Stillborn Texts and Barren Imaginaries in Leopoldo Alas’s Su único hijo (1891)

Bryan Cameron

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¡Un hijo, un hijo de mi alma! Ese es el avatar que yo necesito. ¡Un ser que sea yo mismo, pero empezando de nuevo, fuera de mí, con sangre de mi sangre!
—Leopoldo Alas, Su único hijo

From the outset of his literary career, Leopoldo Alas (Clarin) launched a number of biting critiques regarding aesthetics, literature, and ideology in late nineteenth-century Spain. Much like Miguel de Cervantes in Don Quijote (1605, 1615), the Asturian novelist seeks to question the authority of stagnant narrative forms while destabilizing the traditionally paternal voice of the author. As a result, Alas’s second novel Su único hijo, like Cervantes’s Don Quijote, effectively renegotiates the textual mediation between author and reader, exchanging the conventional father (novelist) and son (narrative) relationship for one that is far more cryptic. The purpose of this gesture, as I will argue here, represents

1 Here I refer to the advice recounted in the prologue to Don Quijote I, dispensed by a sketchily drawn friend to create “una invectiva” that would “deshacer la autoridad y cabida que en el mundo y en el vulgo tienen los libros de caballerı´ as” (101). The friend goes on to suggest that Cervantes unearth a lengthy catalogue of authors by searching for “un libro que los acote todos, desde la A hasta la Z” so that he may expedite the process of citing them, which would “dar de improviso autoridad al libro,” simultaneously marking an aesthetic innovation and imbuing the work with a marked sense of authority (100–01). However, as Ciriaco Morón Arroyo points out, such textual transformations in Don Quijote do not lack their own unambiguous Christian origins, which become perceptible in part through Cervantine play on perspectivism (unstable authority, text in translation, doubts surrounding Cervantes’s agency as the work’s author), a form of modesty that acknowledges the limits of human knowledge. This ability to recognize the restrictions placed on man’s aesthetic creations—known as eironeia—reminds us of the self-mediating agency of the roles outlined by Cervantes in both parts of Don Quijote: those of reader and writer (103).

2 Contesting paternity, within Alas’s novel, much like the confrontation between Cervantes and his bastard son (the “unauthorized” version of the Quijote’s second half, published by Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda in 1614), allows us to establish a link between Su único hijo and Don Quijote in that they both cast the novel in reproductive terms by positing the novel “como hijo del entendimiento” (Cervantes 95). Such a symbolic confrontation clearly places father (as author) and son (as textual object) in an ambiguous and often oppositional relationship.
an attempt to effect the rebirth of the modern Spanish novel, which, he claims in the 1870s, is still a fledgling creation at the beginning of its “gloriosa carrera” (qtd. in Beser 43). Crucially, this concern continues to shape Alas’s perception of Spanish letters, as he later goes on to explore the transitional state of the novel in the 1880s and 1890s in a number of journalistic pieces devoted to the “renacer, mejor nacer, acaso, de la novela” in Restoration Spain. In this essay I cite a number of Alas’s critical essays from the last two decades of the nineteenth century that theorize the predicament facing Spanish letters following the Restoration of the Bourbons in 1874. These articles foreground a number of the conflicts Alas infuses so deftly in Su único hijo, emphasizing the anarchic ebb and flow of historical change at the end of the century as the exhaustion of the realist mode circulates concurrently with the surge of naturalist and spiritualist writings while modernism begins to take shape.

In Su único hijo, Alas presents his readers with an unsolvable conundrum (the mystery of Antonio Reyes’s paternity), which is further complicated by the dizzying circulation of three distinct aesthetic modes within the novel (realism, modernism, and the primitive). Moreover, just as he dislodges his protagonist’s (Bonifacio Reyes) paternal force, he situates his reader within a bewildering textual space while exploring the bounds of indecipherability. To do so, Alas relies on a number of textual strategies to disorient both the reader and the protagonist of Su único hijo; he renders temporality indeterminate, destabilizes normative gender roles, questions narrative authority, manipulates a number of literary forms and traditions, and inserts a number of references to other literary works. Alas integrates all of these narrative tactics in order to infuse his novel with a profound sense of deception and discord, which mirror his own experiences
composing his first novel after the commercial success of *La Regenta* (1884–85). This last point is crucial, not because what follows sets out to provide a psycho-biographical analysis of Alas and his work, but rather because it permits us to understand Alas’s position as a highly esteemed cultural and literary critic in *fin-de-siècle* Spain. The novelist, forced to grapple with a number of frenetic changes in the social, political, economic, and aesthetic landscapes, articulates a poetics of impossibility in his correspondence and within the narrative structures he applies to his second novel.

During the nineteenth century, works of art undergo a process of “autonomization” (Jameson 2), which reveals that the representation of an “objective reality” is wholly unviable since the latter “no longer exists” (9). This process of aesthetic autonomization mirrors the social dissolution taking place at the end of the nineteenth century by emphasizing the disintegration of “a homogeneous public” along with the “social fragmentation and anomic of the bourgeoisie itself” (17). Such anxieties are reflected in Alas’s critical works, transmitted through his repeated calls for the conception of “una legítima manera nueva del pensamiento artístico” (qtd. in Beser 167). As I contend throughout this essay, Alas’s search for narrative innovation can be read as one bent on crafting a mode of narrative expression that is endowed with the capacity to transcend the relentless social and aesthetic discontinuities troubling Restoration Spain.

The novel, as both the privileged vehicle of communication and the site of “grandes obstáculos,” (65), stands, at best, for Alas as the only means of escape from “el lenguaje trillado de nuestra literatura” (71). At its worst, he perceives the novel as a narrative form spiraling recklessly out of control into “todos los vientos del capricho” (64). Alas’s concerns surrounding the Spanish novel’s devolution into an unruly and irrational mode of expression become increasingly palpable as he delves into an idiom of reproduction, advocating the novel’s singular capacity to deliver “el germen fecundo de la vida contemporánea” to the masses and warning against its potential descent into “un subjetivismo caprichoso, infecundo y petulante.” In several of his critical works, Alas posits the 1880s as a crossroads of sorts for the Spanish novel as he works through a number of narrative modes in circulation, along with their various interpolative employments, in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. What we find when we read Alas’s essayistic works alongside his second book, *Su único hijo*, is an immense preoccupation with the need to regenerate Spanish narrative. This anxiety is channeled symbolically through the confounding birth of Antonio Reyes and the subsequent paternal indeterminacy surrounding his parentage.

While some critics claim that Alas’s political impulses had subsided by the late 1880s, it is undeniable that much of his journalistic output continued to advocate expanded suffrage and democracy in Spain throughout the duration of his

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6 This approach is particularly important given Lou Charnon-Deutsch’s recent appraisal of Clarei’s studies in “Between Agency and Determinism: A Critical Review of Clarei Studies.” As Charnon-Deutsch cogently argues: “What Clarei studies lack . . . is a theoretical examination of subjectivity and representation in their historical contexts and a critical stance that moves beyond the role of psychologist grappling, as it were, with a real identity” (150).
career. It is certain, however, that the novelist’s youthful inclination for a radical “república de las ‘turbulentas masas’” had begun to fade by the time he started drafting *Su único hijo* (Martínez Otero 48). The Alas who once vehemently contended that “la democracia ... no puede abandonar al pueblo” (qtd. in Lissorgues, *Clarín político* 211) would later be reduced to lamenting the state of Spanish politics under Restoration leadership by writing, “la democracia en estas condiciones es imposible” (qtd. in *Clarín político* 38). Crucially, the reduction in Alas’s ideological output is most likely connected to the suppression of journalistic freedom following an 1875 decree, which demanded all printed work be subject to governmental approval. As Lissorgues writes, “[a]l volver a Madrid después de Reyes [en 1876], Leopoldo y sus amigos saben que las cosas no van a seguir como antes, que las elementales libertades conquistadas durante los últimos años están amenazadas. Un real decreto de finales de diciembre somete la publicación de libros y periódicos a censura previa” (*Leopoldo Alas* 153). In fact, in a poem printed in the democratic paper *El Solfeo* in December of 1875, Alas discussed the challenges associated with being a journalist opposed to the current state of Spanish politics:

¡Oh dichosa ocupación,
fácil y llano sendero!
puedo decir lo que quiero
pero
con la sola condición
de no hacer oposición
que en buenas manos está el pandero.
(qtd. in *Leopoldo Alas* 167)

Without a doubt, many critics of Alas’s novelistic works often fail to acknowledge the intensity of his political writing following the Restoration of the Bourbons in 1874. In fact, while the frequency of his journalistic production may have faded in his maturity, he did continue to work actively for democratic newspapers such as *El Solfeo* (between 1875 and 1878) and *La Unión* (between 1878 and 1880). Accordingly, essays such as “La comedia política,” “Hay que sanear la vida política,” “Corrupción del sistema político de la Restauración,” “Cacicuismo asturiano,” “Cánovas y su tiempo,” and “Una democracia para la emancipación del pueblo” all speak to Alas’s commitment to the liberal ideals of his youth.

7 In 1896, Alas scathingly queried: “¿Y cómo se prepara el Gobierno a consultar al país, a pedirle su consejo su voto...? Burlándose, como siempre, del sufragio universal; preparando, para su comodidad, una mayoría que va a parecer reclutada en el tiro de pichón, a juzgar por el encasillado de ciertas provincias” (qtd. in García San Miguel, *El pensamiento* 271). Just two years later, he expressed further resignation, lamenting that “El pueblo ... se deja robar el sufragio.”

8 García San Miguel succinctly interprets the evolution of Alas’s political engagement as a withdrawal from radicalism and a turn toward moderation: “Como tantos otros, [Alas] fue haciéndose más conservador, aceptando la realidad de su época” (“Sobre el pensamiento” 13).
The filiative conflicts present within *Su único hijo* undoubtedly refer back to the socio-histcic conditions of Spanish politics under the Restoration—patriarchal anxiety following the death of Alfonso XII in November of 1885, the birth of Alfonso’s lone male heir nearly six months later, and the failure of *regeneracionismo liberal*. A project undone by its own perplexing lack of direction, liberal regeneration has often been characterized as a reflection of a disoriented historical consciousness in *fin-de-siècle* Spain. Further complicating matters, the fracture of the once indelible identification between Castile and Spain exacerbated separatist regionalisms, giving rise to claims launched by intellectuals such as Joan Margall that “[e]l espíritu castellano ha concluido su misión en España” for its lack of analytical strength and its inability to reap the benefits of material progress designed to induce cosmopolitanism (228). Castile, now stranded on “un centro de naturaleza africana, sin vistas al mar” (229), faced a number of insurgent regionalist nationalisms (Basque, Catalan, and Galician) and its defenders were seen as little more than reactionary proponents of a national identity that had already lost most of its cultural and political capital.

The uncertainties plaguing Spanish nationalism were further complicated by ideological clashes between the liberal state and Catholic traditionalists who in the 1880s began an aggressive tactical mission to diffuse a message centered on the Church’s providential mission in the New World. Targeted as both a strategy to commemorate the Catholic Church’s civilizing achievements in the Americas and as a means to savage the voracious greed of the liberal State, the discord between religious traditionalists and liberal freethinkers signals yet another obstacle in the effort to map a legible Spanish national identity. As socioeconomic forces begin to stratify, the “perplexing situation of semi-integration” that defines Spanish nationalism late in the nineteenth century indicates a newfound propensity for cultural pluralism (Manzano Moreno and Pérez Garzón 280). The once-hegemonic construction of Spain’s national identity, linked inextricably to the preeminence of Castile, gets undermined as a more heterogeneous conception of Spain materialized, one that promoted the coherence of the nation’s autonomous regions. It should make sense, therefore, that the social and political upheavals taking place in the two decades preceding the turn of the century would surface as textual preoccupations in the works of *fin-de-siècle* novelists.

Grappling with the era’s historical sea change, Alas’s essayistic works expose the author’s own ambivalence regarding both the production of contemporary

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9 As Eduardo Manzano Moreno and Juan Sisinto Pérez Garzón explain, “the failure of liberal historiography to create an idea of the nation clearly distinguishable from the Church or the Crown led to a major weakness in the concept of Spain” that was further destabilized by the “the emergence of various regional nationalist tendencies that rejected the equation between Castile and Spain” (271). For an adroit reading of the increasingly conspicuous dissolution of the association between Castile and Spain that took place in the decades preceding the turn of the century, see Julio Carabana. See Cerezo Galán’s excellent *El mal del siglo* for his discussion of the multifarious and discombobulated nature of Spanish regenerationism (223-34).

10 See Adolfo Sotelo Vázquez and Yvan Lissorgues (*El pensamiento filosófico*).

11 Even an intellectual such as José Ortega y Gasset, associated with a Castile-centric conception of Spanish nationalism, later expressed similar sentiments with his famous statement: “Castilla ha hecho a España y Castilla la ha deshecho” (55).
criticism and its reception by the Spanish public. In railing against both writers and readers, Alas transmits an unveiled dissatisfaction with the intellectual climate of the Restoration as he clamors for narrative experimentation and a readership willing to follow "[un] criterio de lectura, que es el de los verdaderos hombres de gusto y de instrucción seria" (Ensayos y revistas 143). In 1882, Alas pointedly employs the term experimentación to describe the tenets of the naturalist mode, which, as he claims, should untether authorial restraints that render the artist a passive spectator, thereby, in Alas’s estimation, diminishing the writer’s capacity to "dar alguna enseñanza" (qtd. in Beser 130). Discussing the often-volatile interplay between the novelist’s authority and the increasing empowerment of the reader, just as the narrative object becomes imbued with its own sense of autonomy, my intention here is to disclose a number of the textual strategies employed by Alas in Su único hijo so that we may read his novel as a paradigmatic exemplar of the fin-de-siècle obsession with narrative (re)production.

As a modernist aesthetic consciousness begins to emerge in late nineteenth-century Spain, novelists such as Alas are forced to contend with the delirious circulation of three aesthetic modes: realism, modernism, and what Jameson calls “the primitive” (8). For a writer such as Alas, the regenerative evolution of the Spanish novel requires multiple points of intellectual and affective contact between author and reader. As we pore over Alas’s essays on the intellectual climate of Restoration Spain, it becomes increasingly evident that his anxieties surrounding the accelerated dispersion of literary forms reflect the fact that the Spanish novel, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, failed to make a significant impact on the reading public. For Alas, “las nuevas ideas” emerging in fin-de-siècle Spain remained alarmingly immobile (qtd. in Beser 65), trapped within “moldes estrechos para los pensamientos de que han de ser vehículo,” which prevented the Spanish public from becoming “en espíritu, contemporáneo de todos los grandes autores” (Alas, Ensayos y revistas 143). Such distress, in striking parallel to the failure of the liberal program following the Revolution of 1868, manifests itself thematically in Su único hijo through the protagonist’s feverish search for meaning in a number of textual spaces (the workplace, matrimony, the romantic novel, the world of aesthetics) though none resonates quite as palpably as his need to become a father and complete “[l]a cadena de los padres y los hijos” (440). This chain of paternity, “remontándose por sus eslabones hacia el pasado,” consists of “todo amor, abnegación, la unidad sincera, real, caritativa, de la pobre raza humana” (440–41), providing Alas with the opportunity to underscore the acceleration of concurrent literary modes since he claims that “la cadena venía de lo pasado a lo presente, a lo

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12 Alas’s empowerment of the reader is on full display in his essay titled “La novela novelesca” as he claims that “el lector es el que puede escoger esas obras entre las que el maestro deja sin saber cuál le salió mejor” (Ensayos y revistas 142–43).

13 This alludes tacitly to the political situation in Spain following the 1868 Revolution, which remained entrenched in “la vieja política romántica,” bringing about the realization that “el nuevo ‘orden de cosas’ esperado de la Revolución nunca llegaría a consumarse” (Suárez Miramón 34).
The Clarinian notion of the author as father emphatically reverberates throughout *Su único hijo* as the threat of the broken paternal chain hovers menacingly alongside the *fin-des-siècle* novelists’ inability to generate an innovative form of narrative that would stimulate “la futura metafísica, que no será una reacción, sino otra cosa que es lógico que no podamos encerrar” (*Ensayos y revistas* 145).

Yearning for an innovative novelistic form that offers an alternative to the rigid confines of naturalism or positivism,¹⁴ Alas repeatedly expresses his dismay with modern European narrative and its absent poetic dimension.¹⁵ He deems Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* “poco poética,” while claiming that Émile Zola’s *Le rève* (1888), Juan Valera’s *Pepita jiménez* (1874), and two of Benito Pérez Galdós’ works, *Marianela* (1878) and *El amigo Manso* (1882), are all “algo poéticas” (*Ensayos y revistas* 155). And while Alas is almost entirely unclear as to what characterizes the poetic novel,¹⁶ he argues that it would be “muy bien venida” in Spain as a regenerative source capable of providing “ese perfume ideal que dejan los *lieder* de Goethe; el *Reisebilder*, de Heine; las *Noches*, de Musset; cualquier cosa de Shakespeare . . . y el hálito ideal de *Don Quijote*.” As Alas imagines new paths for the *fin-des-siècle* novel, a striking fascination with spiritualist literature and its propensity for peace, harmony, and intelligence begins to dominate his thoughts.¹⁷ This strain of idealist narrative, unbound by the need to negate or annul that which exceeds naturalism’s scope,¹⁸ is, for Alas, a form uniquely endowed with the capacity to express a “nuevo anhelo” or a “nueva aspiración religiosa y filosófica” that could ultimately reveal the novel’s undistorted purpose (154). A similar path is explored in *Su único hijo* as Bonifacio Reyes contemplates the legitimating authority awaiting him through “una tercera vía: la espiritualista, a través del sacerdocio de la paternidad y de la religión de la familia” (62). Reyes, who views his spiritual reformation as a prerequisite for

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¹⁴ Here we might consider the preface Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote for *À rebours* (1884) twenty years after its original publication in which he reflects on naturalism’s torpidity: “Naturalism was then in full swing; but this school, which was to accomplish the invaluable service of placing real characters in precisely described settings, was fated to go on endlessly repeating itself and marking time on the spot” (183). Like Alas, Huysmans contemplates a textual space that transcends stagnant literary movements, stating: “I was vaguely searching for a way out from a cul-de-sac where I was suffocating, but I had no definite plan; *Against Nature* . . . gave me air and rescued me from a kind of literature which led nowhere” (185).

¹⁵ He describes this poetic aspect as “un poco de lo *lírico* y hasta en lo *musical* en cuanto cosa del espíritu” (*Ensayos y revistas* 155).

¹⁶ Tellingly, Alas never offers a direct answer to his own query: “Pero, ¿qué es la novela poética?” (*Ensayos y revistas* 155).

¹⁷ Alas exalts the “tendencias armónicas” and “afán generoso de paz, armonía, inteligencia en la literatura religiosa” stimulated by the “evidentes transformaciones del positivismo” (*Ensayos y revistas* 146), which, as he laments, remain unexploited in the literary debates in *fin-des-siècle* Spain.

¹⁸ Alas’s ambivalence toward naturalism, glaringly obvious in his comments following the 1890 publication of Galdós’s *Realidad*, framed his perception that the movement “no significa hoy ya una revolución que se prepara o que ahora vence sino una revolución pasada” (*Ensayos sobre Galdós* 175). We should, of course, acknowledge that Alas was technically never a naturalist novelist, “si por Naturalismo se entiende, como es obligado si aspiramos a cierta precisión conceptual, las doctrinas estéticas profesadas por Zola y expuestas teóricamente en *Le Roman expérimental* (1879)” (Resina 97).
realizing his paternal potential and successfully impregnating his wife, Emma, is seemingly on the same track as Alas, who seeks out a new form of literary “oportunismo” through “esa idealidad nueva, de ese anhelo sincero de espiritualidad reformada” he so desperately wants to propagate in late nineteenth-century Spanish letters (Ensayos y revistas 147; 150).19

If we read Su único hijo as the product of its time, as an aesthetic object that reveals the often violent interplay of romanticism, realism, naturalism, spiritualism, and modernism, we are forced to acknowledge how Alas handles the incipient paradox ushered in by modernity. As the collapse of realism becomes increasingly apparent, the modern writer must confront the disappearance of an objective reality, which becomes “increasingly irreconcilable with the aesthetic quality of language,” an anomaly that dictates that “if we can grasp the truth about our world as a totality, as something transcending mere individual experience, then we can no longer make it accessible in narrative” (Jameson 18). The unremitting contradiction afflicting modern artists brings with it an “increasing inability to generalize or universalize” private experience and similarly discloses the ceaseless disintegration of narrative’s potential to represent collective experience and how modernist texts are bluntly refashioned into “sheer autobiography” (18–19).

Bonifacio Reyes, Su único hijo’s protagonist and central father figure, most clearly communicates Alas’s preoccupation with ineffectual and meaningless language by conveying his desire to effect an authorial status that would stabilize the patriarchal order of his household. Nevertheless, Reyes is cut as a pathetic figure whose incompetence is parodied relentlessly by the novel’s narrator. The protagonist, who fancies himself a Romantic hero in spite of his utter uselessness,20 clings desperately to the delusion that he can “hombrearse con los autores que inventaban aquellas maravillas” and create a great work of literature in spite of the fact that his professional talents as copyist for Emma’s father are ridiculed early on in the novel (259).21 Bonifacio’s brief stint as the legal clerk for Diego Valcárcel is comically undone by his inability to efficiently or even legibly record crucial documents for his employer, which highlights the narrator’s numerous attempts to impugn the protagonist’s role as both writer (producer) and reader (interpreter) of various texts throughout Su único hijo.22 Reyes agonizes over his own uselessness within society by exclaiming:

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19 While I focus on the allegorical relationships between author as father and text as son, other critics have analyzed Alas’s preoccupation with the figure of Jesus Christ, which figures prominently throughout the novel from the title onward. As Oleza asserts, “esta obsesión del Clarín maduro: un Jesucristo que no puede ser más que humano, porque la razón y la ciencia no pueden aceptarlo de otra manera, pero cuyo sacrificio presupone la existencia del Padre todopoderoso y da soporte a la exaltación mística de la conciencia humana hacia lo ideal” (428). See also García Sarría (133–38).
20 “Se comparaba con los héroes de las novelas que leía al acostarse” (259).
21 The narrator characterizes Bonifacio’s vocational potential thusly: “No servía para ninguna clase de trabajo serio y constante . . . su ortografía era extremadamente caprichosa y fantástica; es decir, no era ortografía. Escritía con mayúsculas las palabras a que él daba mucha importancia [como] amor, caridad, dulzura, perdón, época, otoño, erudito, suave, música, novia, apetito y otras varias” (158).
22 The shadow of Don Quijote undoubtedly hangs over the novel as Alas incorporates Cervantine preoccupations regarding a protagonist whose immoderate reading leaves him with a distorted sense of reality.
Señores, yo no puedo . . . yo no sé decir, ni debo, ni puedo, ni quiero, todo lo que para mí significa vuestro cariño . . . Yo amo el arte . . . pero no lo sé expresar; me falta la forma, pero mi corazón es artístico; el arte y el amor son dos aspectos de una misma cosa, el anverso y el reverso de la medalla de la belleza, digámoslo así . . . Yo he leído algo . . . yo comprendo que la vida perra que he llevado siempre en este pueblo maldito es mezquina, miserable . . . la aborrezco. Aquí todos me desprecian, me tienen en la misma estimación que a un perro inútil, viejo y desdentado . . . y todo porque soy de carácter suave y desprecio los bienes puramente materiales, el oro vil, y sobre todo la industria y el comercio . . . No sé negociar, no sé intrigar, no sé producirme en sociedad . . . luego soy un bicho. (270)

The protagonist’s obsession with producing himself within society mirrors Alas’s desire to revive Spanish narrative in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Conspicuously, Reyes’s analogous desire to draft a seminal piece of literature is met with nothing less than disdain by the novel’s narrator who mercilessly taunts his clearly unrealizable hope of drafting a literary masterwork by making every effort to inform the reader that Reyes’s authorial dreams are little more than the naïve fantasy of a simpleton condemned to organizing the numerous medicines, ointments, and dressings administered to his hypochondriac wife. Accordingly, the only text that Reyes is empowered to write is drastically reduced to little more than the memoirs of a man whose title might read a bit like a prison sentence: “[los] muchos pormenores de su incumbencia” (260).

Writing the Self: The Loss of Textual Identity through Excessive Reading

En resolución, él se enfrascó tanto en su lectura, que se le pasaban las noches leyendo de claro en claro, y los días de turbio en turbio; y así del poco dormir y del mucho leer se le secó el celebro de manera que vino a perder el juicio.

—Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha

By crafting a novelistic framework that revolves around the protagonist’s search for an identity (economic, aesthetic, sexual, spiritual, and, ultimately, paternal) independent from his wife’s domestic tyranny, Alas repeatedly explores the modes through which the construction of the self relies upon reading in Su único hijo. And it is precisely Reyes’s excessive and often mistaken reading of pernicious texts that overwhelm him, provoking a “scattering effect” that ultimately causes his loss of reason.23 The narrator’s repeated signaling of one type of reading as especially defective—one centered on romantic principles—allows

23 In “Self-Writing,” Michel Foucault examines the hazards of “excessive reading,” which can cause the reader to “retain nothing, to spread [himself] across different thoughts, and to forget [himself]” (211).
Alas to explore the pervasive decay of romantic ideals polluting the Spanish fin-de-siècle imaginary. Scholars of the nineteenth-century European novel note the lingering shadow of romanticism through the end of the century, particularly given the fact that much of what the Spanish public consumed arrived through translation. This, of course, later prompted Ramón Mesonero Romanos to comment: “Nuestro país, en otro tiempo tan original no es en el día otra cosa que una nación traducida” (qtd. by Oleza in *Su único hijo* 189).

Romanticism, inextricably linked to irrationality, *quijotismo*, and idealism, surfaces in *Su único hijo* as a means of narrative subterfuge bent on disorienting Bonifacio Reyes’s perception of reality. In *Su único hijo*, Alas theorizes a reading of romanticism in late nineteenth-century Spain that leads the novel’s protagonist astray by insisting on an obsessive and disfigured rewinding of narrative time. The distorted lens through which Reyes perceives reality, refracted textually as an indication of the decadent optic in Restoration Spain, is what convinces him that, in spite of his inability to produce his own novel through writing, his knowledge of the romantic code will empower him to animate his own existence into one that rivals the great romantic works. It is fitting, of course, that the destabilization of narrative time, one of Alas’s primary objectives within *Su único hijo*, relates to Lukácsian concerns regarding the nineteenth-century novel and its manipulation of temporality, emphasizing the “discrepancy between idea and reality” (Lukács 120). Lukács argues that the “most profound and most humiliating impotence of subjectivity” emerges as a result of the inability to “resist the sluggish, yet constant progress of time,” which “robs subjectivity of all its possessions and imperceptibly forces alien contents into it” (121).

Consequently, the novel, as the only literary form concerned with communicating “real time—Bergson’s *durée*—among its constitutive principles,” becomes the literary form best equipped to convey the “transcendent homelessness of the
idea.” Alas’s use of estilo indirecto libre in Su único hijo further emboldens the narrator’s scathing critique of “[a]quel Romanticismo representado en la sociedad . . . como un grado superior en la comun creencia estética” (193), a performative brand of quotidian expression contaminated by the unnecessarily ornate elevation of language.32 However, every potential site of meaning is contaminated by the novel’s “ojeda retrospectiva” (200), primarily directed to the 1840s, a decade saturated by romantic “[s]uicidios, tisis, quiebras, fugas, [y] enterramientos en vida” (199). For Alas, the exhumation of romantic imagery typifies the exhaustion of the movement’s energies in the final decades of the nineteenth century as well as the futility of its retrograde fascination with the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in an undeniably modern world.

What O’Connor has termed the “telescoping of time” reflects what many critics have described as a Clarinian effort to place the action of the novel sometime between 1840 and the days leading up to the Revolution of 1868 (134). Su único hijo’s backward-looking gaze prompts Reyes to recall “el espectáculo tristísimo de las ruinas de la casa donde él había nacido” (199).33 The narrator, fixating on Reyes’s birthplace, pauses to ask: “¿Qué quedaba de toda aquella vivienda, de aquella familia pobre, pero feliz por el cariño? Quedaba él, un aficionado a la flauta, en poder de su Emma, una furia” (199).34 The protagonist, now cast as a tortured artist who has been fated to endure his wife’s despotism, equates his existence to the ruins of his familial home, which he regards as “una ruina asquerosa que estaba molestando a toda una familia linajuda con su insistencia en vivir, y ser” (200). Reyes’s anxieties surrounding notions of origin, birth, and the town in which he was raised, appropriately named Raíces, force him back in time, placing him in close contact with “[i]a historia!” However, as Reyes slips further and further back in narrative time it is not the depths of his own personal history that he confronts but rather “la historia en las óperas,” which he finds to be a source of greater diversion.

The explicit references to romanticism dramatically increase in frequency in the fourth chapter of the novel, just after Emma relieves Bonifacio from the role of constant caretaker, leaving him with ample time to develop a public identity through socializing in the pharmacy, the book store, the Cascos clothing store, and, most importantly, in the theatre (where he meets his mistress, Serafina).

32 “[T]odo se decía con rodeos, con frases opacas” (193).
33 The narrator goes on to describe Reyes’s childhood home in gruesome detail: “las paredes pintadas de amarillo y otras cubiertas de papel de ramos verdes . . . la chimenea despedazada . . . la alcoba en que había muerto su padre . . . la pared manchada por las expectoraciones del enfermo” (199).
34 The allusion to Emma Valcárcel here as a fury, or a goddess of vengeance, further emphasizes the Clarinian obsession with regeneration and the power of creation. The genesis of the Furies or the Erinyes, who, according to Greek mythology, were spawned from the droplets of blood when Titan Cronus castrated his father Uranus and tossed his genitals into the sea, appears to be rather telling given the text’s concerns with Reyes’s inability to impregnate his wife. Emma’s tyrannical tendencies, her possible adultery with Minghetti, and the repeated expression of her desire to abort her fetus (“Que el hijo se le deshiciere en las entrañas sin culpa de ella....La Valcárcel deseaba abortar, sin ningún remordimiento” [457]), all present Reyes with a number of obstacles in achieving the legitimating paternal status he so desperately craves.
Crucially, the narrator intervenes in the same chapter, just after Reyes enters the theatre for the first time, to inform the reader that “Reyes había leído la Odisea en castellano y recordaba la interesante visita de Ulises a los infiernos; aquella vida opaca, subterranea del Erebo” (207). The allusion to Reyes’s escape into the theatrical world of opera epitomizes an opportunity to disappear into a world of foreigners and devise the plot for his newfound novelesque existence as the protagonist of an exile narrative.

Poetics of Impossibility: Alas and Reyes Confront Their Stillborn Textual Projects

Grant that our hopes, yet likely of fair birth,
Should be still-born.
—William Shakespeare, Henry IV

Alas suffered a number of physical and psychological crises from 1885 to 1891, which not only affected his ability to produce new works but also created doubts about the quality of his earlier writings. In a revealing letter from October 28, 1887, Alas describes the pitfalls of his writer’s block to Catalan critic José Yxart thusly: “Estoy en una época de no creer en mis novelas pretéritas ni futuras; sé que no sirve para quitarle a uno las ganas de escribir y ganar los cuatro cuartos que le dan por estas quisicosas” (qtd. in Richmond, “Un ‘peristilo’” 117). In March of 1888, during the gestation phase of Su único hijo, Alas revisits the idea that he may not be cut out for novelistic writing: “Estoy desorientado, dudo de mí en grado máximo, se me antoja ridículo a ratos haberme creído seminovelistas y estoy perdiendo una porción de pesetas y gastando la paciencia de los editores que me piden original de libros cuya urdidumbre saben que viene a medio hacer, mientras yo me enfrasco en mi to be or not to be” (qtd. in García San Miguel, El pensamiento 48). Alas’s vacillations in confidence, along with his escalating concerns that Su único hijo will never be properly parented, repeatedly crop up in his letters from the late 1880s. Just as he tethers his own authorial anxieties to those imposed upon Bonifacio Reyes, Alas examines the paternal double bind in which he and his protagonist are ensnared, pairing the coveted “sacerdocio de

Valis aptly describes the comparison drawn between Reyes and Odysseus, “a sovereign dispossessed of his lands and wife,” as “highly ironic” (The Decadent Vision 163). “Reyes, like every other character in Su único hijo, is mediocre; there is nothing kingly about him, for this is, as Alas has pointed out in his criticism, the age of ‘medianías y nulidades,’ not of kings and heroes.” While I agree with Valis’s assessment regarding the irony of Bonifacio Reyes as a kingly figure, I believe that the intertextual insertion of The Odyssey facilitates Alas’s critical engagement with various literary forms as he strives to articulate a new path for the fin-de-siécle novel. Alas’s curious obsession with Valmiki’s Ramayana, the ancient Sanskrit epic, during this period perhaps best exemplifies his quest to formulate something “nuevo . . . hermoso . . . simbolista . . . (y) fin de siècle” (Ensayos y revistas 143).

Richmond describes this period as being primarily notable “por lo que no escribió [Alas],” alluding to unfinished novelistic projects such as Palomares, Bárbara, El redentor, Papá Dios, and Del Hígado, none of which were ever completed (“Un ‘peristilo’” 118–19).
Alas's own conflictive relationship with the burdensome gestation of *Su único hijo* incites further comparison between author and protagonist as both struggle to infuse their narrative works with the force necessary to regenerate themselves textually and, as a consequence, invigorate the Spanish imaginary. Alas's profound, if not religious, intellectual ideals, which he claims manage to resist the temptation of following newfound literary currents from abroad, are unambiguously informed by what he calls his own psychic vicissitudes. Such obstacles lead him to the depths of despair conveyed in a letter to fellow novelist Emilia Pardo Bazán, written sometime between 1888 and 1890, in which he grieves: “Mi ‘Su único hijo’, que se anuncia ‘en prensa’ hace años, todavía no ha nacido, es decir, tengo escrito algo, pero el chico, el hijo, no nació todavía. No sé si nacerá” (qtd. in Bravo-Villasante 138). Just like Alas, Reyes agonizes over the rapidly diminishing prospects of his own paternal status throughout most of the novel, considering Emma’s battered uterus to have doomed him to “la vejez solitaria” (*Su único hijo* 302). The only viable solution for his patriarchal paradox, Reyes believes, is to become a philosopher and devote himself to a world of “lecturas pasadas y futuras.”

As I argued in the previous section, Reyes’s tendency to read excessively throughout *Su único hijo* renders him a victim of a scattering effect. What we discover, however, as we move toward the conclusion of the novel is that this scattering effect is precisely that which disables his capacity to (re)produce, underscoring Reyes’s limited status as the mere consumer of texts who is unable to engender a legitimizing work of his own, be it a novel or a son. By problematizing the very notion of reading through multiple textual allusions and by emphasizing the narrator’s incessant critique of Reyes’s numerous misreadings of the fictional and non-fictional worlds he inhabits, Alas seeks to expose literature’s position as an object of mass-production, as an economic transaction that alludes to “an extended set of assumptions about the uncritical and passive reception of texts by mass audiences” (Felski 80). Consequently, Alas not only emboldens a critique of textual consumption, he also forces the reader of *Su único hijo* to be vigilant for the self-conscious exploration of narrative authority in his novel by underscoring Bonifacio Reyes’s status as a “representation of a representation, a consciously created and self-creating” textual object (Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* 8).

The narrator’s relentless taunting of Reyes and his vocational uselessness emphasizes the nexus of two crucial themes as the text reaches its enigmatic

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37 See Alas’s *Epistolario*, particularly page 55.

38 As Rivkin states, “Carmen Bravo-Villasante [in *Vida y obra de Emilia Pardo Bazán* 138] believes that this undated letter was written in 1890, but Francisco García Sarriá [in *Clario o la herejía amorosa* 167] argues convincingly that it was written earlier, in 1889 or even in 1888” (“Extranatural Art” 311).

39 Bonifacio “pensaba leer mucho más si llegaba a tener familia, para criar bien a su hijo . . . aunque no la tuviese” (302).

40 As Foucault proposes in “Self Writing,” too much reading elicits the erasure of self; the subject, hyper-extended in the textual field, becomes fragmented and deregulated.
conclusion; not only is Su único hijo plagued by its protagonist’s numerous misreadings, it is oddly fixated on how Reyes envisions his position as author/philosopher, directly challenging the novel’s authority as protagonist competes with omniscient narrator for control. As a result, a sense of “vaguedad e indeterminación” dominates the novel (335), particularly in its final moments when Bonifacio is confronted with the possibility that his son, his only son, may not in fact be his biological offspring. The reader and Bonifacio, both left with the unsolvable conundrum of Antonio Reyes’s biological paternity,41 are forced to confront what many of Clarín’s contemporaries intuited as the work’s driving force: its unremitting monstrosity.

As we move toward the conclusion of Su único hijo it becomes increasingly apparent that, for Alas, the production of the fin-de-siécle novel in Spain induces an uncanny sense of horror, a terror embodied by Bonifacio Reyes’s inability to author the legitimate birth of his son Antonio.42 Just as Bonifacio’s obsession with crafting his own textual project (first a novel, then a son) devolves into a tableau of sterility and indolence, Alas’s meditation on writer’s block and the “falta de inspiración poética” take center stage (334). Crucially, just as Chapter 10 closes with an awkward sex scene between Bonifacio and Emma,43 the chapter that follows fixates on the protagonist’s writing process. Reyes’s intention of authoring a sonnet, however, degenerates rather quickly into childlike drawing as he begins sketching a perplexing arabesque, which “se enlazaba con sus facul- tades de escribiente, y además también tenía cierto parecido con la música por su vaguedad e indeterminación” (334–35). The image produced by Reyes is remarkably grotesque:

St. poco a poco fue sintiendo Bonis que la música del alma se le bajaba a los dedos; las curvas de su arábesco se hacían más graciosas, sus complicaciones y adornos simétricos más elegantes y expresivos, y la indeterminada tracería se fue cuajando en formas concretas, representativas; y al fin brotó, como si nacieran de la cúpula de lo blanco y de lo negro, brotó en un cielo gris la imagen de la luna, en cuarto menguante, rodeada de nubes, siniestras, mitad diablos o

Critics are divided on Antonio Reyes’s biological parentage, citing either Bonifacio or Minghetti as the father of Emma’s son. See Enrique Rubio Cremades for a succinct account of the lack of critical consensus surrounding Antonio’s paternity (472). Valis offers an imaginative alternative to the novel’s central conundrum, suggesting that “Antonio is really the son of two fathers, since the reader finds it impossible to choose between them. That, however, is an unacceptable reality, a monstrous one” (“The Perfect Copy” 864).

Max Nordau memorably describes the fin-de-siécle mood as “the impotent despair of a sick man, who feels himself dying by inches in the midst of an eternally living nature blooming insolently for ever” (3), claiming that the French “ascribe their own senility to the century” since the “disposition of the times is curiously confused, a compound of feverish restlessness and blunted discouragement. The prevalent feeling is that of imminent perdition and extinction” (2).

The lone erotic exchange between husband and wife in the novel is conspicuously shaded not only by the sexual dominance of Emma but also by the sexual role-play she orchestrates (Emma as Serafina and Bonifacio as Minghetti): “tú eres Minghetti y yo la Gor-goritos... Minghetti de mi alma, aquí tienes a tu reina de tu corazón, a tu reinicka; toma, toma, quiérela, mímalta; Minghetti de mi vida, Bonis, Minghetti de mis entrañas” (332).
brujas montados en escobas, mitad colmenas de formas fantásticas, pero colmenas bien claras, de las que salían multitud de bichos, puntos unidos a otros puntos que tenían cuerpos de abejas, con patas, rabos y uñas de furias infernales. Aquellas abejas o avispas del diablo, volaban en torno de la luna, y algunas llenaban su rostro, el cual era, visto de perfil, el del mismísimo Satanás, que tenía las cejas en ángulo y echaba fuego de ojos y boca. Por encima de esta confusión de formas disparatadas, Bonis dibujó rayas simétricas que imitaban muy bien la superficie del mar en calma, y sobre la línea más alta, la del horizonte, volvió a trazar una imagen de la noche, pero de noche serena, en mitad de cuyo cielo, atravesando cinco hileras de neblina tenue, las líneas del pentagrama, se elevaba suave, majestuosa y poética, la dulce luna llena: en su disco, elegantes curvas sinuosas decían: Serafina. (337–38)

The composition of Reyes’s arabesque, typically assessed as an allusion to a Pre-Raphaelite sensibility,44 is an essential metatext stitched into the framework of Su único hijo. Alas’s intentional miniaturization of the arabesque, the only original text penned by Reyes, visually reproduces the indeterminacy afflicting the various authorial projects at stake in the novel. Tucked carefully within Su único hijo, the arabesque suggests the intentional manipulation of the plotline for Alas as well as the crafting of a “transgressive, gratuitous line of narrative” that necessarily deviates from rectilinear design (Brooks, “Freud’s Masterplot” 292).

As Sandra Naddaff claims, the arabesque, previously termed a resbeshe, is an intricate pictorial shape that derives its form “from a denaturalized leaf or tendril pattern” whose structure and movement is “based on the fundamental premise of repetition, indeed redundancy, and correspondingly symmetry” (111–12). Examined elsewhere as a “deviant and recursive shape” (Stewart 105), the arabesque is perhaps best explained by Robert Louis Stevenson as “the first fancy of the artist; he first plays with his material as a child plays with a kaleidoscope” (qtd. in Rosenblatt 197). Stevenson, in arguing for the arabesque as the first stage of writing, claims that only a few writers will “really grow beyond it [the arabesque], and go forward, fully equipped, to do the business of real art.” Reyes, as we already know, is ill-prepared to develop beyond the initial phase of the writing process due to his lack of both talent and poetic inspiration. Nevertheless, Alas’s move here to close the “distance between the creator and the creation, between author and character” further blurs the line of authority in Su único hijo (Valis, The Decadent Vision 159), a reflection of the satirically drawn “síntesis” of both the novel and Bonifacio’s existence (Alas, Su único hijo 339).

44 Oleza identifies Clarín’s familiarity with “la Hermandad Prerrafaelista, fundada en Londres en 1848, cuyos teóricos fueron Ruskin y Morris” (165). Oleza later attributes Clarín’s fixation with Reyes’s arabesque to a number of workshops held by Morris in London, which sought to bring about the “profunda renovación de las artes decorativas inglesas,” producing “vidrieras, papeles pintados, mosaicos, telas, tapices y hermosas ediciones ilustradas, diseñadas con un precisismo que hacía del arabesco un recurso frecuente” (Su único hijo 334).
Alas’s exploration of the arabesque simultaneously articulates the novelist’s concern for the fin-de-siècle novel while tacitly offering a form of political resistance to Restoration ideology. It is precisely the insertion of a perplexing visual form bent on “ensur[ing] its [own] spatial perpetuation” that suggests an author preoccupied with both politics and aesthetics (Naddaff 112). Crucially, such a gesture also suggests an author invested in crafting a dense and difficult work to which his readers must return since the text necessarily retreats back into itself through repetition, which is the very purpose of its own design. Just as Reyes pens a text that relies on its own stylistic and temporal inversions, Alas unfastens, by emphasizing an infinite pictorial space, an imagined temporal portal that allows him to tap into the aesthetic realms explored above. The arabesque, whose formal composition depends upon its eternal repetition, directs “the eye of the viewer away from the things of this world toward the perception of a design that potentially repeats itself into the realm of the divine” (113). In questioning the shape and scope of Reyes’s “composición simbólica,” Alas scrutinizes the complications and intricate adornment of Reyes’s design, alluding to the protagonist’s romantic illusions while emphasizing the demonic imagery and overgrown scale of the arabesque (Su único hijo 338). Reyes’s attempts to trace symmetrical lines that reflect the surface of a calm sea on top of the arabesque’s ”confusión de formas disparatadas” mirror the protagonist’s own attempts to structure himself within the framework of a textual edifice ultimately doomed to collapse beneath the weight of his own “pasión disparatada y caótica” (338; 339). The twists and turns of the arabesque, for both author and protagonist, are a means of mapping out the most contradictory of narrative contours in order to embed an indelible sentiment of confusion within the novel.

What is certain is that Alas’s ambivalence with the fin-de-siècle Spanish novel never wholly subsides. He continues to oscillate between conflicting perspectives in the 1880s and 1890s, praising “el aire de la libertad del pensamiento” before and then expressing unmitigated disgust for literary products he describes as “enclenques y anodinos” (Obras completas 67; 507), which, as Alas claims, are doomed within a national atmosphere defined by an “anarquía mansa de la indiferencia” (507). Despite his apparent certainty that any form of intellectual novelty in Spain is doomed to become the “pasto de calumnias y blanco de los tiros que a ciegas dispara la ignorancia” (qtd. in Beser 115), Alas remains undeterred as he continues his search for what he calls “[la] savia” of the Spanish novel, which he believes is the key to his future (qtd. in Beser 46). These critical oscillations manifest themselves textually through Alas’s presentation of the indecipherable riddle surrounding Antonio Reyes’s paternity, the at times bewildering conflation of various literary modes, and through the protagonist’s composition of a perplexing arabesque. These narrative tactics, bent on infusing the novel with an uncanny sense of ambiguity and anxiety, underscore the deluge of crises facing the Asturian novelist as he contemplates his status as the embattled stepfather of the Spanish fin-de-siècle novel.45 Alas, by imposing his

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45 It is Pérez Galdós whom Alas posits as the “padre que engendró tanta criatura literaria, [el] Pater Orchamus de ese gran pueblo que pulula en cuarenta y dos tomos de invención
narrative preoccupations on Bonifacio Reyes, stymies a number of (pro)creative projects within *Su único hijo*—Reyes’s aspirations to be a successful novelist, a philosopher, and ultimately a father.

These numerous failures bring about the unrelenting annulment of the author’s regeneration through the birth of his male heir, which Alas conceives as a type of saintliness, as a creative energy channeled spiritually through the novelist’s pen and the patrilineal chain of fathers and sons, both of which are equally vexing for the protagonist of *Su único hijo*. Bonifacio, dazed as the novel concludes, is forced to withstand the verbal gibes of his former mistress while the possible father of his only son plays variations of *La Traviata* (1853) on the church organ during Antonio’s christening ceremony. This, of course, immediately transports the protagonist to his reading of Alexandre Dumas’s *La Dame aux camélias* (1848), which emphatically underscores *Su único hijo’s* dual anxiety with paternity and the management of texts. As Bonifacio recalls Dumas’s Armand Duval, whose love for Marguerite Gautier obliterates the memory of his “vecchio genitor” (507), Alas appears to be equally perplexed by the dueling collapse of patriarchal stability in Restoration Spain and the regenerative impotence of the Spanish *fin-de-siécle* novel.

Responding to the crisis of filiation, the “linear, biologically grounded process, that which ties children to their parents” (Said, *Beginnings* xiii), *Su único hijo* articulates the narrative distress of an author grappling with the discursive sterility of the Spanish novel. ExpRESSED allegorically through the stillbirth of various textual projects, Alas fixates on the legitimizing process conferred by the novel, the literary form “donde puede mejor el ingenio grande y decidido influir para transformar” while underscoring how the novel is ultimately symptomatic of the vast sociohistoric transition taking place in the last two decades of the nineteenth century in Spain (*Galdós, novelista* 86). Accordingly, the failure to imagine the new in *Su único hijo*, either through allegorical birth or narrative (re)production, evinces an attempt by Alas to recover some remnant of the authority “associated in the past with [the] filiative order” (Said, *The World* 19). Author and protagonist, suspended precariously on the precipice of a new era in Spanish narrative, are forced to contend with the dizzying circulation of various literary modes as they struggle to create a legitimizing work able to retrieve some vestige of the authority that has been lost. The rebirth of the Spanish novel, however, seems to be a rather distant prospect given the way the narrator describes Bonifacio’s long-desired son’s countenance at the end of the novel: “su pobre hijo . . . feísimo, risible y lamentable también. Pero . . . ¡era su retrato! Sí, lo era con aquella expresión de asfixia” (478).

**Works Cited**


romanescas” (*Galdós, novelista* 7). Curiously enough, within the framework of *Su único hijo*, Emma’s father (Diego Valcárcel) is characterized as “el Abraham—Pater Orchanus—irresponsable de un gran pueblo de hijos naturales, muchos adulterinos” in the novel’s second chapter (169).


