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## Recurrent Patterns in the Structure of *Miau*

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In the prologue to her edition of Benito Pérez Galdós' *Miau*, Teresa Silva Tena refers to the novel as "guizá la obra galdosiana más perfecta formalmente" (xxii). Similarly, Eamonn Rodgers, in his well-argued monograph on the same work, asserts that the novelist masterfully handles such artistic principles as selection and arrangement to construct a dense fabric of analogy and interconnection which implicitly communicates a critical vision of the characters' lives and values as well as of Restoration Spain. These positive judgments on the novel's structure and language notwithstanding, most critics of this work have taken a less detached or less formalistic point of view, focusing instead upon the employment-related personal misfortunes of Don Ramón Villaamil within the late nineteenth-century governmental bureaucracy. This extended discourse about Villaamil's plight—that is, whether his last-hour unemployment is primarily due to flaws in his own character or to weaknesses in societal organization—has occurred primarily since 1969 within the pages of *Anales galdosianos* (Editors 51-52).

Following the lead of Silva Tena and Rodgers,<sup>1</sup> I will explore various patterns of recurrence which pervade the novel's structure and influence the reader's comprehension.<sup>2</sup> These patterns are found in several of the work's dimensions, including connections between occurrences on the socio-historical and fictive planes, the presence of other literary genres, narrative events, plot organization, and temporal duration.

All of these elements of interior duplication combine to give the reader the perception of a closed world. In *Miau* many characters echo counter-productive national, familial, or individual responses to life's problems which have previously led only to misfortune. For example, when Abelarda allows herself to be fascinated by, even enamored of Victor, just as did her deceased sister Luisa, this communicates a vision of flawed character, of limited creative thinking and energy. It also portends continued suffering. Many characters unconsciously deliver themselves to hackneyed or failed formulas conveyed by repetitive patterns which, in turn, project a sense of futility upon their lives.

In *Miau* there are certain recurring elements which link the micro-narrative—the work's purely imaginative plane—to the macro-narrative—the historical, societal, contextual level of the novel. The most

obvious link is the way the crises within the Villaamil family clearly echo momentous events on the national scene. Each time a national crisis or period of substantial change occurs—approximately once each decade—the fortunes of Don Ramón worsen. This is clearly but perhaps too mechanically pointed out in the following passage: “Vámonos, pues, al 68, que marca el mayor trastorno político de España en el siglo presente, y señaló, además, graves sucesos en los azarosos anales de la familia Villaamil” (588).<sup>3</sup> The years 1868-69, of course, are a period of destabilizing and revolutionary political change on the national level; they also mark the entrance of Víctor Cadalso into the Villaamil family, an event which precipitates misfortunes there.

In Restoration times, as is well known, bureaucrats often found themselves cyclically unemployed and then re-employed due to ministerial changes or other circumstances. The transitory nature of professional life is directly reflected in the career of Ramón Villaamil, who, at the novel's outset, once again finds himself laid off, this time only two months short of collecting a retirement income equivalent to four-fifths of his regular salary. Furthermore, the impermanence found in so many aspects of Spanish nineteenth-century history is also seen on the fictive plane by the continual squandering of financial resources by Pura and Milagros, a pattern reflective of many Spaniards' need to “figurar” or to appear to have what in reality they lack.

A second form of interior doubling in *Miau* is the strong presence of the nineteenth-century literary mode called costumbrismo. A. F. Lambert's essay “Galdós and the Anti-Bureaucratic Tradition” (35-49), places this work within a nineteenth-century tradition cultivated by Mesonero Romanos, Gil y Zárate, and Antonio Flores. Lambert sees various similarities with respect to the treatment of the “cesante,” the “pretendiente,” and the bureaucracy in general. Joaquín Casalduero also notes this same costumbrista intertextuality, although he stresses Galdós' originality in dealing with the topic as a social, historical, and political problem of individual human misery instead of treating it statically, superficially, even comically as previously done (93-94). In any case, the weight of this literary tradition certainly suggests the long-standing nature of the cyclical employment problems faced by the Villaamil family and the scarce hope that they can resolve these alone.

Several writers have addressed the presence of another form of intertextuality; that is, certain dramatic elements, especially at the level of structure and techniques. A classical dramatic structure consisting of exposition, complication, and climax has been pointed out by Robert Weber and further studied by Scanlon and Jones (55). Along the same lines, Silva Tena has made observations about the great amount of dialogue which

has been formatted into dramatic stage directions to indicate movement, attitude, voice inflection, and so forth. She concludes, “y con este recurso . . . da al lector la ilusión teatral de *estar viendo* al personaje en el escenario” (xx). This structural component complements the presence of the small play within the novel; that is, the short piece which Villaamil's family and friends rehearse but never stage. It also blends perfectly with the histrionic voice of Víctor in his frequent melodramatic discourses with Abelarda and Don Ramón; with Víctor's offstage, behind-the-scenes successes with a mysterious lady of great political influence; and with the love of the Villaamil ladies for the opera.

We thus note a careful construction which includes numerous elements from Spain's political and literary traditions, most of them laced with tired formulas. The characters of this work are placed within, or related to, closed structures on a more general societal level, structures which are treated with heavy irony and which distance these individuals from an intimate, genuine contact with real life and one another. They are, by implication, entrapped in this broader context of failed formulas.

Let me briefly summarize other narrative planes where the reader perceives this same disquieting phenomenon: a world in which repetitious behavior patterns severely limit the characters' freedom or future possibilities.

On the most superficial plane, that of narrative action, the reader senses a dreary world of monotony where events occur mechanically. Each day is similar to the previous one. In Luis' case, he goes to school where he is criticized for his lack of preparation; he is taunted or even worse by his classmates on the way home; he is sent by his grandfather on long journeys carrying endless letters of supplication to hoped-for governmental protectors; he then returns home too exhausted to study for the next day's lessons, thus beginning the cycle again. Comparably, the Villaamil women pass the mornings and early afternoons scheming how to find sufficient food and fuel for the remainder of the day, the late afternoons worrying whether Ponce will provide tickets for the evening opera, and the late hours either attending the opera or receiving guests in as pretentious a manner possible, given their dire lack of resources. Villaamil himself does little: he criticizes the new government appointments announced in the newspapers; he ponders which new minister might help him next; he visits the governmental offices repeating each day the same critical observations to the same listeners; and he pens new letters requesting favors. Even when seeming ruptures of these routines occur, they are illusory. For example, when Víctor's sudden appearance causes a commotion, we find this is, in fact, the third time this has occurred, each time with the same disastrous results for the family.

At the level of plot structure, we encounter numerous designs which manifest increasing amounts of desperation or negation. There are the ever more bitter conversations between Ramón and other characters, especially Pura, Víctor, and his former work colleagues about whether or not Villaamil will be employed again. As these dialogues reoccur, we perceive that more and more each character, especially Villaamil, is simply playing a verbal game empty of any genuine feeling. How much does Pura really believe her constant "Ya te colocarán"? And, exactly how much of Don Ramón's "No es posible" is strategic pessimism, as he maintains, and how much of it is representative of his true feelings? What about Luisito's "visions of God"? They seem to occur almost on schedule, especially after some physical exertion by the weak young boy. With each apparition, the god-like figure of the vision becomes more concrete, more directly involved with the problems of the family, even to the extent of advising Luis to tell his grandfather to commit suicide because he will never be employed again. Abelarda's encounters with Víctor also are ever more exaggerated, melodramatic—even violent—until her night of vigil when she alternates hourly between hope and total desperation. On this last occasion, the novel reaches an important structural apex of behavior cycles. Ironically, Abelarda is following the patterns of two other characters—that of her sister Luisa, who also became destructively enamored of Víctor, and that of Víctor himself, as she toys with the affections of Ponce—eventually using him cynically for material security—just as Víctor uses her only to amuse himself. More directly, she foreshadows on the level of sub-plot the rapid mood swings, the pessimism, and even the death of her father. Late in the novel she cynically declares to Ponce: "—¡Vaya si te quiero!— replicó Abelarda, plenamente decidida a tirarse por el Viaducto, es decir, a carse con Ponce" (667). Again, the characters are locked within destructive patterns; they echo one another without being able to identify or change these patterns of behavior. Luis, a representative of the younger generation, foreshadows his grandfather's life situation. In a manner comparable to Don Ramón, Luis is ostracized by his peer group; he exhibits anti-social behavior—preferring to be alone with his animal friend or his private thoughts and visions; and he already has developed a tendency to fanatical thought patterns as seen in his visions and his fixation upon his vocation as a priest. In fact, the basic theme in the frequently examined first paragraph of the novel, which describes the end of a school day and Luis' return home, anticipates the image of Don Ramón himself, an image of rejection, detachment, and loneliness.

Now let us examine the expressive patterns of recurrence found in an element as apparently simple as temporal duration. Many meaningful equivalences with national historic time will not be developed here as they

have been previously treated by others. In its totality, time duration in *Miau* may be broken down into five temporal nuclei, identifiable because each has a perceptible beginning, which, ironically, can also be seen as a sad ending. The most reduced and dramatically intense of these temporal cycles are those closest to the novelistic present. As with other components of the novel, they also suggest an overall futility and point to broader societal criticisms.

The first of these five temporal segments encompasses the time from the beginning of Villaamil's governmental service in 1841 to 1853. This is a twelve-year period which the protagonist explicitly remembers in relatively positive terms. During these years he suffered few layoffs and he also climbed to certain positions in which he could supervise other employees, Cucúrbitas in 1846, for example.

The second interval spans the years from 1854 to 1868. The year 1854, that of the revolution which gave stimulus to the "Bienio Liberal," is important because Don Ramón sees it as the beginning of his bad fortune. He attributes everything to the fact that he did not join the national militia as did Cucúrbitas: "ahí tienes el principio de tu buena fortuna, y el de mi desdicha. Gracias al morrión te plantaste de un salto en jefe de Negociado de segunda, mientras yo me estancaba en oficial primero" (652). It was during this biennium that Villaamil suffered his longest period of unemployment: 11 months.

The next period covers the years between 1869 and October, 1877. In these years Villaamil is increasingly isolated from his family, his friends, and his colleagues at work. Let us not forget that in 1869 Víctor comes into the lives of the Villaamil family, and, after receiving favors from Don Ramón, commits acts which, in Ramón's opinion, cause the death of his eldest daughter, Luisa. The effect of Luisa's loss on Don Ramón is devastating: "sin ruidoso duelo exterior, mudo y con los ojos casi secos, se desquició y desplomó interiormente, quedándose como ruina lamentable, sin esperanza, sin ilusión ninguna de la vida" (590). From this time forward, Don Ramón begins to lose his sense of family cohesion and also ceases to think of his work as a profession; now it is simply a means to support his family. As Stephen Miller affirms, before 1869 Villaamil's bureaucratic position signified to him a career that was not without occasional success stories (84-87). After that key date, Ramón turns within himself, takes various minor positions overseas, and also loses his physical strength, becoming "un tigre viejo y tísico que, después de haberse lucido en las exhibiciones de fieras, no conserva ya de su antigua belleza más que la pintorreada piel" (554).

The fourth interval, from November to January, 1877-1878, is obviously much shorter than previous periods. It is not dramatized directly,

although its repercussions figure prominently in the novel. In this term Don Ramón loses his employment for the fifth and last time. The economic and psychological damage which this event triggers cannot be exaggerated.

The fifth and most intense cycle encompasses the three months of the novel's dramatic time: February, March, and April, 1878. These months include the return of Víctor, the frenetic efforts of Don Ramón to find work again in the bureaucracy, Abelarda's delirious feelings for her sister's former husband and then her decision to marry Ponce, and Luis' series of visions which have repercussions in his grandfather's psyche and definitely influence Ramón's decision to commit suicide. The novel's time concludes in terms comparable to a melodrama, with the abrupt fall of the curtain as Don Ramón utters the following heavily ironic words: "Pues . . . sí . . ." (683).

Thus, we see confirmed in temporal structure, through deft manipulation and patterning, a picture of ever-increasing deterioration in the professional and personal life of Don Ramón Villaamil. This time configuration can also be thought of as a spiral, an ever-tightening noose, forming a series of five temporal circles, each one more intense, not only with respect to the generally shortened periods of time within each, but also with respect to the increasing anguish of the protagonist. There is, then, a cyclical rhythm in the treatment of time as well as in the fortunes of Don Ramón, the lowest moments coming approximately ten years apart: 1854-56, 1868-1869, 1877-1878. The temporal metaphor of entrapment and despair is impressive indeed, embracing as it does a critical portrait of both the Villaamil family and Spanish Restoration society.

As previously suggested, an ironic view of beginnings as endings is implicit in the treatment of time. For example, just as the arrival of Víctor is the beginning of a new period—including a marriage—in the family's life, it is also the conclusion of their previous period of minor successes in governmental service and the end of their family cohesion. The same vision of beginnings as endings is also present at the novel's conclusion. At the same time that Don Ramón's death is the beginning of a potentially new phase of eternal existence, it is also the end of life on earth and it consummates the vision of decline built up throughout the novel.

Finally, this careful structural doubling in the novel leads to the thematic conclusion that the question of Ramón Villaamil's ultimate responsibility or lack of responsibility for his individual plight is less important than the narrator's critical vision of Spanish Restoration society in general and its bureaucracy in particular. The overall patterns within the characters' actions and their close links with societal traits and national developments project a generally critical view, not only of the Villaamil

family, but also of social and governmental structures and cultural norms. From this viewpoint, Don Ramón Villaamil becomes, in part, a literary sign which points to a broader meaning: a badly organized and inequitable bureaucracy in post-civil war Restoration Spain. Significantly, the author's time, 1888, is ten years past the narrator's time (note again the parallel cycles of approximately one decade seen throughout the novel). This period casts a further sense of entrapment upon the macro-narrative time line since the reader of the late 1880s knows of little or no improvement in matters of the bureaucracy from 1878 to 1888.

I have concentrated upon recurrent patterns existing on the following levels: macro- and micro-narrative structures; broadscale literary intertextuality, especially in terms of costumbrismo and drama; repetitious ordering of simple narrative events; analogous designs in broader plot organization; and the presence of five temporal nuclei which express patterns of deterioration. All of these patterns lead to the overwhelming sense of entrapment, stagnation, and futility which is suggested often by various characters but never more directly than by Abelarda:

Las cursis nacen, y no hay fuerza humana que les quite el sello. Nací de esta manera, y así moriré. Seré mujer de otro cursi y tendré hijos cursis, a quienes el mundo llamará los *michitos* . . . —Pausa—. ¿Y cuándo colocarán a papá? Si lo miro bien, no me importa; lo mismo da. Con destino y sin destino, siempre estamos igual. Poco más o menos, mi casa ha estado toda la vida como está ahora. Mama no tiene gobierno; ni lo tiene mi tía, ni lo tengo yo. Si colocan a papá, me alegraré por él, para que tenga en qué ocuparse y se distraiga; pero por la cuestión de bienestar, me figuro que nunca saldremos de ahogos, farsas y pingajos . . . ¡Pobres *Miaus!* (602)

## ● NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eamonn Rodgers, in *Pérez Galdós: "Miau"*, has studied masterfully other patterns such as the various characters' cliché-ridden language primarily taken from melodramatic popular art and their comparable personality traits, especially vanity, self-indulgence, obsessive thinking and behavior, and ineffectuality.

<sup>2</sup> Some aspects of this paper were previously suggested in my study, "La función expresiva del tiempo en *Miau*," prepared for the Fourth International Congress on Benito Pérez Galdós.

<sup>3</sup> Benito Pérez Galdós, Vol. 5, *Obras completas*. All quotations from the novel

are from this edition; pagination is shown between parenthesis within the body of the text.

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## Rereading the New World Chronicles

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Rereading the New World chronicles, the *cartas*, *relaciones*, and *historias*, has become a very popular enterprise in the face of the upcoming Quincentennial. While many scholars are straining to hear the voice of the "Other," silenced by the sword of the conquerors and the cross of the missionaries, it is equally important to reevaluate the voices that resounded loud and clear from the New World during the 16th century. The conquest was an undertaking that encompassed multiple interests. Reassessing the countless times that the individual interests of the conquistadors themselves, the commercial, military and political interests of the Crown and the evangelizing and, of course, political interests of the Church intermingled in cooperation and in conflict is scarcely new. But Octavio Paz reminds us that history is a text in which some passages are written in black ink and others in invisible ink (23). By delving into the silence that the invisible ink represents, we advance in the reassessment beyond the explicit information presented or denied by the writers of the narratives to that which was ignored or deliberately concealed. The purpose of this study<sup>1</sup> is to construct a more complete reading of *La segunda carta de relación* of Hernán Cortés, by investigating and comparing it to the wealth of information, both explicit and implicit, revealed in the *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* of Bartolomé de Las Casas and the *Carta al Emperador: Refutación a Las Casas sobre la colonización española* of Fray Toribio de Benavente (Motolinía). Gold, glory, greed and personal gain, utopian projects to protect the natives, encomiendas to protect the interest of those who protect the interest of the Crown: all of these are recurring themes in New World discourse. That the written word wielded power in the conquest of the New World is beyond controversy. The interesting question in relation to the four narratives under discussion here is how and why the written word of Hernán Cortés was so powerful that it engendered the wrath of Las Casas, the defense of Motolinía and the "true" history of Díaz del Castillo.

The relationship of a work to its intended reader is of utmost importance to a study of this type. In three of these narratives the addressee is the Crown; these three are petitions—petitions that only the Crown has