

THE MEANING OF THEATER IN *LA DESHEREDADA*

Para SG: los manicomios se quedaron en el tintero.

"The theater, however, is no more than a metaphor, a way of focusing vision on a world of role-playing.."

Robert Alter

In 1879, when Galdós was heartily sick of writing *Episodios*, he wrote to Pereda telling him of a new project: "Ahora tengo un gran proyecto. Hace tiempo que me está bullendo en la imaginación una novela que yo guardaba para más adelante, con objeto de hacerlo detenida y juiciosamente. Pero visto el poco éxito de la última (mostrado para la tercera parte) [of *León Roch*], quiero acometerlo ahora. Necesito un año o año y medio. Este asunto es bueno, en parte político, pero no tiene ningún roce con la religión."¹ A year and nine months later *La desheredada* was published, the first of the series that would be called *novelas españolas contemporáneas*, and a novel concerned deeply with the political events of the time. It is reasonable to suppose that when Galdós wrote to Pereda in 1879 of a political novel that he wanted to begin, he was referring to the germ of what would come to be *La desheredada*.

The novel is of course much more than a political allegory. Yet politics play an important part in it, not only through the obvious relation of the protagonist to the vicissitudes of Amadeo's reign, the Republic and the Restoration, but in an indirect way that may not be as clear to the present-day reader as it was to Galdós' contemporaries.

The Aguilar edition of *La desheredada* is not a faithful reproduction of the Guirnalda first edition. On p. 2 of the latter (between the *Dedicatoria* and the first page of Part I) is a cast of characters entitled "Personajes de esta primera parte". In addition to such names as "Isidora Rufete, protagonista" and "D. José de Relimpio y Sastre, espejo de los vagos", the list contains "Mi tío el Canónigo (que no sale)" and a note: "La escena es en

¹ See the letter from Galdós to Pereda dated 4 March 1879, published by Carmen Bravo Villasante, "Veintiocho cartas de Galdós a Pereda," in *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* (Homenaje a Galdós), octubre 1970-enero 1971. núms. 250-252. 9-51. The quote in the text is from pp. 31-32.

Madrid y empieza en la primavera de 1872.”² On p. 254 of the same edition there appears a list of “Personajes de esta segunda parte”, updated to include an Augusto Miquis who is now a doctor rather than a medical student, Emilia de Relimpio de Castaño (now married to her cousin Juan José), the new characters of Part II, and “Un gran personaje (que no habla)” with “Diversos personajes (que no hablan tampoco).” Once again “La escena es en Madrid y principia en Diciembre de 1875.” It is clear that the story is being presented both as a novel and as a drama. This impression is reinforced by an examination of the table of contents; six of the nineteen chapters of Part II have theatrical titles.³ And when two of these chapters are examined closely—chapter 6 and 12—their resemblance to drama is even more pronounced; they are written in dialogue form, with stage directions.

This emphasis on theater through the use of dramatic terminology and form does not appear simply in anticipation of the *novela dialogada* of later years, but rather because Galdós wished to stress the inauthenticity of the society of his time through association with theater, specifically with the theater of Restoration Spain. The very presence of drama brought to Galdós’ mind, as well as to that of his reading public, an immediate association—for very sound reasons—with politics. Alberto Castilla observes that

Los medios informativos, principalmente los periódicos, ofrecían a sus lectores los hechos políticos enmarcados en el gran retablo nacional: “La comedia de la semana”, ...“La corrida política”, “Teatro de la Nación”, “Castelar, Sagasta y Cánovas practicando la esgrima y haciendo turno”, “Teatro político”, “Entre Bambalinas”, “Entre bastidores”, “Estreno del drama Los Conservadores”, forman una breve muestra de la constante serie de referencias periodísticas que interpretaban el hecho político como espectáculo dramático, circense o taurino. Política y teatro respondían, por consiguiente, a un mismo concepto de espectáculo, cuya previa confección y manipulación del éxito tenía, a veces, el mismo origen.⁴

No one knew this better than the favorite playwright of Restoration Spain, José de Echegaray, who remarks in his memoirs: “Para los españoles la política es un gran teatro y los sucesos de la política son como la peripecia de un drama.”⁵ Echegaray was well-equipped to make the comparison, since he had participated actively (as Minister of Finance) in the Republic before turning to the stage to earn a living. His theater, according to Castilla, reflects directly his political experience: “El teatro presentaba algo de hilillos que se mueven, de rompecabezas que se compone y se descompone a placer, y Echegaray, habituado por la política a este ejercicio, podría

² Benito Pérez Galdós, *La desheredada* (Madrid: La Guirnalda, s.a.), p. 2.

³ Part II, chapter 3, “Entreacto en la Iglesia;” chapter 5, “Entreacto en el café;” chapter 6, “Escena vigésima quinta;” chapter 8, “Entreacto en la calle de los Abades;” chapter 11, “Otro entreacto;” and chapter 12, “Escenas.”

⁴ See Alberto Castilla, “Teatro y sociedad en la Restauración: La era de los divos,” *Tiempo de historia*, núm. 57 (agosto, 1979), 92-109. The quote in the text is from p. 109.

⁵ José de Echegaray, *Recuerdos* (Madrid: Ruiz Hnos., 1917), II, p. 306.

aplicarlo al teatro con buenos resultados."⁶

While Galdós was writing the first six *novelas contemporáneas*, he says, "Hallábame yo por entonces en la plenitud de la fiebre novelesca. Del arte escénico no me ocupaba poco ni mucho. No frecuentaba yo los teatros. Desde mi aislamiento sentía el rumor entusiasta de los grandes éxitos de don José Echegaray. Aquel portento iba de gloria en gloria, fascinando todos los públicos. Conocía yo las obras de Echegaray por la lectura, no por la representación."⁷ Certainly Galdós' preoccupation with his own work would explain his absence from the theater, but it is also likely that Echegaray's type of drama would not appeal to him. Don Evaristo González Feijóo probably reflects his author's opinion when he laughs at Fortunata's liking for "Esas obras en que sale aquello de '¡Hijo mío!... ¡Padre mío!...' ...yo en cuanto veo que los actores pegan gritos y las actrices principan a hacerme pucheritos, ya estoy bufando en mi butaca y mirando para la puerta."⁸ Feijóo's description suits admirably such works as *El Gran Galeoto*, *La muerte en los labios* and *O locura o santidad*.

Thus when Galdós uses theatrical techniques and terms in *La desheredada*, they are connected to his dislike of Restoration theater and Restoration politics. That he, like every other newspaper reader in Spain, saw them as interrelated is clearly demonstrated by his statement that "aunque nuestra política me parezca casi siempre, y hoy más que nunca, una mala comedia representada por regulares cómicos, no está bien que así lo manifieste."⁹ The two chapters written in dialogue that appear in this novel illuminate, through their form and content, duplicity on both a public and private level. A brief examination of these chapters confirms this hypothesis.

Chapter 6 of Part II is entitled "Escena vigésima quinta," and the actors are Joaquín and Isidora. They begin by discussing the money Isidora has begged, borrowed and stolen to lend to Joaquín, who is as usual in debt. He thanks her effusively and assures her: "Esta deuda es sagrada, es doble; deuda de corazón y deuda de bolsillo. Te pagaré religiosamente" (p. 319). He is deceiving either Isidora or himself, for he will never repay her, as he has never done in the past. And when she declares that she does not want money, that if he wants to repay her he knows what recompense she wants, his reaction demonstrates his bad faith:

⁶ Rafael-Alberto Castilla, "Echegaray y su tiempo," Diss. Harvard 1974, p. 140.

⁷ Benito Pérez Galdós, *Memorias de un desmemoriado* in his *Obras completas*, ed. F.C. Sainz de Robles (Madrid: Aguilar, 1973) III (Novelas y miscelánea), pp. 1435b-1436a. In his unpublished doctoral dissertation Castilla analyzes this passage from Galdós' memoirs with great care, showing the irony that pervades every line; see chapter 4 of the thesis, entitled "Echegaray y Galdós."

⁸ Benito Pérez Galdós, *Fortunata y Jacinta*, *Obras completas* II (Novelas), p. 763a.

⁹ See William H. Shoemaker, *Las cartas desconocidas de Galdós en "La Prensa" de Buenos Aires* (Madrid: Cultura Hispánica, 1973), p. 43. The letter in which the quote appears was written on 20 December 1883 and published on 17 January 1884. His deprecating remarks about Spanish politics are too numerous to be quoted here in full; see Shoemaker, *passim*, as well as B. Pérez Galdós, *Política española*, the third volume of his *Obras inéditas*, ed. Alberto Ghirardo (Madrid: Renacimiento, 1923).

- JOAQUIN. (*Amoscado*) ¿Cuál?
 ISIDORA. Te lo he dicho mil veces El reconocimiento de Joaquín...
 JOAQUIN. (*Sintiéndose atacado de sordera*) No te oigo.
 ISIDORA. Que reconozcas a nuestro hijo...
 JOAQUIN. ¡Ah! ya... eso es corriente. (*Disimulando su contrariedad*). En estos días me hallo en tal situación que no podré celebrar ningún acto civil... ¡Ay! querida mía, confesor mío, para ti no debo tener secretos. (p. 319)

He then proceeds to make a long speech about the iniquity of usurers and his father's anger. It is clear to the reader, if not to Isidora, that he is simply using her to obtain money to placate his creditors, and that he has no intention of recognizing Riquín.

Joaquín will escape to Cuba and a customs job that will (he hopes) provide him with the funds necessary to pay off his debts. He owes the position to his father's political influence, of course: "Papá y el Ministro han hablado ya. Aunque en el Congreso se tiran a matar, allá entre bastidores, son amigos y se sirven bien" (p. 321). No more succinct description of Restoration politics than this theatrical metaphor could be imagined. The *turno pacífico* was a well-established fact, and the grandiloquent speeches of the Cortes were a conventional spectacle which attracted an audience in much the same way that a play would.¹⁰

Mention of the Cortes in this scene brings Joaquín and Isidora to discuss her protector Alejandro Sánchez Botín, a member of that august body. He has just made a speech which is reproduced in the newspaper that Joaquín carries. It is full of the inflated rhetoric and pomposity (i.e., the contemporary theatricality) characteristic of such speeches. This sort of posturing apparently carries over into his private life, as Isidora's reaction to Joaquín's mocking rendition of the speech shows: "ISIDORA. (*Arrebatando el papel de manos de Joaquín*). Si tú le estuvieras oyendo a todas horas..." (p. 322). Botín, as the reader sees in the following chapter, is as pompous at home with Isidora as he is in the Cortes. But he is not the only one who displays his histrionic skills at home; Isidora admits that "Yo no he gustado nunca de decir mentiras; pero desde que vivo con él, me he adiestrado de tal modo en ellas, que las suelto sin pensar; se me ha desarrollado un talento para mentir..." (p. 324). Roberto G. Sánchez's assessment is absolutely accurate: "Así vio Galdós a Madrid, como escenario cambiante y a sus personajes haciendo teatro, unas veces por gusto y otras muy a su pesar; actuación que, por lo general, tiene mucho de patético, siendo como es un esfuerzo de engañar al prójimo o un empeño en engañarse a sí mismo."¹¹

Finally, after abusing Botín, Joaquín compares himself favorably to

¹⁰ In *La incógnita* there is an account (that covers a full chapter) of fashionable ladies going to the Cortes specifically to hear Castelar speak (chapter 5). Since the great orator's political opinions did not differ so greatly from those of his "opponents," what must have attracted the audience were his histrionic abilities.

¹¹ Robert G. Sánchez. *El teatro en la novela: Galdós y Clarín* (Madrid: Insula, 1974), p. 56.

Isidora's protector in one of the most ferociously ironic passages in the entire novel:

Yo vivo de lo ideal, yo sueño, yo deliro y acato la belleza pura, yo tengo arrobos platónicos. En otro tiempo ¿quién sabe lo que hubiera sido yo? Quizás un D. Juan Tenorio; quizás uno de esos grandes místicos que han escrito cosas tan sublimes... ¿Ves mis calaveradas? Pues nunca he sido verdaderamente vicioso... ¿Ves mi ruina? Pues mira, tengo la conciencia tranquila. No he despojado a nadie. Joaquín Pez pedirá limosna antes que comerciar con el hambre y la desnudez de los licenciados de Cuba. (pp. 328-29)

This playacting convinces Isidora, but the idea of a Pez who is a mystic is so bizarre that the reader is forced to laugh, and at the same time recognize the self-serving role that Joaquín is playing. He may not traffic in the lives of Spanish soldiers, but he lies when he says he has despoiled no one; he is in the process of despoiling Isidora even as he speaks.

The other chapter written in dialogue is chapter 12 of Part II, and is entitled simply "Escenas." Again, the principal actors are Joaquín and Isidora, though D. José Relimpio will also appear. There is no reference to politics in this chapter, but deception is ubiquitous.

The chapter begins with a long soliloquy by Joaquín, who sets the theatrical mood with a recollection of the most famous soliloquy of all: "Este es el dilema, *the question*, como decía el otro" (p. 400). The idea of Joaquín comparing himself to Hamlet is, like his earlier reference to the mystics, so absurd that it provokes laughter and at the same time contempt for the inflation of self inherent in his declamations. He is still making excuses for his debts to an invisible audience and claiming (with another Shakespearean reference) that life without money is not worth living:

JOAQUIN. —La vida sin dinero es una enfermedad del cerebro, una fiebra galopante, una meningitis. Ni el amor es posible en la pobreza. Mete a los amantes más finos y más exaltados, a Romeo y Julieta, por ejemplo, en un cuchitril, donde no tengan más que el consabido *pan y cebolla*, y a los dos días se arañan la cara. (p. 405)¹²

The invocation of the greatest dramatist of all throws an unrelenting light on Joaquín's shallow posturings.

Isidora's delusions about her Aransis connections peak at the end of this chapter ("scene"). When she is arrested for falsifying the papers that "prove" her identity, her reaction is completely theatrical, in the spirit of the time:

ISIDORA. —Esto es una infame trama de mis enemigos... Pero Dios no consentirá que me pierdan ni que me deshonren (*Llora*)... ¡Y a esto llaman justicia, ley! (*Sobrepo-*

¹² Relimpio is very carefully associated with Shakespearean drama throughout this entire chapter, specifically with *Othello*. For a detailed analysis of this scene see Martha G. Krow-Lucal, "Theory and Practice of Character Usage in Galdós: A Study of *La desheredada*," Diss. Harvard 1979, pp. 132-34, 166-70, 188-90.

niéndose al dolor y secando sus lágrimas de tal modo que parece que se abofetea). Yo probaré mi inocencia... Esto me faltaba, esto; ser mártir. (*Aparte, con entereza y orgullo*). Bien venida sea esta noble corona. El martirio me purificará de mis culpas, y hará que resplandezca mi derecho de tal modo que lo puedan ver hasta los ciegos. (p. 419)

It is a supremely ironic moment, for within a very short time all her illusions will be definitively destroyed by the messenger of truth, Muñoz y Nones. Her theatrical proclamation of martyrdom is the pride that goes before what will be a fatal fall; it is her last, magnificent piece of self-deception.¹³

La desheredada is not the last novel for which Galdós will write scenes in dialogue form. Such scenes occur in *El doctor Centeno*, *Tormento* and *La de Bringas*. Politics is no longer a constant theme, though it will reappear, for example, in chapter 41 of *Tormento*. What is never lacking is deception and falsehood be they social, political, literary or personal. Galdós' point is that they are all inextricably intertwined. These interpolated scenes are, as Castilla says of Restoration theater in general, "una pequeña farsa dentro de otra inmensa."¹⁴ Public and private duplicity cannot be separated from one another, but must mingle to form a hollow world, what Ortega was to call thirty years later, with so much justice, "un panorama de fantasmas."¹⁵

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¹³ Sánchez concludes that Galdós uses the *capítulos dialogados* as part of the "introducción del naturalismo en España" (p. 112). It is simply, he says, "uno entre varios ejemplos de realidad documental" (p. 112). This might be true of the later *novelas dialogadas*, but his use of theatrical terminology and structure that are always carefully related to personal or social role-playing and falsehood cannot be considered just one more realist device.

¹⁴ Castilla, "Teatro y sociedad..." P. 108.

¹⁵ José Ortega y Gasset, "Vieja y nueva política," in his *Obras completas* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1946), I, p. 281.