an observer and his ability to feel and convey the transient nature of reality. Once a writer acknowledges the poignancy of Time's sway over all things, he is free to exploit the subject matter of his choice, no matter how sordid, for even the most brutish aspects of reality achieve transcendence under Time's wings. Alas implies that a work of fiction is great only to the degree that it constitutes a "memento mori" in whose wake the reader experiences a deep and reflective melancholy. This is the true lesson of fiction and, by extension, of all art.

But *La Débâcle* only selectively fits this program, which explains the rather tepid enthusiasm I perceive in Alas's review. Zola's lesson has little to do with eternal verities and eternal sadness, but with the here and now: "*La Débâcle* es un libro de medicina moral, un verdadero tratado práctico de patología y de terapéutica social en forma puramente artística." He adds: "es *La Débâcle* [...] un libro edificante a su manera [...]. En él pueden aprender los franceses muchas cosas sobre las que les conviene reflexionar."

Zola's plea is to "l'énergie nationale," in Barrès's phrase, and his opening to the future—which is now, 1892, twenty years after the events described in the novel—is at odds with Alas's "lesson" as noted above. The dynamism of Zola's message, to the effect that one can alter reality for the better, is the polar opposite of Alas's recurrent lassitude and dejection. In *La Regenta*, *Su único hijo*, "Doña Berta," and "Superchería," to name just four works, every adventure, every attempt to harness one's energies and live more expansively, is met with a door slammed shut in one's face. Ana's awakening to sexual pleasure is chastised by the author; Bonis's existential need to perpetuate himself must counter allegations of his son's illegitimacy and ends in hysteria and isolation; Berta is crushed to death when she emerges from the womb of Susacasa into the throbbing vitality of Madrid; and Nicolás Serrano is so terrified by the stirrings of passion that he surrenders Caterina without a fight, abjuring adulthood and its risks for the safety of worship from afar. Unlike Zola's characters, Alas's are often stillborn, stunted by life.

What, then, is the connection between "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" and *La Débâcle*?

The most memorable stylistic feature of "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" is the repetition of the word "Adiós" which , in the final pages of the story, knells no less than fourteen times in the phrases "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!," "¡Adiós, Rosa!" and "¡Adiós, Pinín!" A strikingly similar effect occurs at the

end of *La Débâcle* where the word "adieu" is repeated five times. Of the profound love between Jean and Henriette, the reader is told: "ils ne s'aimaient ouvertement, à cette heure, que pour l'adieu éternel." A sentence or two later: "Jean se releva, d'un long et pénible effort des genoux.

> "Adieu!"
> Sur le carreau, Henriette restait immobile.
> "Adieu!"

A bit further along:

> Dans un sanglot, Jean répéta:
> "Adieu!"
> Henriette ne releva pas la tête, la face cachée entre ses deux mains jointes.
> "Adieu!"

A short paragraph concludes the novel (556-58).

This painful leave-taking, punctuated by a series of "Adieux!," must have struck a chord in Alas, who uses the device to far more wrenching effect. By nearly tripling the repetition of "¡Adiós!" within the confines of a short story (and by having incorporated the word in his title like a foreshadowing), Alas achieves a sense of utter finality and oblivion superseding Zola's decorous "Adieu!" The reader knows that Pinín will never return alive to Somonte meadow: the successive goodbyes of the text toll his death as they had *Cordera's*. And Rosa's sorrow makes a frantic sob of the word, whose intensity goes well beyond the muted, wistful "Adieu!" of Jean and Henriette.

But well before examining these final pages of *La Débâcle* and "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" the attentive reader of both works must surely conclude that Alas internalized Zola's novel to such a degree that reminiscences of *La Débâcle* permeate the Spaniard's text. For example: in Chapter 2 of *La Débâcle* the men of the 106th line regiment, shunted from pillar to post by inept commanders during the first chaotic weeks of war, are at one point crammed into "wagons à bestiaux," at whose passage, "les populations accourues ne recevaient au visage, dans le coup de vent de la locomotive et la vision rapide du train, noyé de vapeur et de bruit, que le hurlement de toute cette chair à canon, charriée à grande vitesse." Artillery men shout the drunken refrain, "A la boucherie! à la boucherie! à la boucherie!," prompting one soldier to reflect: "c'est dégoûtant d'envoyer un tas de braves garçons se faire casser la gueule, pour de sales histoires dont ils ne savent pas le premier mot" (55-57).

We have only to compare this passage with the image of Pinín and his fellow recruits, stuffed into what is metaphorically a cattle car, hurtling towards their slaughter in the second Carlist War:

> Silbó a lo lejos la máquina, apareció el tren en la trinchera, pasó como un relámpago. Rosa, casi metida por las ruedas, pudo ver un instante en un coche de tercera multitud de cabezas de pobres quintos que gritaban,

gesticulaban saludando a los árboles, al suelo, a los campos, a toda la patria familiar, a la pequeña, que dejaban para ir a morir en las luchas fratricidas de la patria grande, al servicio de un rey y de unas ideas que no conocían. (18)[4]

As she watches Pinín's train rush by, Rosa reflects bitterly on this "carne de mi alma, carne de cañón para las locuras del mundo, para las ambiciones ajenas."

The echo effect of Zola's "chair à canon" in Alas's "carne de cañón" may well be coincidental, since this figure of speech had been long acclimatized in France and, presumably, in Spain, but Alas's evocation of "ignorant armies", seems too close to the French text to be merely coincidental.[5]

But these echoes fade before the more significant fact that two of the main characters in *La Débâcle* are twins, just as in "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" Pinín and Rosa are "los niños gemelos."[6] And here I must sketch certain details of *La Débâcle* in order to show how Alas adapted the principal relationships in Zola's novel for his own purposes.

A burst of patriotic fervour impels Maurice Levasseur, Zola's symbol of Third Empire Paris, to enlist in the war against Prussia. Nourished on the exploits of the Grande Armée as a child, this grandson of a Napoleonic hero hopes, by enlisting, to atone for his wastrel existence and repay a moral debt to his adored twin sister, Henriette. Their mother having died in childbirth, it is Henriette who raises him, who ekes out the money for his law studies in Paris—only to see their father die from the strain as Maurice squanders everything on gambling and women—and who finally succeeds in making a "monsieur" of him. The outbreak of hostilities gives the high-strung and dissolute Maurice, who oscillates between feverish enthusiasm and black depression, the chance to regenerate himself in the crucible of war.

Throughout *La Débâcle* Zola underscores the twins' utter devotion to each other, despite the upheavals of war and Maurice's fitful character. When Maurice insists on rejoining the fight before a wound has healed, Henriette exclaims: "Que dis-tu? affaibli comme tu l'es, ayant tant souffert! mais je te garde, jamais je ne te permettrai de partir!...Est-ce que tu n'as pas payé ta dette? Songe à moi aussi, que tu laisserais seule, et qui n'ai plus que toi désormais!" Zola adds: "Leurs larmes se confondirent. Ils s'embrassèrent éperdument, dans leur adoration, cette tendresse des jumeaux, plus étroite, comme venue de par-delà la naissance" (429).

This same motif of a love so deep as to predate birth recurs at the novel's end, as Henriette contemplates the body of her dead brother and her own fathomless solitude: "Son frère, mon Dieu! son Maurice adoré par-delà la naissance, qui était un autre elle-même, qu'elle avait élevé, sauvé!" With Henriette recently widowed, the war has snuffed out her sole remaining bond, her "unique tendresse."[7]

The bond between Maurice and Henriette makes such a passion of inviolateness as to have surely appealed to the sentimentalist in "Clarín." Another bond, forged between Maurice and his corporal, Jean Macquart, is, if anything, more intense and fraternal and constitutes the spine of *La Débâcle*. It too seems to have left a mark on "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" in its portrayal of a comradeship untainted by sex and engendered when the world was young:

N'était-ce point la fraternité des premiers jours du monde, l'amitié avant toute culture et toutes classes, cette amitié de deux hommes unis et confondus, dans leur commun besoin d'assistance, devant la menace de la nature ennemie?" (144)

The ties between the volatile, newly urbanized Maurice, and the steadfast Jean, who is of peasant stock, evolve from hatred to love as each man finds completeness in the other. Maurice reflects:

la fraternité qui avait grandi entre ce paysan et lui, allait au fond de son être, à la racine même de la vie. Cela remontait peut-être aux premiers jours du monde, et c'était aussi comme s'il n'y avait plus eu que deux hommes, dont l'un n'aurait pu renoncer à l'autre, sans renoncer à lui-même. (294)

The friendship between Maurice and Jean reaches its apotheosis when the two men, beset by Prussian soldiers, find themselves alone in deep woods, the Belgian frontier and safety near at hand:

C'était la détente de leur long tourment, la joie de se dire que la douleur allait peut-être avoir pitié d'eux. Et ils se serraient d'une étreinte éperdue, dans la fraternité de tout ce qu'ils venaient de souffrir ensemble; et le baiser qu'ils échangèrent alors leur parut le plus fort de leur vie, un baiser tel qu'ils n'en recevraient jamais d'une femme, l'immortelle amitié, l'absolue certitude que leurs deux coeurs n'en faisaient plus qu'un, pour toujours. (423)

This transcendent union comes apart during the Commune, when Jean and Maurice man opposite sides of the barricades and Jean unwittingly bayonets his "communard" friend. With Henriette and the conscience-stricken Jean in attendance, Maurice eventually dies of his wound. Sister and brother are thus torn from one another, as are brother from brother (for how else can we envision Jean and Maurice?). And, finally, in the "adieux" already cited, Jean and Henriette turn the page on the long, unblemished idyll they once shared far from the battlefield, when the injured Jean was cared for by Henriette: "Heures bien douces pourtant, car la tendresse était venue, une tendresse qu'ils croyait fraternelle, entre leurs deux coeurs qui avaient peu à peu appris à se connaître" (451). This fraternal love constitutes the third panel in Zola's triptych of platonic intimacies. That it might later develop into something else remains unacknowledged because of Maurice's death:

La graine qui germait avait cheminé sourdement, elle l'aimait d'amour, ce garçon près duquel elle n'avait d'abord été que consolée. Et leurs regards se disaient cela, et ils ne s'aimaient ouvertement, à cette heure, que pour l'adieu éternel. Il fallait encore cet affreux sacrifice, l'arrachement dernier, leur bonheur possible la veille s'écroulant aujourd'hui avec le reste, s'en allant avec le flot de sang qui venait d'emporter leur frère. (556)

The words "leur frère" indicate that Zola himself had perhaps fallen under the spell of Henriette's earlier pipe-dream of a devoted threesome living harmoniously and fraternally, "le rêve de leur intimité à trois, dans un avenir de bonheur encore possible" (553). I need not underline the affinity between this passage and the first words of "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!": "¡Eran tres, siempre los tres!: Rosa, Pinín y la *Cordera*." What should be stressed, however, is that Alas reinforces the purity of his characters through the invention of *Cordera*, "grandmother cow," whose amorous frolics and calf-bearing days are long over ("ya no recordaba cuándo le había picado la mosca"), just as Zola, who makes a widow of Henriette and a widower of Jean, avoids any hint of past conjugal rapture on the part of either. (Sex in *La Débâcle* is relegated to the secondary characters, although Zola does allude to Maurice's debaucheries as a student in Paris.) In his review of *La Débâcle* Alas admires this reticence—"todo es puro y casto en *La Débâcle*"—as well as the Frenchman's sober depiction of the war. But to the denatured epic themes of love and war Alas adds two others of greater immediacy: poverty, which leads to *Cordera*'s death, and political corruption, which leads to Pinín's. If Alas wields his pen lightly with respect to these symptoms of injustice, it is because they do not, in themselves, convey the "pessimism" or "sadness" that he sought to instill in "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" Alas did not propose to write a tract. What impressed him most in *La Débâcle* was its "eternal note of sadness," that is, the disintegration of all cherishable human ties. Zola's call for the reintegration of France left him unmoved. Recall that *La Débâcle* ends with Jean striding towards the future, which is essentially a form of greeting or, at the very least, of acceptance. Alas, by contrast, leaves Rosa stranded in Somonte meadow, her ear to the metallic song of the telegraph wire as it vibrates with Pinín's everlasting "¡Adiós!" Pinín's and *Cordera*'s physical expulsion from paradise is followed by Rosa's expulsion "in situ" where the fork-tongued serpent sings its serenade in mocking imitation of Pinín's voice.

This mockery of an afterlife, created by a twist of Rosa's imagination, suggests that all deserving creatures have been denied their just rewards since the beginning of time. For *Cordera*, as mother and grandmother, represents two generations, while Pinín represents a third. By implication, then, every generation of innocent souls faces oblivion as if in punishment for its very innocence. Pinín's voice from beyond is a cruel deception and a veritable "coup de grâce": as in the case of *Doña Berta*, which is the truest companion piece to "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" in Alas's œuvre, the world outside the garden is the end of the line, and is no less the end for all its parodic extension of life.[8]

We may say, then, in conclusion, that if Alas was influenced by *La Débâcle* when writing "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!," it was the novel's lyricism, not its epic qualities, that attracted him. It must be recalled that Zola's main intention was to show how France fell apart as a result of Third Empire depravity, military incompetence, and, with regard to the Commune, the alienation of the Parisian underclass. The characters of *La Débâcle*, symbolizing national defeat and national redemption, are, therefore, representative of French society at that time. Their humanity, more often than not, is at the service of a patriotic ideal. Alas, on the other hand, transcends the limits of nationality in "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" with a message at once more bleak and universal. The message is perfectly clear: when innocent children and benevolent creatures like *Cordera* are destroyed, it is because God's original sacrifice has not changed men's hearts, and the meek are fated never to inherit the earth.[9]

Hunter College, City University of New York.

NOTES

[1] All page references are to this edition.

[2] Some chronology may be of interest. *La Débâcle* was at the booksellers by June 24, 1892, although it had been seralized in *La Vie populaire* from February of that year. Alas's review of Zola's novel appeared on July 18, 1892. Shortly thereafter, on July 27, "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" was published in the Madrid newspaper *El Liberal*. It was later included in the collection, *El Señor y lo demás, son cuentos*, of 1893.

[3] For the best discussion of "pessimism" and "sadness" as they relate to Alas's views on Naturalism, see Beser (160-64 and passim). See also Alas's own "Prólogo" to Pardo Bazán's *La cuestión palpitante*.

[4] These "fratricidal struggles" of 1872-75 have their counterpart in the Paris Commune of 1871, which Zola, in Chapter 7 of *La Débâcle*, calls "cette guerre fratricide." That *La Débâcle* and "¡Adiós, *Cordera*!" coincide chronologically is yet another link between the two works.

[5] According to *Le Grand Robert* (2: 465), Chateaubriand attributed the coinage of "chair à canon" to Napoleon. Ferdinand Brunot, however, cannot bring himself to swallow this: "Est-ce vraiment Napoléon qui aurait lâché l'affreuse expression de 'chair à canon,' comme l'en accusait Chateaubriand?"

See also the pilotless train careering towards the Rhine at the end of *La Bête humaine*: "Sans conducteur, au milieu des ténèbres, en bête aveugle et sourde qu'on aurait lâchée parmi la mort, elle roulait, elle roulait, chargée de cette chair à canon, de ces soldats, déjà hébétés de fatigue, et ivres, qui chantaient" (435).

In English the closest equivalent to the term is "cannon fodder," derived from the German "kannonenfutter." See Shakespeare's "food for powder" in *Henry IV*, IV, II, 72.

[6] In Chapter 1 of *La Débâcle* Zola introduces Maurice Levasseur and "sa soeur jumelle Henriette." I find it odd that Alas, in his review of *La Débâcle*, fails to mention that Maurice and Henriette are twins. As for "los niños gemelos," Alas identifies Pinín and Rosa as such in a passage about the evening star and the first pale gleam of other stars. Castor and Pollux may well be the subtext here, the word "gemelos" suggesting a mythic dimension not at all anomalous in this context. One wonders if Ramón Pérez de Ayala, a fervent admirer of Alas, retained some vague memory of Pinín and Rosa during the writing of *Luz de domingo* years later. From the outset, its protagonists Cástor and Balbina are united more in friendship than in passion.

[7] Unlike Pinín and Rosa, the characters in *La Débâcle* are adults; Zola seldom evokes the twins' childhood. There is a fleeting moment in the novel, however, which does recall the mood of Alas's story. The grandfather of Maurice and Henriette, an old Napoleonic veteran subsisting on a meagre pension in a country backwater, regales the twins with tales, "n'ayant d'autres consolations que de conter ses campagnes à ses petits-enfants, les deux jumeaux, le garçon et la fille, aux même cheveux blonds, dont il était un peu la mère" (67). The old man personifies the glory days of "l'énergie nationale" as *Cordera*, in Alas's story, embodies the wisdom of non-action and isolation from the world. No detail could better illustrate the difference in temperament between Zola and Alas.

[8] I am thinking here of Berta's dying cat and the heartbreakingly factitious memories that Alas invents for it. In essence, Alas kills Berta twice.

[9] It would be worthwhile to explore other thematic links between Alas and Zola. For instance, a possible source for the central intrigue of "Superchería" (1892) may be found in Zola's *La Bête humaine* (1890). Alas seems to have appropriated a minor, if suggestive, detail from Zola's novel—the presence in a train compartment in Chapter 1 of a black-clad woman who eventually disappears without a trace: "Roubaud [...] avait eu la surprise désagréable d'apercevoir, dans ce compartiment qu'il croyait vide, une forme sombre occupant un coin, une femme en deuil sans doute, muette, immobile" (39). The woman in question is later sought by the police as a possible witness to a murder but can nowhere be found: "quant à la femme noire, muette en son coin, elle s'était dissipée comme une ombre, il avait été absolument impossible de la retrouver" (Chapter IV: 115). Roubaud's wife, an accessory to the murder, evokes what

she imagines to be the mind-reading ability of this woman: "Et il y avait, en face de moi, une femme en noir qui ne disait rien et qui me faisait grand-peur. Je ne la voyais même pas, je m'imaginais qu'elle lisait clairement dans nos crânes, qu'elle savait très bien ce que nous voulions faire" (Chapter VIII: 262).

Alas transformed these poetic fragments, Zola's cast-offs, into the vanishing nun and the pythoness, Caterina Porena, in "Superchería." He must also have been struck, in *La Bête humaine*, by the murderers' passage from one section of the train to another, for he incorporates Zola's invention of an outside footboard to explain, in his own story, how the nun escapes from her compartment on the Madrid express.

WORKS CITED

Alas, Leopoldo. "Clarín." "¡Adiós, *Cordero*!" *y otros cuentos*. Madrid: Austral, 1966.

———. *Cuentos* ("Superchería," "Cuervo," "Doña Berta"). Madrid: Taurus, 1980.

———. "LA DEBACLE." *Los Lunes de El Imparcial*. (July 18, 1892): 1.

Beser, Sergio. *Leopoldo Alas, crítico literario*. Madrid: Gredos, 1968.

Brunot, Ferdinand. *Histoire de la langue française*. Vol. 9. Deuxième Partie. Paris: A. Colin, 1967.

Le Grand Robert. 2 vols. Paris: Le Robert, 1985.

Zola, Émile. *La Bête humaine*. Paris: Fasquelle/Le Livre de Poche, 1972.

———. *La Débâcle*. Paris: Fasquelle/Le Livre de Poche, 1993.