

Introduction

The novels of Benito Pérez Galdós reflect the influence of Cervantes, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English authors, the French Romantics, Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and many others. Galdós refined the narrative techniques he learned from their novels, and in some respects his original adaptations of the genre were more advanced than those of any other contemporary European author. Galdós' knowledge of Cervantes fostered his own acute use of irony, to which the so-called realist mode of narrative seems naturally inclined. 'Irony', Northrop Frye has declared, 'as a mode, is born from the low mimetic; it takes life exactly as it finds it.'¹ Sophisticated irony, in its claim to objectivity, refuses to judge life and thus forces the reader to define it for himself.

Although the sense of the term irony may seem intuitively obvious, no single definition will exhaustively comprehend it. Traditionally, it refers to the figure of speech which involves 'saying one thing and meaning another'.² In literary theory of the twentieth century it has come to be used in a much broader sense, to refer to the concept of a relation of disparity or inadequacy. It is in this structural and relational sense that the term is used in the critical theory of György Lukács, Northrop Frye, Wayne Booth, and numerous others.³ An ironical situation is that which exists between an observer and an observed who is not aware of being observed. The narrative situation of the reader and that which he reads, for example, can therefore be seen as intrinsically ironic. Scholes and Kellogg have written in *The Nature of Narrative* that 'The narrative situation is thus ineluctably ironical. The quality of irony is built into the narrative form as it is into no other form of literature.'⁴ Since the observer feels superior to that which he is observing, he feels pleasure. 'Our pleasure in narrative literature itself, then, can be seen as a function of disparity of viewpoint [between ourselves and the characters, for example] or irony' (Scholes and Kellogg, p. 241).

Besides the implicit irony of the narrative relationship between text and reader, there is an irony which is constantly made explicit in the novels of Pérez Galdós. This explicit irony produces various effects; chiefly it unmasks superficiality by revealing a conflicting interiority which contradicts it. Such an irony can serve many purposes and can be found everywhere. D. C. Muecke begins his study, *The Compass of Irony*, with the following observations:

Irony may be a weapon in a satirical attack, or a smokescreen concealing a retreat, or a device for turning the world or oneself inside out; irony may be found in words and attitudes, in events and situations; or we may find nothing on earth and quite certainly nothing in heaven that is not ironic.⁵

Such strategies of irony pervade Galdós' novels, educating the reader not to be too self-assured, not to believe everything he reads, and not to give too much credence to his own powers of objectivity.

Galdós manipulates the pretense of objectivity in his novels in order to ask if there is indeed any objective view at all. This manipulation is displayed in numerous quixotic characters whose subjective views prohibit them from seeing clearly and in the presentation of the entire narration itself as fiction. The language of Galdós' novels reveals the irony of language itself. Their representational models are applicable not only to the social world, but to all concepts of representation, which are constantly undermined. The claim of objectivity and realism in Galdós' novels is an attempt to depict accurately not only the customs of society, but the conventions of perception which function in that society. Robert Alter, in 'History and Imagination in the 19th Century Novel', writes:

There is, however, another direction taken by the realist impulse in the novel, in which the primary object of critical and imaginative attention is not the social world and the historical moment as they bear down on individual lives, but rather, the instruments of fictional representation themselves. This self-conscious tradition – in which the novel is devised to flaunt systematically its own condition as artifice in order to test the problematic relationship between fiction and reality – begins with the very beginning of the genre in *Don Quixote*.⁶

The novel as a construct of language can never escape the question of what language is within the context of a subjectively comprehended reality which is itself illusory.

This study examines the narrative devices which lead the reader of Galdós to perceive the irony of the novel – whether in a character, in a

situation, or in the contradiction which is intrinsic to the realist claim of objective representation. Galdós' novels continually subvert those conventions of reading with which the reader seeks to make the novel intelligible, especially those by which he postulates the correspondence of its representations to his own social, cultural, and literary milieu. Irony extends the reader's constant drive to 'seek the truth', to 'solve the enigma'. Irony dramatizes the choice the reader must make among several alternative appearances of 'truth' in the novel, and it thus makes him a more active participant in the production of meaning in the text.

Since the reader himself forms a 'text' of his own knowledge and experience, he is, like the novel, also a construct of 'intertextualities' or 'intersubjectivities'. Jonathan Culler, in *Structuralist Poetics*, describes the conventions of reading by which the reader attempts to relate his texts of acquired knowledge to that of the novel. He calls this process 'naturalization', because the reader continually attempts to make the literary text 'vraisemblable'.

The *vraisemblable* is thus the basis of the important structuralist concept of *intertextualité*: the relation of a particular text to other texts. . . A work can only be read in connection with or against other texts, which provide a grid through which it is read and structured by establishing expectations which enable one to pick out salient features and give them a structure. And hence intersubjectivity – the shared knowledge which is applied in reading – is a function of these other texts.⁷

When this knowledge which is shared between a literary text and the text of a reader is manipulated or reversed, then irony – including that of the reader himself – is effected. Wayne Booth describes in *A Rhetoric of Irony* (p. 33) the process of perceiving or 'reconstructing' irony. 'Ironic reconstructions', he writes, 'depend on an appeal to assumptions, often unstated, that ironists and readers share.' These assumptions are often subtly subverted in Galdós' works to create complex ironies in the relation between the novel and the reader. Irony is both a mode of novelistic control and a way of viewing the world. Galdós' novels ironize the reader who is inattentive or narrow-minded, just as they ironize the pretended status of their own discourse as an approximation of 'life'. Lukács saw such irony in any attempt to create a homogeneous idea – like the presumed representational or 'meaningful' novel – from a heterogeneous world. The moment the idea is formed, negating discrete 'reality', it is paradoxically abolished by that same reality. 'This interaction of two ethical complexes, their

duality as to form and their unity in being given form, is the content of irony, which is the normative mentality of the novel' (p. 84). More recently Culler has observed: 'The novel is an ironic form born of the discrepancy between meaning and experience, whose source of value lies in the interest of exploring that gap and filling it, while knowing that any claim to have filled it derives from blindness.'⁸ This global novelistic irony is implicit in any novel at all levels. It is epitomized in the hero who is destroyed when he attempts to realize his ideas. It is also the irony of the writer – and the reader – who assumes that he can apprehend, describe, or interpret anything with complete objectivity. And it is the irony of reality itself in that it can never completely subsume ideals, but continually gives rise to the ideals which are manifested in language. Irony reveals the pretense of the assumption that meaning can be defined or delimited.

Muecke has described three principal ways of employing irony:

Irony may be used as a rhetorical device to enforce one's meaning. It may be used . . . as a satiric device to attack a point of view or to expose folly, hypocrisy, or vanity. It may be used as an heuristic device to lead one's readers to see that things are not so simple or certain as they seem, or perhaps not so complex or doubtful as they seem. (Muecke, pp. 232–3)

In Galdós' works all three of these methods, and variations of them, are present. This study attempts to analyze these methods as they work in concert and individually. It is divided into four chapters, 'The irony of portrait', 'The setting of irony', 'The narrator of irony', and 'The texture of irony'. In this last chapter the observations made in the first three chapters will be consolidated and applied to one novella, *Torquemada en la hoguera*.

This analysis does not pretend to be either an exhaustive or a chronological reading of Galdós' work. What it seeks to offer is an illustration of the range of sophistication and development in his literary creation and to prepare the way for future studies of this type. Thematic, stylistic, and interpretive functions will all be considered; they are invoked separately and in connection with each other according to their contribution to the ironic effect. Selected novels from Galdós' *serie contemporánea*, his most acclaimed works, will be studied in the hope that the passages chosen will prove to be representative, not merely because they are taken from those novels which are most obviously ironic, but because they demonstrate how irony is latent throughout Galdós' work, as it is in language itself.

I

The irony of portrait

Character is no less an artificial construct than are the other elements of the novel. But the seemingly natural device of the proper name effects the conventional emergence of the literary construct which is the character's 'personality'. Through the postulation that he conforms to a model (both literary and cultural), a character has meaning particularly for the reader of the nineteenth-century novel. The artifice which creates this illusion can be analyzed at many levels. Roland Barthes illustrates how 'when identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created'.¹ In Galdós' ironic art the various 'semes', or connotations, which traverse the character often derive from contradictory or incompatible literary, cultural, or social 'codes', and thus their concurrence forms an ironic portrait. In many of his novels, the protagonist is the axis around which these literary, cultural, and social codes revolve. The irony of the portrait, therefore, reveals and is reflected in that of the other units of meaning that converge upon and re-emerge from the locus of the character, weaving the total text. The two figures studied in this chapter, Isidora Rufete and Rosalía de Bringas, are both 'characters' whose 'personalities' and 'attitudes' form the ironic nexus of their novels.

La desheredada (1881) was the first of Galdós' *Novelas contemporáneas* and as such marks an important turning point in his artistic style. For with this novel he leaves behind the strong tendency to polemics and the rather stereotyped characters to which this gives rise. Isidora Rufete is a large and dominating figure whose illusions are revealed with great creativity. With this novel Galdós employs various narrative modes, not all of them found before in his work. The result is a penetrating study of the human conflict that exists between 'illusion' and 'reality'.

Tormento and *La de Bringas* (both published in 1884) form a double

portrait of Rosalía de Bringas that further elaborates certain thematic and structural elements already developed in the portrait of Isidora. The two characters can be aptly compared in order to demonstrate the variations in Galdós' ironic strategies. *La de Bringas* displays subtle refinements on some of the narrative devices seen in *La desheredada* and generally offers a more tightly woven ironic construct. Moreover, Rosalía's process of learning to live with the reality of society's fiction is an ironic statement on Isidora who never reconciles her fiction with social realities. Both reveal the dilemma of the reader who must make the transition from observer to observed and back again. In other words, these portraits display at many levels the problems of objectively viewing the phenomenon of 'character', both in others – including literary personalities – and in the reader's self.

If the narrative situation is intrinsically ironic in positing the duality of the observer and the observed – or the reader and the readable – *La desheredada* multiplies the irony implicit in narrative itself. Like *Don Quijote*, which it both parallels and parodies, *La desheredada* relates both the adventures of a misreader of fiction and fiction's own distance from reality.² The reader can fall victim to this novel's irony if he, like Isidora, fails to heed the textual clues to her 'reality' and reads her as he would any other heroine of a *folletín*.³ Just as Isidora loses her identity when she finally realizes that she is not the disinherited granddaughter of a *marquesa*, so the reader will be violently displaced in his role if he has not re-evaluated his relation to the values and ideas which she seems to represent. This proviso applies especially to the uncritical reader who sees through Isidora's eyes and ignores the ironic 'superiority' provided by the narrator's vision. Like the barely educated, poverty-stricken orphan girl from Tomelloso (near El Toboso) who identifies herself with the novels she reads, the naive reader may sympathize too long with Isidora's desires.

Yet even for the most careful reader, the suggestions of Isidora's reprehensible nature in her portrait are often ambiguous: the narration invites the reader to pity as well as to condemn her, and she is a victim, albeit a vain one. The function of Isidora's claim to the *marquesado* is more than the catalyst to her actions and the dénouement of the story. It is not until the end of Part 1 that the reader can be sure her goal is illusory. Expectations are constantly revived and never totally thwarted. The reader is continually forced to re-evaluate the meager details he receives about the protagonist's background. This play between anti-

pation and partial disclosure compels involvement, as Iser has pointed out in *The Implied Reader*, and this active reader may well fall victim to the text's irony.⁴ Such a risk enhances the lesson which *La desheredada* offers in reading narrative and in reading the fictions of society which it examines.

The double-edged irony of Isidora Rufete is sharpened by her representative status, which is emphasized even before the heroine herself appears. Isidora seems to portray a large part of Spain that suffers from an inferior social and moral education. The reader must recognize that Isidora has a distorted, highly subjective view of herself and of the surrounding world. The opening scene in Madrid's asylum for the insane, Leganés, outlines the prevalence of this essential ironic conflict between appearance and reality, and extends it with vivid imagery to the Madrid of the reader which lies beyond the asylum's walls. The dangers inherent in the overzealous pursuit of an idealized illusion (however shallow it might be) must be brought home to the reader. The uncertain region that separates sanity from madness is nowhere more apparent than in the first scenes and characters encountered. The opening statement is a frenzied monologue by Isidora's father, Tomás Rufete, a patient in Leganés. His fantasies, it will eventually be revealed, inspired Isidora's pursuit of her illusive identity. The narrator's comment about this madman is similar to those he makes later about Isidora herself: '¿Hállase en el punto central de la vida, o en miserable decrepitud? La movilidad de sus facciones y el llamear de sus ojos, ¿anuncian exaltado ingenio, o desconsoladora imbecilidad? No es fácil decirlo, ni el espectador, oyéndole y viéndole, sabe decidirse entre la compasión y la risa.'⁵ The narrator questions his audience and feigns ignorance, distancing himself from the character and encouraging us to move closer. Both Isidora and Tomás Rufete, who prefigures her, are comical and pitiable figures. The ambivalence of this need both to ridicule and to pity leaves judgment to the reader. This makes the decision more actively the reader's own, as Booth and Iser have shown.⁶ Because doubt about Rufete's sanity will play a crucial role in evaluating Isidora's quest for nobility, the reader's judgment is particularly important here. Like Don Quijote, Tomás Rufete becomes lucid before he dies, recognizing that he is in Leganés. Yet in the same breath, his last, he mentions his children and the Marquesa. The reader is left to ponder the truth of the dying man's words, and thus Isidora's identity.

The narrator's explicit call for us to judge a situation is only one of

the various devices used to promote participation within the text. The free indirect style, which fuses the voice of the narrator with that of the character, requires the reader to decide who is speaking and to evaluate those words.⁷ Demonstrative pronouns followed by a relative clause ('she was one of those who...') invoke a cultural comparison with which the reader is assumed to be familiar, and extend the same familiarity to the fictional object. Another device, which includes the reader more directly, is the use of the first person plural. After describing the horrors of the male ward at Leganés, the precarious balance between the 'sane' reader and the madman is made explicit:

¡Y considerar que aquella triste colonia no representa otra cosa que la exageración o el extremo irritativo de nuestras múltiples particularidades morales o intelectuales!... Porque no, no son tan grandes las diferencias. Las ideas de estos desgraciados son nuestras ideas, pero desengarzadas, sueltas, sacadas de la misteriosa hebra que gallardamente las enfila... 'Hay muchos cuerdos que son locos razonables.' Esta sentencia es de Rufete. (iv. 967)

More parallels follow: the patio is like the Bolsa in its exaggerated egoism, the cruel *carcelero-enfermeros* are like the ever-vigilant State. Rufete is always concerned with his *bien parecer*, and is compared to an untiring orator who talks even to himself. As in the passage quoted above, the narrative first draws general comparisons which speak to the reader's world and then narrows them to the particular world of the novel, thus establishing a transitive relationship of correspondence between the character and the reader. This process is circular: Rufete's infirmities are just an exaggeration of our own; moreover, they have contributed to Isidora's, which repeat them. In turn, Isidora's plight, her frivolous yearnings to be what she is not, and her lack of restraint in seeking that goal – even to her final social and moral death – differ little, the narrator indicates, from the actions of many who consider themselves sane, including the reader. Although the novel never finally states whether Isidora is truly mad, the ironic foreshadowing of this first chapter admits her proximity to insanity.⁸ In a brief description of the female section of Leganés the narrator's refusal to judge is again evident: 'las hijas de Eva inspiran sentimientos de difícil determinación' (iv. 969). The passage ends significantly with 'Hay una que corre por pasillos y salas buscando *su propia persona*' (iv. 970). This statement is almost immediately followed by the introduction of Isidora, who later searches the 'pasillos' and 'salas' of the Marquesa's palace for her 'propia persona'.

Isidora's entrance into the narrative initially evokes sympathy from the reader because her first words appear in the free indirect style: 'Quería ver al señor director, al señor facultativo, quería ver a un enfermo, a su señor padre. . . quería ver el establecimiento; quería entregar una cosa. . . quería decir otra cosa' (iv. 970). The free indirect style occurs in *La desheredada* and much of Galdós' other work 'for the frequent evocations of inward struggle and spiritual search that attend most moments of tension' (Pascal, p. 81). The impression of confusion and turbulence is restated in the narrator's own words: 'Estos múltiples deseos, que se encerraban en uno solo, fueron expresados atropelladamente y con turbación por la muchacha.' The picture of sweet desperation is further enhanced by the contrast between her rude but quaint costume and her beauty. She inspires a compassionate reaction: 'Ello es que su pañuelo rojo, sus lágrimas acabadas de secar, su gabán raído y de muy difícil calificación en indumentaria, su agraciado rostro, su ademán de resignación, sus botas mayores que los pies y ya entradas en días, inspiraban lástima' (iv. 970). This preliminary perspective soon becomes ironic as she begins talking with the director's scribe, Canencia, whom she only later learns is another *loco-cuerdo*. He addresses her as 'señorita' and the narrator explains: 'A Isidora – ¿por qué ocultarlo? – le gustó que le llamaran señorita. Pero como su ánimo no estaba para vanidades, fijó toda su atención en las palabras consoladoras que había oído, contestando a ellas con una mirada y un hondísimo suspiro' (iv. 971). At this point several aspects of Isidora's personality and of the narrative technique of portrayal emerge. She is rather vain and she dissimulates her feelings to fit the situation, detracting from the sincerity of her grief. The phrase, 'Pero como su ánimo no estaba para vanidades, fijó toda su atención' ironically directs attention to her vain reaction while pretending to discount it. The ensuing conversation with Canencia not only confirms in Isidora a pride and certain shallow sincerity which borders on the melodramatic, it also demonstrates her ignorance. Canencia consoles her with elaborate commonplaces to which she responds with an excessive esteem for his gentlemanliness and intelligence; she thinks he is a priest. After more courteous gestures by Canencia, the use of the free indirect style to describe her reaction enables us to view more intimately her subjective consciousness:⁹ 'Isidora estaba encantada. La discreta palabra de aquel buen señor, realizada por un metal de voz muy dulce; su urbanidad sin tacha, un no sé qué de tierno, paternal y simpático que en su semblante había, cautivaban a la dolorida joven,

inspirándole tanta admiración como gratitud' (iv. 972). The free indirect style begins here with the word 'discreta' since it later becomes obvious that the narrator's designation of Canencia as discrete could only be ironic. However, the passage has an initial appearance of objectivity which supports Isidora's own assessment of the scribe. This is one of the most subtle ironical effects achieved by the free indirect style. As Pascal explains in *The Dual Voice*, the free indirect style is just that: the voice of the narrator and of the character at once: 'free indirect speech is never purely and simply the evocation of a character's thought and perception, but always bears, in its vocabulary, its intonation, its syntactical composition and other stylistic features, in its content, or its context, or in some combination of these, the mark of the narrator' (p. 43). So while the use of the free indirect style can portray sympathy and invoke the reader's familiarity with a character's subjectivity, because it depends upon the narrator's familiarity, it frequently serves to present an ironic view of that subjectivity. As Spitzer observed, the free indirect style is the voice of mimicry – both of the mimicker and the mimicked (Pascal, p. 29). The subtlety of this effect, as in the above example, may lead the reader to join the character in being mimicked if he fails to note the ironic duality of the voice. The passage underscores Isidora's ignorance by demonstrating her inability to judge character and recognize the commonplace. Moreover, her appreciation for Canencia's enchanting, courteous manner overshadows the consoling aim of the words. The placing of 'admiración' before 'gratitud' brings this into relief. All these confidences increase her natural expansive tendencies and reveal what she believes to be her true identity. In doing so, she exposes aspects of her personality of which she is never aware.

Canencia speaks of how all must work together for divine harmony, whatever the cost; yet Isidora's thoughts turn not to the image of divine will, but rather to a selfish contemplation of her own burden: 'Esta sentencia afectó a la de Rufete, haciéndole pensar en lo cara que a ella sola le costaba la armonía de todos. Enjugándose otra vez en las lágrimas, dijo así:...' (iv. 972). Although several aspects of her account of her poverty-stricken childhood provoke compassion, the importance of the subsequent relation is its ironic forecast. A process which is frequently used in the portrayal of Isidora is self-characterization through description of others; in this first instance it is through her assessment of her father that she reveals herself:

—¡Y si viera usted qué bueno ha sido siempre!... ¡Cuánto nos quería!