

Unamuno's Paratexts:
Twisted Guides to
Contorted Narratives

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Introduction

ALMOST AS MUCH AS the thematic concerns of life after death (Marías 50) and the human personality (Blanco Aguinaga 31), the novelistic fiction of Unamuno is characterized by its paratexts. Open almost any of his longer narratives or collections thereof, and one will find preludes to or extensions of their central text: epigraphs, prologues of various sorts, disguised and undisguised epilogues, notes, and—for the reader familiar with his endless collections of other kinds of writing—an inexhaustible supply of epitexts. This paratextual presence, so obvious, so seemingly distinct from the presumed narrative core of the work, must—one suspects—play an integral role in the narrative’s dramatization of the quest for immortality and the unfolding of the mechanisms of personality. In a novelist whose work is highly formalistic—this despite its author’s coinage of terms like *vivíparo* and *nivola* and the critic’s habitual application of descriptors like “open” or “unclo- sured”—one easily perceives that the form of the work, and hence its overall message or the experience of its reader, depends on that reader’s attention to those elements given inordinate emphasis by being set off from the central text.

In 1987, Genette published *Seuils*, the bible of paratextual vademecums. Ten years later it became available in English as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Some variation ultimately exists between the original French, the English translation, and terms used by Unamuno. Genette speaks of the *préface* in reference to phenomena that English would subsume under either *preface* or *prologue*. Although *prefacio* exists in Spanish, Unamuno invariably prefers *prólogo*, whether referring to a prologue or a preface. These variations make little difference provided

the translator or critic add clarifiers to make more precise any use of the terms. In this study, many words—*prologue*, *preface*, *prelude*, and *introduction*—are adapted as counterparts to Genette's *préface*. Some of this is done for stylistic variation, but most is carried out in an attempt to modulate Genette's highly flexible use of an otherwise inflexible lexicon for its current employment in a study written in English. There are, for example, many places in which the English-language reader of the rigidly translated *preface* (for *préface*) would understand an appendage written by a real or imagined third party, when Genette more often refers clearly to a text added by the author or one of his or her characters. In instances such as this, some flexibility in the rendering of terminology is necessary if one is to both keep up with Genette's multiple denotations and provide descriptions of forms utilized by Unamuno.

I am obviously not the only commentator on Unamuno's fiction to discuss Unamuno's paratexts, but the present study is, at writing, the only one to focus on the entire body of his extended fiction. Almost no study of specific Unamuno narratives is without some reference and speculation as to the function of one or more of its paratexts. This is particularly true in almost every study dealing with *Amor y pedagogía* (1902) and *Niebla* (1914). A very few studies of Unamuno's narrative art have foregrounded the phenomenon of paratextual structures. Criado's 1986 work, *Las novelas de Unamuno: estudio formal y crítico*, makes liberal use of Genette's perspectives, but the French theorist's material appears here imbedded in formalist concerns of a larger order—the overall structuring of plot and characterization—so that it becomes diluted, at times even distorted, in observations on discourse and diegesis quite alien to Genette's more limited claims for paratextual analysis. Vauthier's 1999 study, *Niebla de Miguel de Unamuno: A favor de Cervantes, en contra de los "cervantófilos,"* on the other hand, while severely limited to one novel, faithfully and creatively uses Genette's paratextual catalogue and its illustrative exposition of effects in order to tease important metaliterary—though few ontological—perspectives from Unamuno's

most famous narratives. Pérez López applauds the achievements of Vauthier and categorically states that it is the paratextual elements that free Unamuno's narratives from the dictates of positivism and the quasi-deterministic structures of realism (69-79). I have attempted to combine Criado's highly justified attention to diegesis with Vauthier's more concentrated attention to the paratexts. I have added to these concerns an attempt to define the effects of this paratextual-diegetical link to Unamuno's problematic ontology, a personal interest of mine that it is fair to say is common to many Unamuno commentators of my own and earlier generations.

It will be observed—perhaps with some surprise—that my view of the paratexts' contribution to the creation of a narrative ontology is an optimistic one. That is, my marshaling of evidence leads to an unmistakable conclusion that the paratextual material in Unamuno's narratives counteracts and successfully reverses much of the pessimistic and "tragic" dimension created by the narratives' central texts. My reaction to this conclusion is ambivalent. On the one hand, I am happy to report such a clear marker of a never-say-die spirit on the part of the writer. On the other hand, I am frustrated at finding one more feature that keeps our purview of his literaturized philosophy and philosophized literature in perpetual suspense, somewhere between the relative pessimism of the central text and the formal openness of the paratexts, though—on balance—this tally exhibits more hope than despair. My belief is that this tilt toward optimism really should surprise no one for, as Tanganelli has pointed out in reference to Unamuno's habitual confrontation of feeling and rationality, "a Unamuno, igual que a tantos otros artistas e intelectuales finiseculares, le interesaba reducir el dominio de lo lógico y abstracto para reivindicar la 'originariedad' de lo patético-concreto" (*Hermenéutica de la crisis* 160). It is a perspective that Unamuno clearly found confirmed in his favorite William James essay, *The Will to Believe*: "Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an opinion between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds" (11).