MORE ON THE NARRATOR OF *FORTUNATA Y JACINTA*

Whereas we count on the narrators of nineteenth-century novels to confirm the significance and believability of the tale they tell, the narrator who ushers us into *Fortunata y Jacinta* does quite the contrary, as Stephen Gilman observes in *Galdós and the Art of the European Novel.* Comparing this opening strategy, which seems to "invite our disinterest,"[1] with other beginnings of nineteenth-century novels, he reaches a provocative conclusion about Galdós' purpose:

> [I]t was what we might term inherent novelistic believability, the comfortable habit of automatically attributing historical truth to fiction on the fragile basis of a date and a place name, that Galdós could not accept. He wants to be present and on the scene (in the persona of his bored narrator) in order to warn us against himself and against the easy magic he has at his command. (p. 365)

Such undercutting of historical illusion, Gilman argues, signals Galdós' skepticism with regard to the meaning of contemporary history by serving as "a demonstration of the fictional nature of the history and sociology upon which his public heedlessly premised its believed-in-realism" (p. 239). The essay that follows will explore this insight by examining Galdós' subversion of a standard procedure of nineteenth-century narrative.

To begin our discussion of the role of the narrator in producing believability, let us consider Gerard Genette's analysis of verisimilitude in "Vraisemblance et motivation." Examining the seventeenth-century polemic about the verisimilitude of *La Princesse de Cleves,* Genette identifies the basic criterion for believability as an action's conformity to a norm accepted by the public. He then formulates this principle in general terms:

> Le récit vraisemblable est donc un récit dont les actions répondent, comme autant d'applications ou de cas particuliers, à un corps de maximes reçues comme vraies par le public auquel il s'adresse; mais ces maximes, du fait même qu'elles sont admises restent le plus souvent implicites.[2]

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[1] Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U. Press, 1981, p. 361.

[2] *Figures II* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969), p. 76.

He then describes a second, less formulaic category of narrative, one which cannot count on tacit norms for justification.

> Un tel récit devrait alors chercher dà se donner la transparence qui lui manque en multipliant les explications, en suppléant à tout propos les maximes, ignorées du public, capables de rendre compte de la conduite de ses personnages et de l'enchanement de ses intrigues, bref en inventant ses propres poncifs et en simulant de toutes pièces et pour les besoins de sa cause un vraisemblable artificiel qui serait la théorie—cette fois-ci, et par force, explicite et déclarée—de sa propre practique... [I]l s'agit évidement du récit balzacien. (p. 79)

Thus the Balzacian novel, setting the paradigm for nineteenth-century fiction in general, uses the narrative voice to set forth the maxims that justify fictional events, incorporating within the novel itself the "theoretical" frame of reference that previously existed between author and reader outside the text.

Galdós' narrator, too, adopts the procedure established by his French antecedent. Particularities of the novelistic world of *Fortunata y Jacinta* receive justification from the narrator, who as early as the first page refers to a general idea of youth to explain Juanito's abrupt turn-about as a student: "verificóse en él uno de esos cambios críticos que tan comunes son en la edad juvenil."[3] Sprinkled liberally throughout the telling of the story, such restatements of what are phrased as commonly held beliefs give the effect of confirming the credibility of the characters' behavior. Generalities about human nature, female nature, Spanish character, and universalized psychological experience perform this function in the Galdosian as well as in the Balzacian narrative. Galdós' narrator especially likes to adduce tendencies of social history as laws that make individual behavior comprehensible; the parallel between Juanito's amorous caprices and Spain's political instability provides the most notorious example. However, another instance illustrates how Galdós turns this technique against itself. To explain an event that seems incredible both to Fortunata and to the reader, namely, the Rubín family's acceptance of her return to Maxi, the narrator makes an analogy with social process:

> Fue de esas cosas que pasan, sin que se pueda determinar como pasaron, hechos fatales en la historia de una familia como lo son sus similares en la historia de los pueblos; hechos que... aunque se les sienta venir, no se ve el disimulado mecanismo que los trae. (p. 362)

The chapter title, "Otra restauración," implies that the restoration of Fortunata's marriage can be no less credible than that of the Bourbon dynasty. Yet the negative formulation slyly subverts this justification of a fictional event by reference to an historical event: the narrator ultimately

[3] *Obras completas, V*, 4th ed. (Madrid: Aguilar, 1965), p. 13.

refers us, not to the explanatory framework of history, but to skepticism about explanations of either historical or personal developments. Thus Galdós, apparently employing the procedure that Balzac worked out for establishing the verisimilitude of the realist novel, in fact undermines the general laws to which his narrator appeals.

Galdós' ironic treatment of the novel's explicit belief system depends crucially on the personified narrator, characterized by John Kronik as an eyewitness subnarrator,"[4] and by Gilman as a narrator-reporter (p. 363). Carlos Blanco demonstrates that the narrator, friend of the Santa Cruz family, of Villalonga, and the rest, shares their conception of the world: "de ahí que más de una vez no podamos distinguir entre sus expresiones y juicios y los de—por ejemplo—don Baldomero o *la Santa*."[5] Indeed, the narrator whose acquaintance with the novel's upper middle class permits him to witness the events he recounts or to get privileged information from those involved—"Zalamero asegura que..." (p. 76), "Cuentan Jacinta y su criada que..." (p. 115)—echoes their perspective in his explanations as well as his judgments. For example, a generalizing concept that suggests the cause of don Baldomero's leniency toward his son—"¡Efectos de la evolución educativa, paralela de la evolución política!" (p. 27)—simply recapitulates the elder Santa Cruz's justification of his educational philosophy ten pages earlier. Moreover, very early in the novel the narrator adopts the function of expressing Baldomero's unarticulated notions: "Don Baldomero no lo decía así; per sus vagas ideas sobre el asunto se condensaban en una expresión de moda y muy socorrida: 'El mundo marcha' " (p. 27). Of course, this fashionable phrase is precisely the maxim that subsumes the narrator's own formulations of the trends governing the history he narrates: "Hemos progresado de tal modo..." (p. 16); "la transformación impuesta por los tiempos..." (p. 28).

The narrator's repetition, as if from his own authority, of the precepts expressed by his characters discredits the explanatory maxims he provides, of course. Readers accustomed to earlier realism would have felt the irony of this tautological procedure. In Balzac the narrator's power to formulate the laws of human nature and social process that authenticate his story sets him apart from his characters and forms a bond with the reader. Though the narrator of *Fortunata y Jacinta* imitates the Balzacian model in documentary detail, in concern with the signs of historical process, his failure to propose explanations which transcend the belief systems of his characters weakens his assertions. Since, as we have already remarked, the narrator's generalizing comments echo the ideas of a specific group within the novel's social hierarchy, the well-connected commercial and financial bourgeoisie, it becomes apparent that Galdós uses his fictional narrator to undercut a

[4] "Galdosian Reflections: Feijóo and the Fabrication of Fortunata" *M L N*, 97 (1982), 284.

[5] "Entrar por el aro: restauración del 'orden' y educación de Fortunata," *La historia y el texto literario: Tres novelas de Galdós* (Madrid: Nuestra Cultura, 1978), p. 86.

class ideology,[6] cleverly turning the need to create a "vraisemblable artificiel" against the historical ideological system that the nineteenth-century narrative mimicked.

The full force of Galdós' subversive strategy emerges in a much commented passage. The narrator's comments on the "dichosa confusión de todas las clases" and his claim that "el nacimiento no significa nada entre nosotros" (p. 65) echo a commonplace which, mocked by Larra in the 1830's and solemnly affirmed by Fernán Caballero two decades later, was being rehabilitated as part of the Restoration propaganda. These sweeping statements seem to sum up a truth recognized beyond the novel as well as within it, where the narrator's voicing of the Santa Cruz's opinions is already well established. Like a Balzacian maxim, this generalization presents itself in relation to narrated facts—the guest list for the Santa Cruz's Christmas Eve dinner—as a theoretical law to particular phenomena: each verifies the other.

Yet to the extent that we are to resist the easy magic of the narrative convention, we perceive disconcertingly the contrary effect, that these "truths" are at odds with significant particularities of the story. The reader, assured here that "se han ido compenetrando las clases todas" (p. 65), has just finished watching through Jacinta's horrified eyes the abandonment and disappearance of a young woman of the people, who has slipped below the surface of society as Jacinta knows it. Nor does the treatment of the episode soon to follow in which Jacinta visits the slums bear out the narrator's comforting idea that "no hay más diferencias que las esenciales... las desigualdades eternas del espíritu" (p. 65). As Gilman has shown us, Jacinta experiences this unfamiliar part of Madrid as radically other than her ordinary world, as a descent into an underworld.[7] Considering such discrepancies, Thomas E. Lewis regards the narrator's assertions to be a statement of the goal toward which the narrative as a process of reconciliations strives.[8] While this attractive proposal accounts for the striking correspondence between the passage in question and the grand lines along which the novel moves, it disregards the subtle sabotage of the narrator's declarations, not only by the contradictory context of Jacinta's experience, but also by sly characterization of the speaker's first person plural. The deceptive "entre nosotros" attempts to pass itself off as referring to "la masa nacional" but several other clues reveal its referent to be the partial society represented by the Santa Cruz circle. The matter-of-fact mention of "la educación académica que todos los españoles reciben" is one giveaway.

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[6] Blanco too observes that the ironic treatment of the narrator gives an ambiguous sense to his corroboration of "la pragmática y vulgar versión burguesa de la 'ley de la realidad' " (p. 91).

[7] "As the title of the chapter indicates, Jacinta undertakes nothing less than a mythological 'viaje' to the underworld..." (p. 299, n. 14).

[8] See "*Fortunata y Jacinta:* Galdós and the Production of the Literary Referent," *MLN*, 96 (1981), 317.

Another can be found in the argument in favor of democratization: "Esta confusión es un bien, y gracias a ella no nos aterra el contagio de la guerra social..." (p. 65). Such a concern clearly characterizes those who with don Baldomero were apprehensive about "la guerra y la anarquía" that surfaced during the Republic (p. 151). To return to Genette's terminology for a moment, we find that the "theory" voiced by Galdós' narrator, instead of confirming the "practice" represented in the narrative, stands subtly at odds with it. The discrepancy exposes as partial or false the ideology of the respectable society to which the narrator belongs.

Yet, as careful readers of *Fortunata y Jacinta* are aware, the personified narrator who serves Galdós' debunking process fades out of parts 2, 3 and 4, though Kronik observes (p. 282) that he asserts himself just enough to preserve a kind of narrative instability. He withdraws, appropriately, when the world of the Santa Cruz with which he is so closely associated fades into the background. A depersonalized narrator takes his place, a chameleon whose linguistic and conceptual quality changes with the characters who dominate the narrated episodes. As the narrator makes fewer justificatory remarks, above all in the last two parts, the characters themselves, particularly Fortunata, Feijóo, and Maxi, take over that function in striving for a coherent understanding of their world, their actions and their motivations. The characters' attempts to comprehend the underlying laws of their world replace to some extent the theorizing activity of the narrator and are tested directly against the flow of events transmitted by the narration.

This procedure also produces the skepticism with regard to explanation that we noted as an effect of the ironic use of the narrator. Feijóo provides a significant example. Within the novel his worldly wisdom is unexcelled. He understands so precisely the mechanisms that constrain and motivate action in this narrative that he can predict with certainty and manipulate to some extent outcomes that at first do not seem likely to the persons involved: he perceives that Fortunata will become his mistress, and later, that the Rubín family will take her back. Since he possesses such profound knowledge of the laws that govern his social world, Feijóo should be the character most capable of formulating the general theory that would justify specific actions. His "filosofía práctica" very nearly succeeds in doing so, yet it fails in the end as an adequate guide for Fortunata's actions. Long before the final outcome, however, the inadequacy of Feijóo's maxims reveals itself in the difficulty that the practical philosopher encounters in articulating them to his protegee. "[E]n la conciencia se le puso un nudo, que le apretó durante breve rato; pero al punto lo deshizo, evocando las teorías que había profesado toda su vida" (p. 353). Even then it is not easy to get out what he has to say, and when he has said it, he is assaulted by "una inquietud inexplicable" (p. 354) that turns into terror and physical illness—the beginnings of the attack whose consequence is his irreversible mental decadence. The knot in his throat reflects the knot in his theories, an unresolved duality that flaws the coherence of his moral and social vision.

As if struck down by the impossibility of articulating a fully integrated, consistent synthesis, the old man lapses into the incoherent mutterings of his final dialogue with Fortunata.

In *Fortunata y Jacinta,* then, neither the personified narrator nor the characters who might speak in lieu of the invisible narrator verbalize comprehensive laws for their world that are not sabotaged or discredited. Considered in relation to realism as a genre, this observation can be seen as a sign that Galdós' novel stands on that closing frontier of the realist novel where the possibility of registering the experience of contradiction, discontinuity, breakdown within a cohesive and comprehensive framework approaches its breaking point.[9] Continuing our initial line of inquiry, however, let us note in Galdós' ironic development of a Balzacian practice further evidence for Gilman's argument that *Fortunata y Jacinta* counters Balzac by discrediting contemporary history as a meaning-endowing frame for fiction. The novel attacks the Restoration, its idea of Spanish history, its false ideology of progress, harmony and reconciliation, and its hypocritical ethic by incorporating—and then undercutting—that idea system into the explicit assumptions of the personified narrator or of characters who use it to explain their world. Galdós has a constructive purpose in offering us this kind of self-destructing ideological tape recording, however: in the absence of sound maxims, unshakable laws, monolithic explanatory systems, we can hear a little better the incoate, contradictory yearnings through which Fortunata intimates the possibility of something different. She tries again and again to express the ardent desire of another kind of relation between herself and others in terms that seem absurd to Juanito, Guillermina and the narrator, for she is moved by an utopian impulse that can find no echo in the Restoration language of how things are. The idea of what human connection might be, which she embodies in a final gesture rather than words, can not be interpreted truly in the dominant codes of those around her, except for a fleeting moment by Jacinta. If, as Gilman tells us, "Galdós in creating Fortunata proposed to relieve his readers of their history and society" (p. 367), it is in this sense: she thrusts against the dead weight of an historical system in which socio-economic relations, verbal representations, and conceptual constructs mutually reinforced each other and supported the sterile prosperity and hegemony of the Santa Cruz. Galdós' sabotage of his narrator's maxims, laws, and commonplaces constitutes the reverse side of Fortunata's efforts to communicate what cannot be said.

Even so, the author who sets all this up, who manipulates narrator, language and action to produce his liberating ironies, cannot fully escape the ideological system within which he writes and lives. Let us take the case

[9] J.J. Macklin implies something similar in the conclusion of "B. Pérez Galdós: *Fortunata y Jacinta*", in ed. Williams, *The Monster in the Mirror: Studies in Nineteenth Century Realism* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1978), p. 203.

of a familiar maxim that turns up as the justification of certain startling actions even when the ideology-bound personified narrator of the first part dissolves into the invisible narrating function that predominates in parts 3 and 4. The narrator prepares us for Fortunata's first uncontrolled outburst at Jacinta by alluding to the nature of the *pueblo*: "Toda la rudeza, toda la pasión fogosa de mujer de pueblo... hervía en su alma..." (p. 384). When another explosion interrupts Fortunata's observance of middle-class social rules, the narrator again appeals to a code of class characteristics: "La ira, la pasión y la grosería del pueblo se manifestaron en ella de golpe..." (p. 408). Here the generalization that the lower class is subject to uncontrolled emotion performs precisely the role in creating verisimilitude that Genette analyzes: it creates a relationship "entre la conduite particulière attribuée à tel personnage, et telle maxime général implicite et reçue" (p. 74). The proposition is further buttressed by its close relation to other generalizations. On the preceding page the narrator, assuming his own voice as he does so rarely in the latter half of the novel, asserts that:

> Así era la verdad, porque el pueblo, en nuestras sociedades, conserva las ideas y los sentimientos elementales en su tosca plenitud, como la cantera contiene el mármol, materia de la forma. El pueblo posee las verdades grandes y en bloque, y a él acude la civilización conforme se le van gastando las menudas de que vive. (p. 407)

Of course, we immediately suspect that the personified narrator, tainted by his identification with the Santa Cruz, speaks here: after all, he intervenes to confirm Guillermina's remark to Fortunata: "Tiene usted las pasiones de pueblo, brutales como un canto sin labrar." And when we remember that both Guillermina and the narrator echo the very images used by Juanito when he speaks "con un poco de pedantería" of the people as the quarry of elemental feeling (p. 278), we sense an ironic undertow eroding the narrator's "truth."

Yet here we face one of the great novel's unresolvable ambiguities. Although Galdós has gradually trained his readers to take his narrator's performance of the conventional explanatory function with a grain of salt, he does not in this final case deliver the undercut we have come to expect. The relation of Fortunata's violent impulses to a general notionof her class must stand as valid if we are to accept as believable the fatally decisive action of her life, when, still weak from childbirth, she physically attacks Aurora. While this episode is carefully motivated by the evolution of Maxi's mad insights, the refinement of his hopeless pain into an instrument capable of galvanizing Fortunata's own jealousy, the narrator still recurs to the maxims of class nature to justify the particular expression of Fortunata's sense of betrayal. Her scandalous—and self-destructive—eruption in Aurora's genteel atelier is explained as a sudden reversion "a las condiciones de su origen, mujer del pueblo, con toda la pasión y la grosería que el trato social había disimulado en ella" (p. 516). Thus, neither the narrator nor the

story-structuring author allow Fortunata to escape the conditions that typed her from the start as a passionate, elemental, heedless *chulita.* The maxim that Madrid's *chulitas* are violent and generous, loyal and jealous, is both the germ and the verification of Fortunata's story,[10] and as such resists the corrosive effect of Galdós' play with the narrator's general affirmations. Nevertheless, in the final balance, the resulting tension between irony and ideology sufficiently interferes with the easy magic that binds reader, narrator and narrated in a tautological circle to permit us a glimpse of what Fortunata could be and mean if we could apprehend her in other terms.

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[10] In her survey of female Spanish types, Emilia Pardo Bazán describes *la chula madrileña* in these terms, citing Galdós: "Galdós ha estudiado maravillosamente este genuino tipo, siempre primitivo e indómito, en una de sus últimas obras, *Fortunata y Jacinta.*" See "La mujer española," *La mujer española,* ed. Leda Schiavo (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1976), p. 62. First published in *La España Moderna,* 2, No. 17 (1890), 101-113.