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# Returning to the Originary Enmity of Philosophy and Literature: Juan Benet's DEL POZO Y DEL NUMA (Un ensayo y una leyenda)

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Returning to the Originary Enmity of  
Philosophy and Literature:  
Juan Benet's *DEL POZO Y DEL NUMA*  
(*Un ensayo y una leyenda*)

When *DEL POZO Y DEL NUMA* (*Un ensayo y una leyenda*) came out in 1978, alert librarians catalogued it alongside criticism on Thomas Mann rather than amongst Juan Benet's already numerous novels, essay collections, and short stories.<sup>1</sup> Yet mischief pervades the Spaniard's critical reading of the German novelist. In the essay which makes up the first half of the book, Benet, a self-described literary hobbyist, turns his attention to Mann, the consummate professional man of letters. A Spaniard with an admiration for Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic models reflects upon a German with a fascination for the passion of the South. A writer who once typed a "continuous narrative" on a roll of paper (using the mechanism whose blueprints grace the inside cover of *DEL POZO Y DEL NUMA*) reads a writer famous for using an elaborate system of note cards to construct his intricately symbolic, philosophical novels methodically. At times, Benet barely masks his bemusement at Mann's seriousness ("creía todo lo que decía y decía todo lo que creía . . . importante" [43; Benet's ellipses]), at his deliberate, methodical, professional attitude towards his novelistic production (such as producing exactly 50 pages of the novel *Joseph and his Brothers* for every page of the Biblical story [71]), and at Mann's ambition (he wanted to create an "época Mann," but it turned out to be the age of Hitler [55]). But at the same time, Benet shows genuine puzzlement at the failure of the work that Mann considered his magnum opus, *Joseph and his Brothers*. After all, in spite of the many differences between the two, Benet has to be aware of what they share: a tendency towards philosophical digressions and towards investing elements of their novels with metaphysical meanings. Nor should we forget that Benet was at the time in the process of producing his own Biblically inspired novel, *Saúl ante Samuel*.

Mischief might also be the best way to characterize the tense relationship Benet maintained with literary criticism, a genre which he practiced frequently throughout his writing career and at which he excelled even when he seemed occupied with a wholesale dismissal of literary criticism. His gripe is a familiar one, and its implications for his own writing cannot have escaped a mind as lucid and self-conscious as Benet's. Briefly put, Benet claims that literature is creative and original, while criticism is reactive and stifling, substituting the critic's own analytic commentary for the brilliant immediacy of the work itself. In 1973 Fernando Lázaro Carreter asked prominent writers to respond to several questions about the teaching of literature and printed them in a collection entitled *Literatura y educación*. In his response Benet largely ignored Lázaro Carreter's questions, suggesting that most writers succeed in spite of, rather than because of, their literary education, which, following the critical leanings of teachers of literature, reduces literature to a history of movements and generations. In his letter he tries to account for his own impulse to write critical essays by speaking of three "mentalities" belonging to the writer, the reader, and the critic (203).<sup>2</sup> In Benet's most direct and sustained treatment of this problem in "La crítica en cuanto antropología," one of the essays in *En ciernes*, he evokes a conception of criticism which would mean "la intelección de la obra de arte más completa de entre todas las posibles" (66). However, from the essay's initial jeer at the concept of "novelística" to the end, he exclusively discusses a criticism which regards literature in the same way natural scientists do the natural world, with a necessary distance which amounts to an essential incomprehension.

By calling Benet's critical attitude mischief, rather than inconsistency or even hypocrisy, I mean to suggest that the conflict reveals something more complex and profound than even Benet knew.<sup>3</sup> In both his relation to Mann and his relation to criticism, Benet was dealing with something close to the center of his own work. He clearly needed to distinguish himself, to say, in effect, that although he may write philosophical novels, he does not do so like Mann; although he might write criticism, he is not a critic. In the process, however, he explored what it means to write a philosophical novel and the nature of literature, philosophy, and criticism. His innovation in *DEL POZO Y DEL NUMA* was his decision to include a literary text alongside a critical and philosophical text. Unlike the prologues of Henry James or Unamuno, which clearly

aim to give a context for the reading of the fictitious work, Benet's two works—the essay and the legend—have no apparent connection, occupying roughly the same amount of space in the volume in which they appear and lacking any explicit reference from the essay to the novella, or, as Benet calls it, legend.

A reading of *DEL POZO Y DEL NUMA* could emulate Benet's prologue to a translation of *Wild Palms*, in which he lists the parallel motifs and vocabulary that seem to link the two novellas whose alternating chapters constitute Faulkner's novel (Prologue 9–14). But Benet clearly wanted to juxtapose genres and hinted that the particular specimens ("Del pozo" and "Numa") might be less important than the fact that they are "un ensayo" and "una leyenda."<sup>4</sup> On the title page preceding "Del pozo" (as opposed to the book's title page, all uppercase, and the cover, all lowercase), we see in all capital letters, "UN ENSAYO" (7). Meanwhile, in the page preceding the novella "Numa," the title is in lowercase letters, "Una leyenda" (97). The two genres chosen are not "criticism" and "fiction," or "theory" and "novella," but essay and legend, which suggest a juxtaposition as strong as the different kinds of printing. As an essay, the work emphasizes the author's effort, essaying, rehearsing, trying out his thoughts in writing. A legend emphasizes the action of the reader, with its origins in *leer* or the Latin *lego*. We should even note the play of gender on the book's title pages. On the one hand, when Benet writes in the genre of the essay, *el ensayo*, whose grammatical gender is masculine, he ostensibly writes about a theme whose gender is feminine, "La deuda . . ." On the other hand, when he writes in a genre whose gender is feminine, *la leyenda*, his subject matter is expressly masculine, "(el) Numa." How else do we account for the title "La deuda de la novela hacia el poema religioso de la antigüedad" in an essay that hardly lingers on this striking proposition concerning literary genealogy?

Such a web of contraries is perhaps another act of mischief, challenging some unsuspecting critic to account for these various matings, perhaps by way of some heteroerotic poetics like that which begins Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. While David Herzberger, in a book review, insists that "there is no literary reason for including the two works of *Del pozo y del Numa* . . . in the same book" (176–77), another critic calls Benet's juxtaposition "coquetería," giving erotic overtones to this mischievousness (Torres Fierro 38). Benet's mischief is ultimately insightful in "Del pozo" when his examination of Mann's failed novel un-

covers something about the relation between literature and thought and when his discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of literary criticism of a scientific bent helps him to define a specific kind of literariness, if not literature in general.<sup>5</sup> The point of the juxtaposition of essay and legend is much more elusive, however. As I intend to demonstrate in what follows, the works themselves bear out what the genres and genders on the title pages merely suggest via etymology.<sup>6</sup> Both the critical voice of "Del pozo" and the narrator of "Numa" share a concern with genesis, with beginnings, finding in critical moments of an imagined past the sources of their praxis, of their behavior, in their treatment of language and their relation to the world. This shared interest does not, however, prevent their coexistence in a state of acute animosity.

Before examining Benet's description of the relation between literature and thought in "Del pozo," let us recall that modern Spanish writers have long asserted that literature and abstract thinking form a relatively simple, harmonious unity rooted in the human subject. In *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* Unamuno insists that "poeta y filósofo son hermanos gemelos, si es que no la misma cosa" (14). Implicitly in *Niebla* and at the end of *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*, and explicitly in *Tres novelas ejemplares y un prólogo*, he reaffirms that his reflections on his fiction have something of a fictional status: "este prólogo es también una novela" (9). For Unamuno, the difference between literature and philosophy is nearly imperceptible, even completely negligible, since they are both artistic in the sense that they are created by humans out of a need for a meaning that transcends individual, mortal existence.

For the Ortega y Gasset of *Meditaciones del Quijote*, literature and philosophy are also conceived in terms of the individual who produces them as different sorts of discharges: "La fruición estética es una súbita descarga de emociones alusivas. Análogamente es la filosofía como una súbita descarga de intelección" (19). Closer attention to the *Meditaciones del Quijote* would also show that the assertion of this somewhat coarse metaphor remains Ortega's conception of the relation of art to philosophy. While Ortega sees literary criticism as a circumlocutory meditation (for which he uses the analogy of Joshua fighting the battle of Jericho [32]), he nonetheless insists on a scientific basis for his essays ("el ensayo es la ciencia, menos la prueba explícita" [20]) and insists on the possibility of "la plenitud de su significado" when speaking of phenomena as given in critical commentary (12).<sup>7</sup> Whether we explain the

difference between thinking and literature by strategic choice or by some more nebulous necessity, both Unamuno and Ortega put these discourses at the service of the human subject. Unlike what we have seen in Benet, no necessary conflict arises in the individual between the more literary writer and the more philosophical critic. As a result, literature tends to be subordinated to philosophy: Ortega devoted himself to writing quasi-philosophical essays, while Unamuno tended to frame his fictions in a theoretical discourse or to sacrifice the aesthetic qualities of fiction to ideas which he expresses more directly elsewhere.<sup>8</sup>

Closer to Benet's way of thinking is María Zambrano. In two books from the late 1930s, *Filosofía y poesía* and *Pensamiento y poesía en la vida española*, Zambrano begins with the premise that literature and philosophy are in conflict, vying for the control of the writer. I propose to read the first of the three sections of "Del pozo" alongside Zambrano's treatment of this conflict in the first of the aforementioned works in order to focus on the most persistent aspect of Benet's somewhat desultory text. Also, Zambrano's philosophical narrative will help us fill in some of the implications of Benet's remarks so that we may arrive at a more global understanding of the essay and the legend, "Del pozo" and "Del Numa."

Before moving on to that analysis, it is worth noting that this tradition of animosity represented by Zambrano and Benet remains rooted in a description of the activities of the thinker and poet. Any discussion of this topic, however, would be deficient without mention of Heidegger's persistent interrogation of the relation between poetry and thinking. Heidegger's most direct and least known pronouncement on this issue was the 1944/1945 seminar entitled *Einleitung in die Philosophie: Denken und Dichten* (Introduction to Philosophy: Thinking and Writing Poetry). There Heidegger states that the purpose of the seminar is to determine the way in which Nietzsche (the poetic thinker) and Hölderlin (the thoughtful poet) gave thoughtful and poetic answers, respectively, to the question "Was ist jetzt?" ("What is now?"; *Einleitung* 93; translation mine). Demonstrating this eventuality, for Heidegger, would show that "müsste in dem, was ist, d.h. im 'Sein' selbst, sich ein unendlicher Unterschied verbergen" ("an infinite difference must be hidden in that which is, that is, in 'Being' itself"; *Einleitung* 103; translation mine). That being said, *Denken* (Thinking) and *Dichten* (Writing) are not only human activities, though they certainly are that. For

Heidegger, these words permit the carrying out of a phenomenological description in which the historical emergence of beings can be articulated. Heidegger's philosophical project could be described as a variegated attempt to account for differences in the way in which human experience and knowledge have been constituted up until the modern epoch, with his best known articulations sometimes being taken for the definitive ones: the temporalization of Being (in *Being and Time*) or an event or "enowning" (*Ereignis*, in the *Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning*, "The Question Concerning Technology," and elsewhere).

Although in Heidegger the problem of poetry and thought exceeds in ambition and scope the reflections of Zambrano and Benet, there are important parallels that could be and should be sorted out at greater length. As we will see, Zambrano and Benet consider the poetic way of life as having something to do with a rich relation to things of the world; Heidegger expressed something of the sort in a lecture entitled "Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung" (Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry), presented in Rome in 1936 and published in 1937: "Dichterisch wohnen' heißt: in der Gegenwart der Götter stehen und betroffen sein von der Wesensnähe der Dinge" ("To live poetically' means: to stand in the presence of the gods and to be struck by the essential nearness of things"; *Erläuterungen* 39; translation mine). The first half of this definition of "living poetically," that is, the relationship to divinity, is addressed by Roberto Sánchez Benítez in "María Zambrano y el nihilismo." An important touchstone for the second half of this definition, the relation to things, can be found in *Nietzsche*, volume 1, "The Will to Power as Art." There Heidegger discusses Nietzsche's idea of art as "Rausch (rapture)." He says that, for Nietzsche, art's peculiarity lies in the sense of power it gives the viewer and defines this power in terms of a relationship to the world: "the capacity to extend beyond oneself, as a relation to beings in which beings themselves are experienced as being more fully in being, richer, more perspicuous, more essential" (*Nietzsche* 100).

Zambrano and Benet's contention that the modern world's preference for a certain philosophy has tamed everything but poetry is shared by the introductory paragraph of Heidegger's "Wie wenn am Feiertag" ("As on a holiday," the title of a hymn by Hölderlin), a lecture given throughout 1939 and 1940 and published in 1941.<sup>9</sup> It is especially noteworthy in this context that Heidegger's studies of Hölderlin assert that

the German poet “[dichtet] das Wesen der Dichtung” (“[writes] poetically the essence of poetry”; *Erläuterungen* 32; translation mine), contrasting Hölderlin’s poetics with a “comparative approach” that would deal with poetry philosophically and produce a “general conception of poetry” (*Erläuterungen* 31–32; translation mine). By extension, Heidegger implies that the essence of poetry remains external to the philosophical gaze. This contrast, evoked in the previously cited lecture from 1936, could be seen as the kernel of Zambrano and Benet’s reflections on the activity of writing poetry and thinking. That Heidegger’s work was an influence seems likely in the case of Zambrano, whose works are full of language and structures reminiscent of Heidegger. Because this Heideggerian resonance does not characterize Benet’s essays, it seems most likely that either Benet read Zambrano or that both came to similar conclusions independently.<sup>10</sup>

Zambrano begins *Filosofía y poesía* by defining the copula in her title as a conflict, something which she claims to be self-evident (“parece imponerse por sí misma” [*Obras* 115]). In the first part of the book, called “Pensamiento y poesía,” Zambrano intends to define the terms of the conflict (“definir en lo posible los términos del conflicto en que un ser necesitado de ambas se debate” [*Obras* 117]). She associates poetry with a primordial, immediate relationship to the world and assigns a certain passivity to the poets, who receive and carry the wholeness of an impression within themselves: “Fieles a las cosas, fieles a su primitiva admiración extática, no se decidieron a aceptar nada que pudiera escindirla; no podían, porque la presencia donada se había fijado ya en ellos; estaba impresa en su interior” (*Obras* 120). Philosophy, on the other hand, participates in a “rending” of which the poet is incapable. This rending opens a distance between the human being and “la presencia donada” (the 1939 edition of *Filosofía y poesía* refers more clearly to “la cosa misma” in this passage [16]) and requires a long, methodical procedure to possess this presence or thing (120). Conflict arises because poetry falls within the realm of what philosophy wants to know. Unable to comprehend a phenomenon which is all about never undergoing the initial rending of the human being and the thing, philosophy responds by redefining poetry in its own terms and by claiming its own type of relation to things as the only valid one. As a result, poetry is “perennemente en rebeldía” (116), confined within the dominion of philosophy.



Benet also insists, early in "Del pozo," upon the strict distinction between poet and philosopher and on the tendency of philosophy to dominate, to impose itself upon literature. Benet will repeatedly speak of their difference as an often neglected fact:

Se olvida que [el poeta] fue no-filósofo, no-teólogo y no-sociólogo conscientemente y que, en buena medida, aquellos que vinieron después, utilizando sus instrumentos y métodos al servicio de las humanidades, no hicieron sino empezar a recorrer paso a paso el espacio que él quiso cruzar de un salto. (11)

Yet—withstanding Nietzsche's claim that laziness is the most universal of human vices—Benet agrees with Zambrano that "nuestra cultura" prefers the long secure way to the risky leap of poetry: "Sin género de dudas, nuestra cultura acusa la absoluta pérdida de influencia del poeta y el dominio de toda la moralidad intelectual por parte del hombre de ciencia" (*Del pozo* 13). There is no in-between and no communication; philosophers and artists are separated by an "abismo" (24); the poet's "espíritu no intelectual" does not create the "distanciamiento" characteristic of philosophy and science (*Del pozo* 30).

Zambrano specifies the origin of this conflict as the moment, just after philosophy's birth, when the philosophical gaze separated itself from the "admiración originaria" characteristic of poetry; for this admiration, she says, is the original relationship of human beings to the world (118–19). Zambrano calls the separation from this pristine state the violence that characterizes philosophy, consisting of human beings' tearing themselves away from the visible world to a world of what she calls "la verdad trabajosa," "el trasunto ideal," and "aquello permanente, idéntico a sí mismo" (119–20). This is analogous to the moment in Plato's myth of the cave when humans are taken from their places manacled in front of the wall upon which shadows of ideas are cast and are forced to look toward the mouth of the cave to the ideas themselves, suffering the bright light of the sun (*Republic*, Book VII). Zambrano describes in various ways how the repression of poetry manifests itself in Plato, showing that, as the more primordial phenomenon, poetry cannot be wholly relinquished (121–22). She also gives not only historical but conceptual priority to poetry when she concludes that one of poetry's roles is the prolongation of the scene of philosophy's birth (125).

In the penultimate section of the first part of "Del pozo," Benet likewise gives an account of the emergence of the rift between literature and thought:

Que el monumento literario sea lo primero es lo de menos. El pensamiento—por darle una sola palabra—le había acompañado desde su origen y aun se perciben los rasgos de aquella hermandad a pesar de la aparente confusión de las doctrinas, inevitable procedimiento en que aquél había de caer en cuanto fuera aceptado su propósito de trascender los límites del arte al que para tal operación nadie se ocupó de consultar; no había por qué; el pensamiento es soberano y amplio . . . (19–20)

Benet begins by declaring the primordially of literature and the sibling relationship of literature and thought (he elsewhere calls thought "filosofía y religión unidas en una palabra" [23–24]). He tells of the progressive loss of power of the poet, who—in the passage of "Del pozo" which most resembles the plight of the guardian of "Numa"—lacks even the means to protest or to complain (20). This poetry is not bereft of thought, but only possesses a thought while having too much consideration for individuality to bother to compete with the universal ideas of philosophy:

Así el poeta . . . prefirió perder el puesto rector del pensamiento social antes que incluir en su repertorio aquellas ideas que podían ser las mismas para un hombre que para otro, que se pretendían comunes a toda la humanidad por su condición exclusivamente racional y que habían de constituir el punto de partida de la actividad filosófica y científica. (21)

While Zambrano is most concerned about the effect of this conflict and dominance of philosophy on thought, Benet celebrates the liberation experienced by poetry, which is in a certain sense left alone to explore what it knows best: exceptions, enigmas, and, above all, death.<sup>11</sup> These topics are out of range of philosophical thinking, so that while philosophy appears stronger and more comprehensive, poetry enjoys the true superiority (28–29).

Though poetry, literature, and art appear inaccessible to philosophy and science, we should also note that, for Benet, the former have their ruses, ways of using the latter to gain greater attention. In a negative mode, speaking of the reasons which do not quite account for literature's superiority, Benet says this superiority is not

porque . . . haya usado de un disfraz que le permita ser examinada por el saber como una "cosa" más, que a la vez que acepta el progreso de la ciencia sobre sí hurta su naturaleza del examen a fin de permanecer inmemorialmente en la incomprensible lozanía del misterio. (29)

Benet speaks here of the disguise that artistic and literary works use, suggesting that criticism not only subjects them to inessential concepts and categories, but that literature incites this incomprehension for the sake of its own "health." Benet does not develop the idea further, outlining the insufficient reasons for literature's superiority but without providing a positive explanation. He thus ends the section with the suggestion that literature not only cannot, but need not look for resolution of its conflict with philosophy. This suggestion recalls Benet's indifference to literary education in *Literatura y educación*, an indifference which is created in reaction to the stringency of literary education, its focus on quantifiable elements of literature such as histories, major figures, and movements.<sup>12</sup>

Zambrano is quite explicit in *Filosofía y poesía* about the desired result of her inquiry. She proposes a search for a solution to the conflict, but it is a solution which offers reconciliation, not resolution. The result would be a "salida a un mundo nuevo de vida y conocimiento" (117). Such a world would be one in which philosophy, science, and the criticism that is allied with them would respect literature's difference, realizing that poetry is another "[forma] del saber y de expresión" (115). The difference dwells in its origins, making a certain element of literature inaccessible to science. In such a new world, criticism could still occupy itself with literature, but without the pretense that it is dealing with anything besides what literature chooses to show it; literary history, thematic readings, and the representation of culture through art would be considered valid but *interested* looks at art.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of his apparent disdain for a certain style of literary studies, Benet actually proposes an expansion, rather than a limitation, of the field. True, he criticizes readings which are "anthropological," that is, which reduce literature to a manifestation of a cultural or historical moment; he positively exalts literature's ability to evoke the enigmatic shadow-like realm that inhabits our world and upon which science can have no purchase. But just as he acknowledges, with greater or lesser insistence, the existence and legitimacy of other styles or attitudes of writing, he practices a type of reading which proposes comprehensive

ways of understanding individual literary works and entire genres, trends, and periods.<sup>14</sup> He also exalts a different sort of writer who explores the shadows and practices a criticism which offers something other than that based on a scientific model. For literary criticism as practiced in the United States, the style of criticism that Benet describes could take several forms, but is most likely to be associated with the kind of deconstruction that arose in the wake of Paul de Man, when "reading against the grain" became one of the common metaphors for reading. Such reading ostensibly freed criticism from a dependence on the explanatory force of authorial intentions (which previous formalisms had been hesitant to question) by regarding those intentions as a kind of counter-guide to the meaning of the text, indicating how *not* to read it. Similarly, we will see how Benet's reading of Mann attributes to the latter something that seems to run counter to the German's approach to the task of creating great literature. Little seems so clear about Benet's condemnation of criticism as his unfamiliarity with modes of criticism which arose from the same sort of reservations about traditional scholarship.

Although Benet does not develop further the implications of his archaeology of the relation of literature and thought, we can perhaps project Zambrano onto his discussion, especially since Benet, like Zambrano, appears to consider this history in ambivalent terms: it is an "humillante y dramática contradicción" (29), but also allows art to exist in "la incomprendible lozanía del misterio" (29). Zambrano begins *Filosofía y poesía* with a curiously concrete assertion: the conflict between literature and philosophy has resulted in some "vocaciones malogradas" (115), people who could have been fine philosophers or poets but, by being attracted to both, managed to excel at neither. She mentions no names. Juan Benet, however, after his exposition of the conflict between literature and philosophy, jumps into an exegesis of the late failed masterpiece of Thomas Mann. This analysis will help us to understand the imprecision mentioned earlier: the role of thought in literature. As we will see, thought is a necessary element of literature, but only insofar as literature provides an encounter like that which spawned philosophy in the first place, an immediate encounter with things.

We have observed Benet's insistence, in the first part of "Del pozo," on the strict separation of literature and thought. Curiously, when he begins to speak of Mann in the second part, he associates literature

and thought in a more common way. He asserts, as we commonly do, that literature contains thought: characters and narrators think, poems convey ideas. Benet speaks directly of Mann and of all the biographical material one would expect to form part of the work's "disguise": information about technique, opinions, and aspirations of the German novelist and a discussion of the historical moment in which Mann worked on *Joseph and his Brothers*. This creates a portrait of Mann as a professional thinker, as much as a literary artist. Benet has announced his fascination with Mann's failure and goes on to offer two explanations. The first contends that although Mann does seem to have achieved exactly what he proposed, "el gran campo de cultivo está en lo azaroso, en lo impensado, en lo sorprendente" (*Del pozo* 52). The result of too much thinking is, ironically, that "*José es una obra que no da que pensar*" (63). Thinking is thus inseparable from monumental art and from the "zona en sombras" (55), which removes art from the realm of simple objects of cognition. Thinking is indispensable but needs to preserve its relation to chance, surprise, and, paradoxically, to "lo impensado," to what has not been thought. Mann's error thus seems to have been to include thoughts that had already been thought out ahead of time.

In his reading, however, Benet focuses on the central scene of the story of Joseph. By connecting the well with his discussion of literature and philosophy in the first part of "Del pozo," Benet brings out the latent thought in Mann's novel. For Benet, the scene of Joseph at the well serves the function of Plato's parable of the cave in Zambrano: it represents the moment in which philosophy establishes its hegemony, believing that it leaves poetry behind. And it is Mann who, willy nilly, brings out the incommensurability of Joseph, the poet, who is cast into the well, and Joseph, the philosopher, who is sold into slavery and rises to become one of the pharaoh's most prized advisors:

Mann insiste en ese tema que dividirá la vida de José de tal manera que han de considerarse dos hombres distintos, pero la vida que nos ha sido narrada es la del que sobrevive; del que quedó gimiendo no sabremos nunca nada pues el que cobraron los madianitas era un joven metamorfoseado, decidido a utilizar sus facultades con método y disimulo para cumplir el designio divino: era la ciencia. El arte literario quedó sepulto, reducido a un gemido frustrado por la liberación y un afán por la protesta ahogado por las nuevas posibilidades de prosperidad. (92-93)

This discussion of the Well (Benet capitalizes the word in the final section) gathers up all the motifs of the struggle between literature and philosophy in Zambrano and Benet: the "abyss" separating them, the priority of literature, the initiation of an era of dominant philosophy and dissimulating literature. Thus Benet's analysis, apart from practicing a kind of criticism he considers insensitive to or unmindful of literature's singularity, gives to Mann's work the thought that it does not give of itself, perhaps lending it the very literariness to which criticism is supposedly indifferent.

Since both literature and philosophy tend, for both Benet and Zambrano, to define themselves with respect to the other, the polemical relation between them is a fruitful conflict, worth preserving. The pathos of Benet's descriptions of the conflict is perhaps extreme, considering that he eventually provides something of a reconciliation by himself, practicing a criticism that proffers some of the most traditional kind of commentary. Due to a terminological slippage, something like thought exists on both sides of this divide: philosophical or scientific thought and literary or poetic thought. These two types of thinking, however, need to preserve their conflict, and we do not find Benet making statements like Unamuno's about the near or exact identity of literature and philosophy. Benet's book is a model for this conflict, if there can be such a thing: a superficial incongruity and opposition hide a common concern for origins. All that remains to be seen is how "Numa" contains its own ruminations about the critical moments at the origins.

Juan Benet pairs "Del pozo" with a story whose protagonist is obsessed with another critical moment, a cataclysm which determined the possibility and limits of his actions. Almost without exception, "Numa" has been read in the context of the figure's relation to a global picture of Región, that is, in the intertext of Benet's oeuvre.<sup>15</sup> As a result, emphasis has been placed on the organizing force of the figure outside of "la propiedad" in the municipality of Región and the surrounding area. In "Numa," however, the emphasis is on the guard himself. He is not named, incidentally, except in the title. I will occasionally follow convention by calling him "Numa" but would like to remark this namelessness; in terms of the narration, it works as a result of his solitude. There is no one to address the guard. But namelessness also suggests an absence of singularity; the proper name stands for a distinguishing trait; it is used so that one can call out with precision, in a crowd, for

example. This is not necessary for Numa. The question remains as to whether this absence of singularity might not signify the universality of this figure, and his solitude and angst certainly suggest something of an existential hero.

On the other hand, the allusion by which we know this figure has everything to do with the issue of literature and thought. The general description of Numa's "historia—o su leyenda" as "múltiple y contradictoria" in *Volverás a Región* (265) actually repeats Plutarch's trope in the *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* of the diversity and disagreement about Numa Pompilius's exact historical moment (74–75). There are several other clear parallels between Plutarch's and Benet's Numa. First, Numa earns one of the first places in Plutarch's volume for being the lawgiver of Rome, a king chosen by the rival Romans and Sabines to forge order and stability as an alternative to the constantly changing regencies of the interregnum (76). Numa accepted this appointment as "a gift so noble in itself" and as "a field for great and honourable actions" (Plutarch 78–79). In contrast to the representation of Numa in the *Región* novels as a guardian who is as implacable as a force of nature, the "legend" reveals the beginning of Numa's "mission" on the mountain and repeatedly tells of a "principio" which the guardian is neither willing nor able to violate. He is devoted to preventing the presence of intruders until his own death at the hands of his successor. Also, according to Plutarch, Numa was responsible for building a temple to the mountain goddess Tacita (a name which evokes silence, as in the proverb "si filosofus eris, tacuisses") (80–81). He also built a temple to the god Terminus, who governs land boundaries. According to Plutarch, Numa Pompilius recognized that boundaries are both defensive and the site of transgressions (87–88), a problem of which Benet's Numa is all too aware. Finally, Plutarch insists on the skill of Numa, recounting that, as a student of Pythagoras, he worked hard to expel and to subdue base emotion and that Numa was thus one of the most effective kings in Roman history, achieving an as perfect as possible realization of Plato's *Republic* (91).

The name Numa thus evokes an initial state, one in which thought is present and gives the law. His association with the *Republic*, however, recalls Plato's expulsion of the poets from the ideal city. Plutarch also reminds his readers that Pythagoreans did not believe that things should be written down, and thus Numa had all of his books

burned upon his death (92). Numa, then, as a political and philosophical figure, represents, for all his love of knowledge, an enmity to literature, as well as to any thought that does not yield useful knowledge, knowledge that does not translate directly into action. This enmity makes its appearance in "Numa: una leyenda" in the form of a struggle between two "disposiciones de ánimo o dos almas" (102). At the beginning of the novella, the narrator evokes this division without commenting further, except to say that the greatest danger for the guard lay in the predominance of the meditative part.

I do not propose a comprehensive reading of "Numa," even if such a reading were possible. Rather, I want to focus on the elements that stand out as a part of Juan Benet's reflection on the relation of literature and philosophy. "Numa" is remarkable for its density and the prescience of the thinking it contains. Like the rest of Benet's narrative, this is certainly not the work of someone inimical to thinking *per se*.<sup>16</sup> The vast majority of the guardian's ruminations have to do with his role within the world, giving the story an "existential" tone. The Sartrean formula "existence before essence" is never mentioned explicitly but is echoed in the guardian's pondering on the origins of his charge and of his very existence. Ultimately, the guard's actions are all seen in the context of two critical moments: first, the moment in which the enmity between the mountain and the human race emerges, and second, the guardian's acceptance of the Principle which guides and obligates him to protect "la propiedad" up to the moment of his own death. His thinking is nearly entirely taken up by the two themes of enmity and obligation, whose inconclusiveness, as I will show, leads him to a refusal of thinking. Such a rejection ultimately suggests a critique of the prestige of simplicity at the basis of thinking about personal or communal identity. Rather than portraying the complex, conflictual nature of Numa's thought as somehow aberrant, Benet creates a sympathetic character whose very existence is threatened by the abrogation of thinking.

As Zambrano speaks of an original violence that distinguishes philosophy from poetry, Numa's narrator postulates an original cataclysm which creates the need for a guard on the mountain. In the first passage that treats their relationship as such, the narrator mentions a "divorcio" between the mountain and men, a "daño" and "una afrenta" committed against the mountain (113-14). The narrator explains this critical moment as one in which "de una vez para siempre habían quedado



trazados los límites entre lo permitido y lo prohibido, lo afín y lo ajeno, lo propio y lo extraño" (112). Such postulates are only speculative, however, and represent the work of the narrator, whose difference from Numa is never more distinct than on the issue of origins. He says:

Por su parte el guarda jamás se había interrogado sobre las raíces y motivos de aquella actitud que, muy probablemente, tenía su origen en una historia anterior a su época . . . Nunca había querido saber lo que había pasado en épocas anteriores . . . No era difícil suponer que tal actitud procedía de una época inmemorial en que tal cosa había acontecido. (112–13)

As we shall see, it is important to note this difference between the character and the narrator, for it is the narrative voice, the voice of the writer of the legend, for whom this origin takes on importance.

The creation of this separation between the character and the narrator means that the crossing of this abyss is possible, but mediation is not. Numa observes, fascinated, the noisy "conflagration" in the lands below the mountain, during which no one tries to trespass on the mountain; he studies the behavior of foreign trekkers and scientists, but the narrator is careful to insist that this gaze is not a comprehending one: "Demasiado bien sabía que, más que perdonar, comprender es aceptar y en más de un aspecto caer en el campo de lo que anteayer fue incomprendido . . ." (130). Like Benet's poets, the guard's original commitment requires him to refuse any alliance with the others because it would mean the loss of his own particularity. The latter, as shown on the first pages of "Numa," implies its own kind of knowledge, characterized by an intimate proximity to the land he inhabits, with his whole cycle of life being determined by the seasonal changes on the mountain. And it is worth mentioning, for the analogy with literature's use of a "disfraz" (29), that the mountain appears to offer all kinds of attractions, both useful and pleasurable: "no sólo parecía permitir cualquier clase de visitas . . . sino que no se avergonzaba de hacer públicos todos sus atractivos para atraerlas" (100–01).

The guard has a strange position here. He is, first of all, the only witness to this secretive scene, the mountain. Yet he is a witness who cannot communicate without the mediation of the narrator. If art and literature, as Blanchot has described them, engage in an Orphic quest into a space of silent, dark incommunicability, emerging to sing of the failed quest (*Space* 171–76), Benet positions his guard to make sure that

Orpheus not only loses Persephone, but himself remains behind, in the silence of death. This is consistent with Benet's predominant assertions about literature's inaccessibility and the incommunicable nature of an individual's experience of literature's singularity. It also manifests the marked hostility Benet attributes to literature when confronted with the attempt to understand it.

The narrator's position is essential, then, for unlike Orpheus, he does not enter this zone but rather floats above and around it, observing Numa and at times appearing to coincide with his experience. In this sense, and considering the interest we have seen for the origins of the circumstances, the narrator's voice is in fact critical, either reporting the guard's speculation or engaging in his own, observing, analyzing, formulating, and articulating the experience of an attempt to understand sympathetically. Such a critical voice is not unique in Benet, although in this case it is an extreme, keeping within a relatively well defined range. The closest relatives of "Numa" within Benet's oeuvre are not so much the novels in which the figure of the guard appears—*Volverás a Región*, *Una meditación*, and *El aire de un crimen*—as the meditations in *Puerta de tierra* on divorce and death, "Epístola moral a Laura" and "Un extempore," respectively. Although there are more similar texts, the pairing of "Numa" with "Del pozo" emphasizes this in-between voice of the narrator. Since Benet's writing so clearly sets up the poles that are variously designated, on the one hand, science, criticism, philosophy and, on the other hand, literature, art, poetry, it is necessary to observe the existence of this in-between as Benet makes it happen in the essay and the legend. The question does remain as to what to call this in-between discourse, if not criticism.

This problem of denomination also arises in the scene which, by all indications, seals Numa's fate by forcing him out of the in-between region and into an extreme rejection of contemplation, which is followed by the emergence of a third attitude and his fatal absorption in a scene occurring below the mountain. These are the novella's most gripping pages, the moment when Numa's propensity to study an intruder gives the latter the chance to defend himself, trapping the guard in a disadvantageous position behind a slab of rock. The guard's decision to do battle from this position leads the narrator to speculate once again on his regard for origins in a process which can only be called "thought" for lack of a better word. As the following passage explains,

this is a "thought" with an uneasy relation to "categories and formulas" and to the "reasons" of philosophy (155; translation mine):

El hecho de que las directrices que sigue la conducta del combatiente sean mucho más económicas y veloces que las razones esgrimidas a posteriori para ratificar su acierto, exime de la necesidad narrativa de exponer algo que sólo porque no hay otro concepto más ajustado se puede llamar pensamiento y que, en verdad, cuando se vierte en las categorías y fórmulas de éste pierde lo más valioso de su contenido y por eso, aun cuando resulte ocioso preguntarse por qué prefirió el guarda seguir apostado tras la lancha en lugar de internarse en el bosque, acaso no esté fuera de lugar presumir que una parte de su decisión estaba informada por hábitos intraducibles a palabras, por su concepto del deber y de la mejor (o más elegante) forma de cumplirlo, por la obediencia al principio que le susurraría hacerlo así, sin tener que apoyar su consejo con razones . . . (155)

Again, it is the narrator who identifies the prestige of the simple origin that will determine the guard's actions. The narrator also voices the limitations of reason in a discourse which is nothing if not reasonable (in spite of the estranging effect of the interminable sentences). The narrator even considers whether the guard's preference stems not out of a desire to follow through with an original, perhaps erroneous state (something which the guard considers with regard to the initial decision of the property to post a guard whom they would be powerless to recall) but, rather, out of a desire to justify retroactively that decision: "el guarda tenía que demostrar lo acertado de su elección y hacer gala de la necesaria habilidad para sacar a su adversario de su refugio" (156).

Following his success in this combat, the guard renews his determination to control the "disposición de ánimo" or "alma" (102) corresponding to imagination and contemplation: "el guarda se juró a sí mismo que nunca volvería a ocurrir nada parecido a causa de su dejadez, de su exceso de confianza o de su tendencia a dejarse llevar a la embriaguez de la imaginación" (162). As a sign of this coming decisiveness, the guard had killed his opponent with shots to precisely those places which represent generation and singularity: the genitals and the face, more specifically, the open mouth of his victim.

As time goes on, the guard returns to his "ensoñaciones" (163) until, according to the narrator, another attitude emerges between the active and the contemplative. From what we have learned in the foregoing discussion of "Del pozo," we should be suspicious about this in-

between to the extent that it eliminates the difference between the two extremes. Indeed, that is what this newly instituted disposition does:

dejaron de ser dos las actitudes de su alma pues una tercera vino a interponer—por así decirlo—una tierra de nadie entre ellas, tan diferentes y tan tajantemente separadas, una especie de terreno vago sin características propias, no dominado por ninguna de ellas y en el que para convivir amistosamente ambas tenían que perder sus más calificativos caracteres. En aquel terreno el guarda ni daba en pensar intensamente ni vigilaba con acecho y, tal vez, oscuramente y con regocijo y con miedo al mismo tiempo, vino a descubrir que aquel terreno era el más grato de los tres. (164)

If this in-between is pleasant, it is only at the price of reconciling the difference between the two sides. It is this difference that made the guard effective and kept him in position. As the final lines suggest, occupying this third realm not only neutralizes the other two but also allows the guard to be taken by surprise by an ominous rustling of the leaves that seems to signal his imminent death.

The parallels between the two parts of *DEL POZO Y DEL NUMA* are hard to ignore. By implication, Benet creates an image of a discourse which situates itself between literature and thought by means of reconciling the difference between the two, as Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset claimed to do. For Benet, this process risks a failure to fulfill the goals of either one of them, offering neither the solid, demonstrable knowledge of science nor the mysterious vitality of literature. On the other hand, another kind of discourse emerges, which floats between the two, partaking sometimes of one and sometimes of the other. This is an uncomfortable position, resulting at times in contradiction and confusion, but valuable nonetheless.

For good reason it has become commonplace for critics to express some sort of hesitation about commenting on Benet's work. No doubt this hesitation seems especially significant when faced with a work whose traditional narrative elements like plot and character are so elusive, but Benet implies in his work that such hesitation might have to characterize all criticism in one way or another. This would include his criticism of Thomas Mann, and we could read Benet's long excursus on the relation between literature and philosophy in the first third of "Del pozo" as the performance, if not exactly the expression, of this hesitation.

In his review of *Del pozo y del Numa*, Danubio Torres Fierro commits a telling equivocation that sums up the effect of this odd book. He insists, at first, that the two texts are clearly separate on account of their different genres: "dos géneros que tienen sus propias reglas e instauran sus propios registros y que, sobre todo, y más aún en la visión literaria benetiana, aparecen divorciados por un hiato radical . . ." (37–38). In a later description of the two, however, he ascribes to "Numa" a "tono sentencioso y filosófico" (39) and to "Del pozo" an "estado de delirio" more appropriate to literature (38). Benet, of all literary figures, seems to insist on this "divorce," and yet each part of his work evokes description in terms more proper to the other. While Benet, as much as anyone, holds up the strict separation between literature and philosophy, few have been more fascinated with the ways in which each reaches out to the other, as both reach back to the critical moments of their origins. *DEL POZO Y DEL NUMA* is the most definitive document of that fascination.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I reproduce the orthography of the title page, although on the book cover the title is all lowercase. Before the body of the first half of the book, to which I will refer as "Del pozo," for reasons which I will mention, a separate title page announces "UN ENSAYO: La deuda de la novela hacia el poema religioso de la antigüedad" (7). Since the titles are important to my interpretation of the book, I prefer not to reduce these anomalies to standard editorial practice. The incongruous titles and their possibly misleading character are pointed out by García Pérez (68).

<sup>2</sup> Unlike other places like "Del pozo" or *En ciernes*, Benet is quite blunt and clearly unfair in the context of his response to Lázaro Carreter. He says that the writer and reader are driven by the desire, respectively, to create or to encounter something new but describes the "mentalidad crítica" (*Literatura* 203) in an elaborate analogy to a tour guide who helps tourists confirm the preconceptions formed at a distance about the object of admiration they are finally seeing up close. Such a guide focuses on explaining the way in which the object fulfills expectations, reinforcing the barriers to the perception of anything new or unprecedented (*Literatura* 204–06). In his exchange with Lázaro Carreter, the eminent, recently deceased Spanish critic and philologist, Benet implies that the writer might make a brief foray into criticism, but the critic is less likely to shift his perspective to a more creative or open-ended one.

<sup>3</sup> Vicente Cabrera convincingly argues that Benet fails to take into account his own critique of criticism in the section of *Juan Benet* devoted to *Del pozo y del Numa* (20–22).

<sup>4</sup> Critics have so far been vague regarding the relation of these two elements. Chicharro Chamorro says that “ensayo literario y creación se aúnan” in *Del pozo y del Numa* (“La aventura” 35), whereas Ken Benson refers to them as “dos discursos paralelos” (11). Neither delves into the specific effects of this relation, as I intend to do.

<sup>5</sup> Such an understanding of literature as the site of an elusive “literariness” is not new to “Del pozo.” Malcolm Alan Compitello sees such a conception in *La inspiración y el estilo* and adeptly relates it to Russian formalism.

<sup>6</sup> The dictionary of Indo-European roots appended to older editions of the *American Heritage Dictionary* relates *genre* and *gender* both to *gene*, “to give birth, beget” (1516).

<sup>7</sup> More complex is the suggestion that criticism participates in or begins a process of continual negotiation of meaning, but, as in classical hermeneutics, Ortega y Gasset often seems to be referring to a fixable meaning whose validity lies in its solid connection to the historical present.

<sup>8</sup> For example, one could say that *Niebla*'s erasure of the difference between reality (of reader, of writer) and fictionality (of characters) is stated more directly in *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*. It is worth emphasizing, as has Robert Spires in *Beyond the Metafictional Mode*, the way in which the literature “[foregrounds] the fascinating capacity of language to give birth to itself” (44). In an analysis of *Niebla*, Spires reminds us how the oscillating destruction and affirmation of textual authority in the novel can give a sense of anxiety and of autonomy which need not resolve itself in one way or the other (34–38). Presumably, a philosophical text aspires to a single definitive sensation, either anxiety or autonomy, in a way that literature does not.

<sup>9</sup> In this paragraph Heidegger describes how modern editorial practices brought this poem into the light over a hundred years after its composition and in the midst of a new age. This new age has been characterized by mastery of the entire earth, Heidegger says, with the exception of Hölderlin's poem, which has yet to be interpreted (*Erläuterungen* 50).

<sup>10</sup> It is possible, though not necessary for my purposes, that Zambrano attended or heard about one of Heidegger's presentations, especially during her service with the Second Republic's Committee for Cultural Relations (see Johnson 224).

<sup>11</sup> Benet is not the first to give literature a privileged status with regard to death. His analysis, couched in somewhat vague, heroic terms, could be fruitfully compared to Blanchot's in “Literature and the Right to Death” (*Work* 300–44) and “The Gaze of Orpheus” (*Space* 171–76).

<sup>12</sup> A similar point is made in the first essay of *Puerta de tierra*, as Benet recalls a schoolteacher's evocation of "la costumbrística" (11). In an essay comparing Benet's literary theory to Juan Goytisolo's, David Herzberger illuminates the way in which Benet conceives of a writer's relationship to his or her literary tradition ("Theoretical Approaches to the Spanish New Novel: Juan Benet and Juan Goytisolo").

<sup>13</sup> The implication that Benet sees art as disinterested is deliberate, but disinterested in the rarified sense that develops in the *Critique of Judgment*, not the psychological meaning that Schopenhauer and later Nietzsche gave to the term. For Kant, "disinterest" is meant to reflect art's association with a priori structures of understanding, giving rise to the universally valid judgments whose existence he sets out to establish in the Third Critique. On Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's misreading of Kant, see Heidegger, *Nietzsche* (107–14).

<sup>14</sup> Chicharro Chamorro's first article on Benet's theory, "Juan Benet y el pensamiento literario del medio siglo," as helpful as it is by situating Benet in a history of Spanish poetics, fails to account for Benet's many works of literary criticism when he asserts that, for Benet, a "lectura solitaria" is the only way of understanding a work completely (51–52). Either Benet, oddly, puts aside the desire for full comprehension in his essays, or else he does not see the articulation of his readings as any threat to the solitude of his comprehension.

<sup>15</sup> The most prominent examples are Stephen J. Summerhill, John B. Margenot's chapter on Numa in *Zonas y sombras*, and David Herzberger's "Numa and the Nature of the Fantastic." The exception is the perceptive structural analysis by Helen F. Roberts. For Jacques Fressard, Numa's organizing power dwells as much in the associations of his name as in the attributes ascribed to him in "Una leyenda" and elsewhere.

<sup>16</sup> Javier Marías, in an article commemorating the publication of *Volverás a Región*, credits Benet with reawakening "el pensamiento literario" in Spain (25), a term which he uses, unlike Chicharro Chamorro in the essays I have cited, to refer to the interaction between meditative characters, for which the prime examples come from Shakespeare.

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