

# SOUTELO AND POTOCKY OR THE FRATERNITY OF THE ENSLAVED NATIONS<sup>1</sup>

CARME FERNÁNDEZ PÉREZ-SANJULIÁN  
*Universidade da Coruña*

In Galician Literature, *Grupo Nós* is the well-known label for a group of authors who were the leaders of Galician cultural life in the 1920s and 1930s. They were the active creators of novels, stories, dramas, designs and essays, as well as being politicians committed to a political paradigm that identified with Galiza. Europeanism was also one of the main elements of their ideology.

One of their number, Ramón Otero Pedrayo (1888-1976), is a good example of an author that uses narrative discourse as a means to expand the debate over national identity. This paper will focus upon an analysis of interpretations of the Slavic world, the Baltic and especially Poland in one of his romances, *Os caminhos da vida* (1928). We will study how these images work as identifying references that serve the author as a way to maintain the debate over the affirmation of his country's identity and, at the same time to denounce the political dependence, the peripheral situation and the marginalisation of these nations in comparison to the nucleus of traditional powers. Finally, these interpretations allow the Otero Pedrayo to assert the idea of Europeanism based on the similarities between Galiza and the other peripheral nations of Europe.

## 1. Introduction

Under the title of *Grupo Nós*, we associate a group of authors who took a leading cultural role in Galiza from 1920 until the military uprising in 1936 that gave way to the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent dictatorship of Franco. They were active creators as well as politicians committed to a political paradigm that identified with Galiza. Europeanism was also one of the main elements of their ideology. In addition, the main feature that characterises this group and explains its decisive influence upon the Galician cultural world was their determined support for the elaboration of an essentially cultivated,

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refined and modern artistic discourse that was directly related to the innovative aesthetic waves that circulated in Europe at that time.

This combination of nationalism and universalism, respect for tradition, openness to reform, aestheticism and ideological compromise, resulted in wide productivity in various fields (literature, drama, essay, science, design, etc.), mainly characterised by formal accuracy and originality. The thematic repertoire increased and new genres were introduced. Certain elements that were present in the Galician literary tradition, such as popular topics and the use of nature and landscapes, were treated as a means to a new language, and were clearly influenced by the aesthetics of symbolism and expressionism that were fashionable in Europe at that time. Above all the most important contribution from this group of writers was the conscious and continuous effort that they devoted to the cultivation of prose in a literary context which was dominated by verse. They were the creators of the modern Galician prose<sup>2</sup> in the fields of fiction and essay, and the works belonging to these particular genres best reflect the ideological cause that motivated them.

Their productivity therefore caused a radical reform of the Galician literary panorama at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which provided them with an indisputable prestige in the eyes of their contemporaries (Carvalho Calero 1990: 231). In addition to the charisma that some of them undoubtedly had, this significant recognition explains the attraction that their cultural projects inspired among older and younger writers. Therefore many initiatives favoured by the members of the *Grupo Nós* would end up influencing almost the whole of the pre-war Galician literary universe.

One of the most influential authors from this period of Galician literature is Ramón Otero Pedrayo (1888-1976), a prolific author (narrator, essayist and playwright), orator and politician. He is a paradigmatic representative of the intellectual elite that devoted its creative efforts to the literary codification of an ideological discourse that was concerned with the creation of a awareness of national identity. This discourse was characterised by its orientation towards the ideology, and the consolidation, of the cultural and symbolic references that were considered essential for the formation of the concept of a nation (Fernández Pérez-Sanjulián 2003: 74).

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<sup>2</sup> As well as this their contribution has great value concerning the configuration of a model literary language. According to G. Sanmartín this period “is also defined as that in which the first serious attempt to provide writers with a cultured model for Galician, without which we would not write the way we do nowadays” (Rei 2002: 184-185).

This was a transnational process that was developed in a similar way in all those situations in which the opportunity arose to affirm a particular identity. We may refer to the situation of nineteenth-century America, Galicia, Catalonia, Ireland and postcolonial Africa. However, as A. M<sup>a</sup> Thiesse asserted, the publication of a national literature can occur within an educational project focused upon uniting all of the social components of a nation into the consciousness of its community (Thiesse 2001: 63). An educational project that is going to involve various means and genres –books, magazines, journals, comics and associated activities– as was explicitly outlined in political discourses and texts. All are going to be the means by which nationalist elites will develop a didactic discourse aimed at their fellow citizens, a discourse focused upon awakening their will to become a nation.

Nevertheless, it was not in the literature of analysis and critical opinion, nor in the essays and the more clearly doctrinal, journalistic prose where this form of argument could be found. The authors participating in these processes (who included Otero Pedrayo and their contemporaries in *Nós* amongst them) turned narrative into a privileged vehicle by which they could present certain primary elements of the project to create a nation to a wide audience in a more accessible way.

The authors intended to refer to identity by means of literary texts and, in turn, to create an imaginary “we”<sup>3</sup> from a well-defined group of compatriots. In other words, these works intended to define, and thereby to affirm, the community to which the discourse was addressed. In other words, the narrative discourse was once again based upon certain thematic nuclei such as the representation of the symbolic value of the land and the landscape, the simulation of history,<sup>4</sup> the creation of a typology of main characters and heroes, and the frequent appearance of topics such as the Celtic world, Atlantism, and sentimental family relations, as allegories that created the idea of a nation.<sup>5</sup> In this context these themes, which we will call nationalist ideologemes,<sup>6</sup> had an ideological motivation linked to the nationalist project that was supported by the work of their creators.

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<sup>3</sup> This concept is understood here in the same way expressed by B. Anderson in *Imagined Communities*. For him a nation: “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion [...]. It is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 1996: 6- 7).

<sup>4</sup> Salinas Portugal offers an interesting overview of this issue in a section of his article: “A literatura galega e os contornos da identidade” (Portugal 2006: 355-358).

<sup>5</sup> We adopt this concept from D. Sommer who explains how political ideas were apparently based upon sentimental stories in the literature of postcolonial America in his *Foundational Fictions*. Therefore, he asserts: “The coherence comes from their common project to build, through reconciliations and amalgamations of national constituencies, a cast of lovers destined to desire each other. This produces a surprisingly consistent narrative that apparently suits a range of political positions” (Sommer 1991: 24).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed study of the nationalist ideologemes in Otero Pedrayo’s narrative works, see Fernández Pérez-Sanjulián 2003: 125-255.

The starting point for our study must be placed within this theoretical framework. This paper proposes to attempt an analysis of the Slavic, Baltic and above all Polish interpretations of the work of Ramón Otero Pedrayo, the author chosen for the purpose of this analysis.

## 2. Soutelo and Potocky, two convergent careers

As a starting point we will study the two scholars who give this paper its title, and who appeared in one of his Otero's main works: *Os caminos da vida* (*The Paths of Life*), a historical novel published in 1928 that takes place between 1836 and 1868. We will then analyse how the narrative voice provides an ideological discourse with a clear theme of identity through the characters of two noblemen, the Galician Adrián Soutelo and the Pole Potocky, who were exiled in Paris in approximately 1830-1840.

In fact Adrián Soutelo, one of the main figures in this romance, is a young nobleman who seems to be gifted with traits proper to the heroes in Otero's narrative. Like the majority of the male heroes designed by the author,<sup>7</sup> he is an individualist young man; he is thoughtful and dreamy and undergoes a long and painful process in search of his identity. Therefore Adrián Soutelo belongs to Otero's gallery of sensitive and hesitant individuals, who are aware of being different, who live their existence in a convoluted way and need a lifetime of searching in order to find their place in the world, their (personal and collective) identity, and their real interests.

All characters are represented as well-aware of the importance that education has in their lives; a rigorous intellectual preparation combined with the improvement of sensibility and reflection. Therefore the slow description of the formative process, both academic and vital, of the main characters has an enormous functional relevance in the romances of this author, especially in *Os caminos da vida*.

In Otero's works the path towards self-knowledge culminates with the adoption of a commitment to Galica, with a proto-nationalist or even nationalist influence, on the part of their main characters. Therefore that gradual awareness turns into a clear didactic solution that Otero Pedrayo uses to fix in his readers the key elements of the ideology that the author promoted in his writings.

At this point it is important to note that travels, especially those that could be considered educational, play a fundamental role in the character's development that the

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<sup>7</sup> We find Adrián Solobio or Solovio, Xacobe Vilasantar, Paio Soutelo, Martiño Dumbria or Pauliños Fontela in Otero Pedrayo's works, they are fictional characters who share many similarities, who are conceived as personifications of the author's ideological discourse (see Fernández Pérez-Sanjulián 2003: 210-225).

author meticulously describes. Encounters and contacts with new realities are essential for the formation of his characters' personality and ideology. Metonymically, it explains the importance the author gives to the extension of that same educational process to the whole of the society, or at least to those who could afford it.

In this case it is a trip to Paris and an encounter with the exiled that might stimulate the sensitivities of the Galician, and could make an essential contribution to the configuration of their ideology.

Above all the figures of the Irish O'Bryan and the Pole Potocky, given special importance due to their situation as fighters for their respective nations, are presented as identifying<sup>8</sup> points of reference that will eventually lead to the political commitment of the Galician Soutelo. It will be Soutelo himself – transformed into an autobiographic narrator – who many years later, having become a form of paternal figure, will describe this experience to his nephew Paio Soutelo. This narration, beyond its apparent nostalgic evocation of a vital period of youthful enthusiasm, intends to transmit to the nephew the same initial feeling of national pride that the old Soutelo learnt from his European friends. Therefore the reader encounters an instructive and founding discourse that can be inserted into the integral educational program that the family designs for the young nobleman.

Let's return then to Adrián Soutelo's story and see how he tells the story of his friendship with these men, and the significant effect that these encounters had upon his worldview:

“It took me some time to find the city centre of Paris and company that suited my mood. One afternoon I went to Versailles. (...) I walked up and down near a group of people I particularly liked. Soon I learnt their names: Potocky, O'Brian, with other two or three other emigrants, rushed through the tree-lined avenue, poorly dressed, their clothes not matching at all, as if they were being blown by the wind of the dead, just like dead leaves. But in their eyes there shone a calm, restrained, fatal light which sparkled every now and then like a gunshot! *Their talk shone forth in bright pieces only to then drop into long silences ruled by a great fixed idea: the enslaved country/homeland. They were castaways saved from the disaster of their lands; and they focussed their passions into a yearning that was wholly chimerical at that time. Poland, Ireland, Hungary, ancient lands, keepers of the bones of the free races, were immersed in the three nets of foreign bureaucracy, militarism, justice and instruction.* Potocky's wide chest sighed heavily whenever he thought about his mother's language being swept away from schools, dragged away from printing houses, expelled from the sacred chair like a cursed jargon. O'Brian, his grey eyes lost on the line of the horizon of sea and sky, thought he was hearing the beating of the Atlantic waters against the coastal cliffs of the sagas. The white swans of Ireland were dying one by one in the warm lakes; year after year there would be a time where the children would fill the schools and churches singing in a strange, hoarse language. Maybe they would even doubt the national faith when the Protestant minister hammered out biblical passages over and

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<sup>8</sup> With regards to this, see the chapter “Os referentes de analoxía” (Beramendi 2007: 586-589).

over again. The emigrants did not ask about names or countries. They could read in my eyes that I was also an emigrant, and talking to them I felt that vision of Galica rising freely, which up to that moment had only appeared like a fog from childhood. [...] Potocky remembered France's old friendship with Poland, he was a white, strong man, a little round shouldered, shy like a child with people, a great hunter, so he said, in the melancholic fir forests. There he found, fighting against the Russians, a heroic death! Of an old, noble lineage, he suffered for the misery of emigration. Louis flew like water from his hands into the poor man's purse or like the courtesan's onto the gambling table. He had decorated pipes and rich, shiny fur [...]. One night O'Brian saved Potocky from death. He found him on a bridge; the huge Polish man was staggering with unshapely steps, falling on both sides; the fur on him, skinned and dirty, made his condition even worse. Drunk with spirits, he said: "What is the reason for living? I tried to look for comfort. Poland is dead, the last bands have crossed the border. Only a gun or the Seine will free me from this martyrdom".

The firm spark in the Celtic man's eyes cured him and gave him hope. That was a short time before I made acquaintance with them. In the poor restaurants, I told them about my vision of Galica" (Pedrayo 1985: 228-230).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Original: "Tardei en atopar en París o centro e a compañía doadas para o meu xenio. Un serán fun a Versailles. [...] Andei rondando un grupo de persoas que me interesaban. Axiña souben os seus nomes: Potocky, O'Bryan, con outros dous ou tres emigrados, alancaban polas alamedas, mal fateados, con indumentos contradictorios, como levados polo vento dos mortos igual que as follas murchas. ¡Mais nos seus ollos brillaba unha luz serena, contida, fatal, dando ás veces un brillar súpeto de pistolazo! *A conversa estralaba en anacos labarecentes para caer logo en espaciados silenzos dominados polo aleteo da grande idea fixa: a patria escravizada. Eran naufragos salvados da catástrofe das súas terras; e xuntaban as súas paixóns nun arelar polo de entón practicamente quimérico. Polonia, Irlanda, Hungría, antergas terras gardadoras dos ósos das razas ceibes, ficaban envolveitas nas triples redes da burocracia, do militarismo, da xustiza e do ensino estranxeiros.* O vasto peito de Potocky estralaba en salaios ó pensar na lingua da súa nai varrida das escolas, arrincada das imprentas, botada como unha xerga maldizoada da cátedra sagrada. O'Bryan, os ollos griseiros perdidos nunha liña de mar e ceo, pensaba ouvir o bater das augas atlánticas nos rochedos da costa das sagas. Os cisnes brancos da Irlanda morrían un a un nos lagos mornos; ano tras ano chegaría tempo en que os rapaces encherían a escola e o templo cantaruxando nunha lingua estraña e bronca. Quizais ata dubidasen da fe nacional diante do martelar das pasaxes bíblicas polo pastor protestante. Ós emigrados non se preguntaban os nomes nin as patrias, Nos meus ollos coñeceron que eu tamén era un emigrado, e eu, falando con eles, sentín xurdir ceibe aquela visión da Galiza que ata entón soamente se me tiña presentado como unha néboa de rapaz.

[...] Potocky lembraba a vella amizade de Francia por Polonia, era un home branco e forte, un pouco cangado de ombreiros, curto como un neno coa xente, gran cazador, segundo dicía, nos melancólicos bosques de abetos, ¡Neles atopou, loitando cos rusos, unha morte heroica! De caste antiga e fidalga, sufría coa miseria da emigración; os luíses decorrían como a auga dende a os seus dedos á faltriqueira do pobre ou da cortesá, na mesa do xogo. Levaba pipas adornadas e peles brillantes e ricas [...].

Outra noite O'Bryan salvou da morte a Potocky. Atopouno nunha ponte; o xigane polonés alancaba con pasos disformes, caendo para os lados; as peles que o cubrían, espelexadas e porcas, facían máis duro o seu estado. Borracho de augardente, falaba: -¿Para que vivir? Quíxenme consolar. A Polonia está morta, as derradeiras bandas cruzaron a fronteira. Só a pistola ou o Sena me ceibarán deste martirio".

O firme resplandor dos ollos do celta curouno e deulle esperanza. Foi pouco denantes de facer eu coñecemento con eles. Nos pobres restaurantes conteilles eu a

Therefore, the character of Potocky is based upon the stereotype of the romantic hero, and more precisely upon the conventional literary images that were adopted as a model of the nineteenth-century liberal man. At the same time this character demonstrates some of the images of the Slavic world that had been developed in the literature of the peninsula, and had also been advocated by other art forms such as opera and the plastic arts. For example the author first uses the patronymic Potocky (without any direct relationship with the figure of the writer Jan Potocky) due to its simple evocative power (which suggests an immediate connection with Poland's history and culture) and because it reinforces the believability of the character in the eyes of his readers.

Potocky's character conforms to the stereotype of the slave, which helped to consolidate the cult of Western Europe in literature and the other arts. In this case the nobleman is a strong white man, a good hunter in the melancholic fir forests, who when in Paris is dressed in shiny rich furs and smokes with decorated pipes. Being romantic, passionate and daring, while at the same time being a shy and sensitive man, he is described as a hedonist who is fond of drinking, is generous and wasteful, and enjoys his time visiting games rooms and courtesans while in exile. However he never forgets that his life is completely focused upon saving his "enslaved nation". This mission will even lead him to his death (he dies while fighting against the Russians), a tragic ending of which readers are informed thanks to a useful prolepsis.

As mentioned above, Souleto's awareness of his Galician national identity is insitigated by means of the characters of Potocky and the Irish O'Bryan. It is also important to note that comments and reflections by these characters also promote ideas that represent passages of genuine importance to the novel. For instance they emphasise the role that language plays in any movement of national vindication, and the need to create a concept of national identity. For example, we read:

"[...] Right now, in this Europe which boasts about being so cultivated, there are many races subjected to foreign tyranny. One might have thought they were dead if their soul were not speaking in the verses of various poets."<sup>10</sup>

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miña visión de Galiza" (Otero Pedrayo 1985: 228-230) My italics ; unless otherwise stated, the translations are mine.

<sup>10</sup> Original: "[...] Agora mesmo, nesta Europa que se gaba de ser tan culta hai moitas razas que sofren baixo a tiranía estranxeira. Pensaríase que están mortas se non falara a súa alma nos versos dalgúns poetas" (Otero Pedrayo, 1985: 290).

The author introduces another fundamental point: Galiza has the same problems – lack of political power, a peripheral location, the lack of leading elites – as other European nations in a similar situation. This would lead Otero Pedrayo to the most innovative idea within the Galician discourse up to that point: the importance of solidarity with other, not necessarily Atlantic, European nations. Therefore the idea of Atlantism (linked to Celtism in the Galician cultural tradition) is related to Europeanism, a standard concept in the political and cultural work of the author<sup>11</sup> and his colleagues.<sup>12</sup>

By placing the situation of those European nations without official status alongside the development of Galician self-consciousness in the nineteenth century, Otero Pedrayo establishes a clear correlation between the birth of the first reflections upon the uniqueness of Galiza and those taking place across Europe at the same time: the emergence of nationalism in territories which would later achieve their independence from the states that had dominated them. Therefore, on one hand, in a dialogue concerning all matters Galician, he describes Galiza as equal with other nations in similar situations. On the other hand he introduces a model of Europeanism, which is conceived from an open and integrated standpoint, in the line with the maxim of the Galician nationalist party *Partido Galeguista*, also used by the group *Nós*: “Galiza, cell of universality”.<sup>13</sup>

As in many of his other works, the author depicts an idea of Europe that is closely linked to his vision of the Galician nation, and is far from the ideas of self-absorption, and of local reductionism. This is one of the fundamental themes of his best-known novel: *Arredor de si* (*About Himself*), published in 1930. In this novel we are told about the local and foreign travels (around Spain and Europe) of another Adrián. In this case it is Adrián Solovio, another of those paradigmatic heroes who, after a long period of searching, rediscover their homeland and embark upon a political engagement with it.<sup>14</sup> In the last

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<sup>11</sup> “Otero Pedrayo rejects the abstract and standardizing cosmopolitanism although he does not request a closure in the narrow limits of the culture itself, but universality based on plurality, on the free and peaceful harmony of people. This position puts into practice a disposition open to the world culture too” (Quintana & Valcárcel 1988: 87).

<sup>12</sup> An approach to the concept of Europeism for the Galicianist movement can be found in Carro, 1985: 283-285. See also Villares (2006: 124f).

<sup>13</sup> This maxim is also included in the “Programa de acción pra os Grupos Galeguistas aprobado na II Asambleira 1933” (Action Programme for Pro-Galician Groups as passed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting 1933).

<sup>14</sup> The author himself talks about this work in an interview carried out in the last year of his life: “Adrián Solovio, the main character in the book, is me and all the young men we found in Galica at that time: Caste-lao, Lousada, Risco, Cuevillas, each of them having their differences [...]. How long it took us to discover our land by going around the universe and through books! From time to time I came back to my hometown in Trasalba full of dilettante worries, and what did I find there? A rural and suppressed Galiza, ignorant people who were forgotten in a corner while I was searching for the truth in books, and it burnt into my chest more and more every time” (Freixanes 1982: 22-23).



chapter of this novel the reflections that the city of Santiago induces in the main character when he returns from his journey are described:

“[...] [Santiago de Compostela] it didn't give Adrián the impression of a cosmopolitan power. On the contrary, it affirmed the vitality of a small country, brilliant in spirit, necessary for the economy of the world. Only on the shores of the Atlantic can small countries live free, perhaps they are at the very centre of world events.”<sup>15</sup>

Finally, in an even more explicit passage towards the end of the novel the narrator explains Adrián's dream of Europe, his vision of what Europe should become in a near future:

“(...) The novelty of Europe, the one she expects, the one she will always justify to the world (...) is nothing (...) but the discovery and the adult age of all the nations that it consists of, the emergence of all the collective national souls. (...) Adrián (...) imagined the future map of Europe. The borders were not customs lines but vital transition zones between the harmonious consciousness of the nations.”<sup>16</sup>

As stated above, Otero Pedrayo was already describing the concept later known as the “Europe of the nations”, as opposed to that of the states from an essentially literal point of view, in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

### 3. Conclusion

The present paper reveals that the two characters in question, the Galician Adrián Soutelo and the Pole Potocky, are reference points for self-identification that enable the author to sustain his affirmation of self-identity. That identity had been rejected due to his nation's situation of political dependence and the marginalisation in regard to the traditional centres of power. At the same time, these images are used to insist on the necessity for spreading the idea of Europeanism, which must not be conceived from the perspective of national states – traditionally seen as central to the configuration of Europe – but from a different point of view that highlights the similarities between the peripheral European nations, with or without an official status.

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<sup>15</sup> Original: “[...] [Santiago de Compostela] non lle daba a Adrián a sensación dun poder cosmopolita. Polo contrario, afirmaba a vitalidade dunha pequena patria, lucente de espírito, necesaria na Economía do mundo. Só nas beiras atlánticas poden vivir os pequenos pobos, ceibes, quizais precisamente por estar no centro das correntes do mundo” (Otero Pedrayo 1990: 172-173).

<sup>16</sup> Original: “[...] A novidade de Europa, a que ela agarda, a que xustificará para sempre no mundo [...] non é [...] senón o descubrimento e maioría de idade de todos os pobos que a compoñen, o xurdimento de todas as almas colectivas, nacionais. [...] Adrián [...] imaxinaba o futuro mapa da Europa. As fronteiras non eran liñas de aduanas senón vitais zonas de transición entre as harmoniosas consciencias dos pobos” (Otero Pedrayo 1990: 191-192).

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