

A REEVALUATION OF THE *EPISODIOS NACIONALES* AND THE GALDÓS CANON

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The received scholarly opinion about Galdós has long been that the *Novelas contemporáneas* represent his highest literary achievement and so have merited more critical attention than any of his other work. The canon now largely excludes the *Episodios nacionales*. The comparative paucity of critical studies dedicated to them is perhaps due to their daunting quantity. Yet they contain a thinly disguised literary richness that is unsurpassed by the *Novelas contemporáneas*, and thus they deserve at least as much attention. I will direct my comments in this brief essay, then, to the largest portion of Galdós's prodigious work, the *Episodios nacionales*.

I began studying the *Episodios* seriously a number of years ago, both out of curiosity and out of a feeling that I should be familiar with all of Galdós's works, no matter how naive or uninteresting. I fully expected that reading the *Episodios* would be enormously boring, since I had been induced to accept their lack of importance by their typical exclusion from courses on Galdós. My odyssey through the *Episodios* began with the standard condescension with which they are generally approached. I started in the middle of things, with the third series, and soon learned that a chronological reading is not the only productive approach to understanding this body of literature. In fact, my somewhat haphazard reading of the *Episodios* seems to have been fortuitously appropriate for this marvellously puzzling set of works whose forty-six pieces fit together in manifold ways. Some *Episodios* reread previous ones, not always from the same series; some can only be understood well after a reading of others written later; many aspects of even the earliest *Episodios* seem to foreshadow specifically developments in the very last ones; and so on. I found that at both ends of their composition—1873 and 1912—many of these works are as sophisticated as, and sometimes even more innovative than, those volumes of the *Novelas contemporáneas* considered to be the best of Galdós's writing. Far from a burdensome task, reading the *Episodios* has greatly enhanced my appreciation of Galdós's artistic virtuosity and his profound sense of humanity.

The current prejudices against the *Episodios* were not held by Galdós's contemporaries. Scholars have documented how very significant the *Episodios* were for the development of the novel in Spain. Alfred Rodríguez, for example, observes that the "first two Series of *Episodios Nacionales* [were] the most widely read and most uniformly acclaimed of Galdós's literary creations. These Series are, furthermore, the first instance of a literary approach to History that left its imprint on Spanish letters. . . . They provided Galdós with an audience that made it possible for him to become the first of Spain's modern novelists, for it is as 'el autor de los *Episodios Nacionales*,' an epithet that derives from these first two Series, that he was to be known throughout his life" (52). This immense contemporary popularity might be reason alone to re-evaluate the works. Moreover, the *Episodios* were written during important periods in literary history. If the first two series began an epoch in the 1870s, the last three, written between 1898 and 1912, played an integral part in the formation of another

one. What we can learn about Galdós's art, and the art and evolution of the novel in general, through the study of these works that span his entire career is another incentive to their study.

The *Episodios nacionales* are seminal texts that call for new ways of reading, ways that may help to explain why these works have been frequent exiles from undergraduate and graduate curriculums. The *Novelas contemporáneas* have undoubtedly been better received because of the prominent way in which they represent Spain's contribution to the realist movement in European literature. Judged by the same standards as the *Novelas contemporáneas*, the *Episodios nacionales* fail. They often lack the verisimilitude that would qualify them for inclusion in a realist canon, and they are inadequate historical records. Yet to ignore them because they fail as history or as narrowly defined realist fiction is to miss their unique narrative innovations, their important place in literary history, and their remarkable complexity. As Roland Barthes argued, "the supreme achievement of nineteenth-century realism, whether in literature or in social commentary, was to substitute surreptitiously an already textualized image of the world for the concrete reality it feigned ironically to represent" (quoted in White 206). Realism, even while it was being developed, was seen by authors, like Galdós, as an ironic, subversive, and manipulative mode.

There are countless examples of subversion and manipulation in the *Episodios*. From the very first volumes it is clear that the narratives use social and literary conventions against themselves to undermine the authority of certain principles of nineteenth-century historiography, conventions of realism, definitions of literary genres, and many of the underlying values of accepted social practices. The *Episodios* continually employ conventional perspectives on history and tried modes of literary discourse, only to overturn them at other points in the narrative. The *Episodios* subvert conventional hierarchies, in which such categories as realism, autobiography, or historical objectivity seem more "natural" than others. In many ways, the early *Episodios* are not realistic; in even more ways, the later ones are not. As Rodolfo Cardona pointed out, Galdós's earliest works, like *La sombra*, as well as his last, use the fantastic as a means of probing human behavior: "Galdós' interest in exploring and fathoming the human soul, . . . in presenting the 'mysterious' forces that govern man's behavior and the strange forms that these forces assume, an interest which he showed from the very beginning of his career as a novelist, is what made him shift his eyes from the 'real' to the 'fantastic'" (xxiv). While this fantastic aspect may seem obvious in the narrative of the protean Tito Liviano of the fifth series, it is also present in many aspects of the first series, beginning with chapter 1 of *Trafalgar*, where the octogenarian Gabriel Araceli, through a "maravillosa superchería de la imaginación," becomes young again. What scholars have observed in the *Novelas contemporáneas*—their psychological penetration, linguistic self-consciousness, narcissism, etc.—also characterizes the *Episodios* from first volume to last. The *Episodios nacionales* are an incredibly rich and complex source of multifaceted meanings, and taken together they represent the zenith of Galdós's splendid literary career.

To return to Cardona's comments on *La sombra*, he writes that Galdós "came to portray, intuitively, several cases in which something very close to a psychoanalytic process, in the pure Freudian sense, is presented with an amazing fullness of detail" (xxiv). He considers *La sombra* to be a "remarkably 'Freudian' novel long before Freud had even begun his investigations. In this novel we are dealing with an amazing case of intuition on Galdós' part, an intuition which he combined with his empir-

ical knowledge of human behavior obtained through keen observation and which resulted in his 'discovering' psychoanalysis" (xxv). Cardona's study of this 1870 novel illustrated twenty-five years ago that a psychoanalytical reading of Galdós's works is one supremely productive approach to their plural processes of signification. Today, his insights seem "remarkably semiotic." Julia Kristeva has convincingly argued that analytic or psychoanalytic interpretation is the only type of interpretation that leads to the fundamental problems that underlie all theory and practice of interpretation, namely the heterogeneity, the limitations, and the incompleteness of language, thought, and thus meaning in any sense (312). Moreover, if one can consider Galdós to have had such advanced psychoanalytical insights, perhaps his discoveries were not only pre-Freudian but post-Freudian as well. Kristeva observes: "After psychiatric 'semiology,' Freud had discovered the 'symptom' as metaphor, that is, condensation, of fantasy. Now, and thanks to Lacan, one analyses the symptom as a screen through which one detects the workings of 'signifiante' (the process of formation and deformation of meaning and the subject) . . ." (242). In such a brilliant writer as Galdós, capable of ingenious manipulation of language, it is not surprising that he would see the intricate connections between language and the psyche and incorporate them into his work. These connections encompass all of the relationships between the individual and language, fiction and history. The *Episodios nacionales* are an ideal medium in which to explore the complex ways in which meanings are formed and de-formed in language, in the mind, and in the world.

Semiotic analysis, understood in the broadest of terms, enables the reader to distinguish the various codes and discourses of a text and their superficially established hierarchies. It permits a view of how the text displays the multiple and often contradictory ways in which such codes postulate meanings and definitions of reality. At the same time it demonstrates that any interpretation, any reading, contains its own preconceived system of assigning meanings. Semiotic analysis can bring to the fore unexpected, provocative, and productive readings of Galdós's early twentieth-century *Episodios* as well as those of the 1870s, and it is precisely such new readings that the *Episodios* demand. I am convinced that the results of a critical reevaluation of the *Episodios* will lead to a complete reconsideration of their literary merit, of their place in the Galdós canon, and of their place in Spanish literary history.

The value of any method of literary analysis lies in the quality of the insights it offers into how meanings are produced in a written text by a person or by a culture, not just in the meanings that the method itself produces. Modern critical theory reveals that, in linguistic complexity, in psychological power, in theoretical sophistication, Galdós's *Episodios nacionales* equal, if not surpass, the *Novelas contemporáneas*. New critical methods allow one to see what is there already in the texts, that the *Episodios* are a complex literary achievement. The texts speak for themselves and produce our understanding of them; no reading should distort them or veil their power. Galdós was always concerned with the process by which meaning is created, and he took painstaking care to show the relativity of the meanings that can be produced, whether in his own fiction, in society, in historical discourse, or by the reader. Whatever approaches one takes to the *Episodios nacionales*, the ultimate value of those approaches must surely rest on their ability to see and respect, not ignore or limit, the wealth of possible ways in which Galdós illustrates the many processes by which human beings create themselves and their world.

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