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SOLITUDE AND COMMUNION IN *MIAU*

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Todos los hombres, en algún momento de su vida, se sienten solos: y más, todos los hombres están solos. Vivir, es separarnos del que fuimos para internarnos en el que vamos a ser, futuro extraño siempre. la soledad es el fondo último de la conciencia humana.

Octavio Paz
«La dialéctica de la soledad»¹

Miau continues to be a challenging work because of the complexity of its problems and techniques. The symbolic title has been studied as a key to the metaphoric tension of both structure and characterization within the novel; Don Ramón de Villaamil's deplorable economic situation reveals the narrator's and the author's critical perception of the false and hypocritical urban society that surrounds him. Above all, his suicide, constructed as it is within a quasi-heretical (certainly not orthodox) interpretation of the mandate of the Almighty, has both fascinated and puzzled critics.² Yet all of these problems, character dehumanization and animalization, the critique of the social order and of contemporary history, and the frustration and alienation of the protagonist, are linked in some manner with the formal problems of narrative, dialogue and internal monologue for they are the visible modes of expression that open up the world of the novel.

In *Marxism and Form*, Frederic Jameson's analysis of Georg Lukacs' *Theory of the Novel*, he speaks of the typology that Lukacs formulates to define and differentiate narrative in order to find a practical (praxis) mode of existence for the narrative. By using the Hegelian concepts of the abstract ideal and the concrete

reality, two categories appear: the first is the novel of abstract idealism and the second is the novel or romantic disillusionment.³ In regard to the latter, Jameson comments on Lukacs' perception of the change of focus that delineates the structure and form of the modern novel:

...at this point Lukacs makes one of his most remarkable observations (and it has often been pointed out that in this he anticipates the whole direction of the modern novel at a time—1914—when it was just coming into being). For whereas, the external world of the earlier novel form was primarily spatial, whereas the hero's experience of such a world took geographical space, now in the novel of romantic disillusionment, the dominant mode of being, of external reality will be time itself.⁴

In shifting the focus of the narrative away from space and into time, life and action may be relegated to hope and memory. According to Jameson, the world in the present «always defeats the hero, frustrates his longing for reconciliation: yet when he remembers his failure, paradoxically he is at one with it.»⁵

The dual problem, time = anguish (memory, frustration) and time narrative (the telling of the above time) offers another equation on another plane: time = failure for the protagonist, unable to fight against the enormity of the present; and time = success for the narrator-author who can concretize this abstract internal problem through narrative. The use of time, to tell, narrate and re-create the example of the life and reality of the protagonist permits the narrator to fulfill the ultimate meaning and *raison d'être* of the novelistic form, that is, the exemplification of life in the concrete representation of the novel.

This conflictive meaning of time (a dialectic between the external time shared by the creator-narrator and the reader, opposed to the temporal reality re-created within the work, i.e. the time of the protagonist) is an ironic dimension of narrative which contrasts to the dramatic and epic forms. The creator's will gives meaning to an outside experience, the creation of which is a triumph, while the life within the narrative is not.⁶

Lukacs' interpretation of Hegel's concept of the dialectical opposition between the abstract and the concrete also offers, accor-

ding to Jameson, a strong parallel with the contemporary concept of alienation, for the dialectical structure of the experience serves as a perception of what it is in terms of its being (is) and its nothing (what it is not). The abstract and the alienated are signs for the same object, the difference between them being, as Jameson notes, that alienation makes no provision for the *what is* of the experience.⁷

Whereas the latter concept may also be applied to the first of the typological categories (for example, the case of the Picaresque), it is the relationship between the three premises which I have discussed, the concept of the temporally posited novel, the quality of its ironic mode of existence and the concept of alienation, that offer to shed new light on *Miau*.

The characters within the novel fall into four distinct groups: the female «Miau's», Doña Pura, Milagros and Abelarda make up a communicative collective substructure; they interact among themselves and with the second larger group, Ponce, Pantoja, Federico Ruiz, his wife and the rest of the *tertulia*. This group in turn interacts with the wider dimension of the society in the novel, the ministers, bureaucrats and administrators upon whose willful intentions, the fate of the family lies. This interaction relates the entire spectrum back to the foci of the novel, Don Ramón de Villaamil, Luisito Cadalso, and Victor Cadalso. Whereas the latter is Don Ramón's antagonist and adversary, his role within the structure of the novel is less well-drawn. It is possible that Victor's characterization might have been the preliminary sketch of a dramatic character. I suspect a strong parallel with the type of dialectical structure through characterization that is visible in the theatrical works of Galdós. Within the scope of this narrative, however, he is often more described than truly active. For that reason, and because their particular roles so strongly exemplify the questions raised at the beginning of this study, I will focus on the opposing and complementary characters of Don Ramón de Villaamil and Luisito Cadalso.

In large measure, Don Ramón exemplifies the type of character alluded to in the discussion on Lukacs. He is old, frustrated, and unable to fight any longer against the obstacles that the prevailing non-ethical society has put in his path. Luisito, on the other hand, is a child; his innocence permits him to perceive the reality that surrounds him; yet he mitigates its sordidness with an unflinching optimism even while confronting its fatal terrors.

It is Luisito, presented indirectly through the novel's narrator who leads the reader into the world of the «Miau's». The opening paragraph identifies him among the group of schoolboys leaving their classroom for the day:

Entre ellos había uno de menguada estatura, que se apartó de la bandada para emprender sólo y calladito el camino de su casa. Y apenas notado por sus compañeros aquel apartamiento, que más bien parecía huída, fueron tras él y le acosaron con burlas y cuchflistas, no del mejor gusto.⁸

Despite Luisito's timidity, he is never alone in the novel. His subsequent conversations with Murillo, his classmate, with the family's neighbors, the Mendizábal, and with the family matriarch Doña Pura, serve to situate Luisito in his world while at the same time providing the reader insights into the cast of characters and acquainting him with the inherent problems confronting them. But despite the narrator's intrusion in presenting and describing each new character in this expository first chapter, Luisito constantly enters into dialogue with them. It is this relationship through dialogue that serves as a key to the dynamic process of this chapter.

In the case of Don Ramón, the situation is just the opposite. In contrast to the societal environment that surrounds Luisito and in which he acts and to which he reacts, the reader first perceives Don Ramón as a disembodied voice, a fragmented echo calling out from the depths of a darkened room: «Despedía la señora en la puerta al chiquillo, cuando de un aposento próximo a la entrada de la casa, salió una voz cavernosa y sepulcral que decía: —Puuura, Puuura.»⁹

A paragraph and a half later, after Doña Pura brings a lamp into the study, the totality of his presence is fully revealed. Here, as in the case of Dona Pura, the characterization of Don Ramón complements the feline description already begun and this too, is another extension of the dehumanized perception that the reader already has of the old man.

But it is in Don Ramón's first long speech, a quasi-response to Doña Pura's brief and commonplace question, «A ver. ¿A quién has escrito?» that the first example of the function of memory and frustration becomes evident. Battling against the failing afternoon light, a reference that sets into motion the dimension of time, he

says: «...se anochece antes de que uno quisiera...» and then relates his long afternoon of letter writing to acquaintances in high places for the purpose of asking favors and begging for loans. It is here, however, that he also alludes to his past, to his memories of favors once granted and now forgotten: «...Pues ese ingrato, ese olvidadizo, a quien tuve yo de escribiente siendo yo jefe de negociado...tiene la poca delicadeza de mandarme medio duro.»¹⁰ What we have before us is not a conversational response. It is a rhetorical condemnation of the present, seen from the point of view of Don Ramón's desolate situation, from the perspective of his once comfortable past career in government service, and with invectives toward the malevolent and unyielding bureaucracy that frustrates his possible re-employment. As the communicative world of dialogue becomes the key to the characterization of Luisito, Don Ramón begins a series of lonely speeches that create and reflect the reality in which he lives, a world of anxieties, of endless reproaches, of nostalgic memories and of a lack of comprehension or understanding of what is being said around him. For while he seemingly moves through space, from his home to the ministries and through the squares and streets of Madrid, the true center of his action and of his being lies within him, within the limits and expansions of a time remembered and of an agonic present.

The keys that appear in this chapter also establish a dialectical constant between Luisito and Don Ramón which will continue throughout the novel. For if one represents the frustrated present perceived from the perspective of the what-might-have-been, born of age and experience, the other, the young innocent, lives in a world of anguished discoveries, still searching for the response that brings hope to the situation.

Luisito's ability to communicate is manifested in two significant ways immediately after the opening chapter. In chapter II it consists of the verbal and non-verbal communication with Canelo, the dog, who seemingly understands his moods and troubles. In chapter III the reader shares the first of four extraordinary experiences consisting of Luisito's dialogue with God.

It should be noted that the ambiguous personal history of the family gives rise to a possible naturalistic interpretation of these events. The theme of madness (or at least, of an inherited mental imbalance) is hinted at but never truly developed. Examples include the «Miau's» obsession with opera and their frustrated and vain operatic ambitions; the madness and death of Luisito's mother

brought on by her frenzied passion for Victor Cadalso and by his ruthless treatment of her; Abelarda's vicious attack on Luisito, symptomatic of her own frustration and of her pent-up emotions; and finally, the rumors concerning Don Ramón's mental state, encouraged by Victor's denigrating comments. However, considering Galdos' conception of «madness» and «unreason» in other works, and considering the general tradition of these two concepts in Spanish letters, Luisito's dialogue with God should be interpreted outside the rigid doctrine of the naturalistic aesthetic.¹¹

The narrative backdrop of this event describes the physical effects and symptoms of the visionary state:

Al entrar en la calle del Pueblo, iba ya Cadalso tan fatigado que, para recobrar las fuerzas, se sentó... Y lo mismo fue sentirse... que sentirse acometido de un profundo sueño... Más bien era aquello como un desvanecimiento, no desconocido para el chiquillo, y que no verificaba sin que el tuviera conciencia de los extraños sentimientos precursores: «¡Contro! - pensó muy asustado - me va a dar aquello... va a dar, me da...»¹²

The personification of the God-like figure who foresees and advises Luisito casts new light on the social problems that are basic to the meaning of the work. Luisito's confidence in this figure leads to an immediate confession of the family's problems. The response however is not consistent with the *Deus ex machina* response that the reader might expect of an orthodox God-figure. In this case and in the ones that follow, God foresees and sympathizes, but cannot intercede. Indeed his initial appearance ends with the observation that «Están los tiempos muy malos.»

This personification, puzzling and complex as it seems, appears to be a visualization, an attempt at an ontological representation, and, as such, a concrete response to Luisito's incessant search for communication. In Octavio Paz' appendix to his first major essay, *El laberinto de la soledad*, quoted at the beginning of this study, he defines the dialectic of solitude, the response to the unilateral condition of solitude that dominates our life. In so doing, he refers to the world of the child, in which he (the child) attempts to communicate (to seek communion, reconciliation) with the world through animation and through the game of signs and names:

Gracias al juego y a la imaginación, la naturaleza inerte de los adultos—una silla, un libro, un objeto cualquiera—adquiere de pronto vida propia. Por la virtud mágica del lenguaje o del gesto, del símbolo, o del acto, el niño crea un mundo viviente, en el que los objetos son capaces de responder a sus preguntas. El lenguaje, desnudo de sus significaciones intelectuales, deja de ser un conjunto de signos y vuelve a ser un delicado organismo de inmantación mágica. No hay distancia entre el nombre de la cosa y pronunciar una palabra es poner en movimiento a la realidad que designa. . . . Hablar vuelve a ser una actividad creadora de la realidad, esto es, una actividad poética. El niño, por virtud de su magia, crea un mundo a su imagen y resuelve así su soledad.¹³

In a phenomenological sense, Luisito's vision of God corresponds to a representative self-invention. The power of the need for communication, coupled with his still unsullied, still idealistic view of reality develops into the dialogue vision of this personification. More than an alter-ego, Luisito's God represents a compendium of traditional beliefs intermingled with an innocent understanding of his own personal shortcomings, the need to study more and to excel as a student and in this magic way, help to alleviate his grandfather's situation.

This manifestation of God, then, is not all-merciful; it represents Luisito's sensitive comprehension of the world around him and it also voices, along with Don Ramón, a critical and reproachful opinion of prevailing social values. In echoing this position, this God begins to approximate the definition that Lukacs has made concerning the role of the intercessor in the narrative *vis a vis* the epic of idealism, the problematic reality of the «Godless epic.»¹⁴ Yet the most critical motive behind the conceptualization of this figure lies in Luisito's communication of his existence to Don Ramón and the influence of this event on the latter's suicide. For Luisito, through «God» or for him, voices the uneasy solution that has been a constant in Don Ramón's thoughts: that it would be better for him to die. Ironically, this conversation is one of the few to which Don Ramón pays attention. He listens and responds to Luisito and as a result he is seized and «blessed» with the idea of carrying out the «divine counsel.»

Normally Don Ramón is characterized by a lack of attention to the verbal world around him. Before Luisito's dialogue with God, Don Ramón's rhetorical and anguished monologues have dominated his voice within the novel. Moreover, the quality of in-communication is substantiated by the narrator's constant reference to «Villaamil, que nada de esto oía...» and, «sin esperar lo que Federico contestaba a esas expansiones calurosas...». ¹⁵ The constant reference to «pesimismo», «el infortunado Villaamil» and «ensimismamiento,» «ensimismado» adds to the projection of internal frustration. As such, Don Ramón progressively enclosed himself within his memory, frustration and agonistic interiority, and finally escapes through his final state of solitude, suicide.

His last conversation, or dialogue, occurs at a tavern where he meets a group of military recruits. This dialogue exemplifies both his newly-discovered serenity and, as such, echoes the monologue pattern; at the same time it characterizes his inability to use language and mood to reach out to those around him. His response to the tavern keeper reflects these problems:

—No, si yo no he de volver. Mañana estaré muy lejos, amigo mío. Señores (volviéndose a los chicos y saludándoles sombrero en mano), conservarse.

Gracias: que les aproveche... Y no olviden lo que les he dicho...ser libres, ser independientes...como el aire. Veánme a mí. Me pongo al Estado por montera...Hasta ahora...

Salió arrastrando la capa y uno de los mozos se asomó a la puerta gritando:

Eh...abuelo, agárrese, que se cae...Abuelo que se le han quedado las narices. va acá!

Pero Villaamil no oía nada... ¹⁶

The final two chapters (XLIII, XLIV) represent the climax of Villaamil's mental agitation and signal his approaching end. With the dramatic intensity of a stage monologue, the reader hears his voice, the projection of memories and of the irreversible past that has made the present so unbearable. These recollections, stimulated by his observation of some feeding birds, brings sharply into focus his hatred and disgust for his family, which he now views as representative of the hypocritical bourgeoisie. And this scene seems

to draw the work to a close by symbolically recapitulating the novel's opening paragraph in which schoolboys are compared to birds.

Don Ramón's progression through a solitude and loneliness terminates in alienation. he is a prisoner of his time, and his «madness» seems to indicate an inability to compromise. Lacking the innocence of Luisito, he is unable to invent the «other,» the complementary voice of solace. Lacking the mature dialectic of love that Octavio Paz defines as the communion-reconciliation available to man, Don Ramón seeks instead the absolute lonely state of death.

Yet, in light of what Jameson and Lukacs have stated concerning the existence of the novel, the decadence that produces this desolate state of being is a triumph for the narrator and the work. Indeed, the reader of the text, with its inherent dialectical problems, experiences the ethical posture of the novel, the debasement of the human condition as a result of materialistic and exploitive society. Don Ramón is both a product and a victim of that society, yet the modern reader from the perspective of his own time is capable of conceiving of the regeneration of society through humanistic values. This novel is an example of Galdós' modernity as it foreshadows tenets of human behavior, social condition and philosophical postures that extend beyond the limits of late nineteenth century Spanish realism. This «act of rebellion» is a structural model of social criticism conceived within a labyrinth of personal and historical time. It forces us as readers and critics into a new dialectic with the text and makes us aware of the complexities inherent in the work of Galdós.

NOTES

1. Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de la soledad* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1969), p. 175.
2. *Miau* has been the object of studies by the most widely known Galdosian critics among which are: Ricardo Gullón's edition including a preliminary study and

bibliography (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1967); Gustavo Correa, «La crucificación de Villaamil en la novela *Miau*» (in) *El simbolismo religioso en las novelas de Pérez Galdós* (Madrid: Gredos, 1962); Theodore A. Sackett, «The Meaning of *Miau*», *Anales Galdosianos*, 4 (1969), 25-38; *Anales Galdosianos*, 6 (1971), 50-51 presents a discussion on the various views on *Miau* as represented in studies and commentaries by Ricardo Gullón, R. J. Weber, Rodolfo Cardona, Geoffrey Ribbans, Theodore Sackett and Alexander A. Parker.

3. Federic Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 160-205.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

8. Benito Pérez Galdós, *Miau* (Mexico: Ed. Porrúa, 1979).

9. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

11. One of the first works to deal with the Cervantine influence on Galdós (to which I am alluding) is: J. Warshaw, «Galdós' Indebtedness to Cervantes», *Hispania*, 16 (1933), 127-42. Also, Gustavo Correa, «Tradicion mística y cervantismo en las novelas de Galdós» *Hispania*, 53 (1970), 842-51.

12. *Miau*, p. 9.

13. *El laberinto de la soledad*. pp. 182-83.

14. A recent and penetrating study on the problem of Hegelian theory and practice which also emphasizes the meanings of the God presence (Monotheism and Alienation) in the modern narrative as it relates to the exposé of social decadence is Julia Kristeva's «L'Experience et le Practique» (in) *Polylogue* (Paris: Ed. Seuil, 1977), pp. 107-36.

15. *Miau*, p. 131.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 147-48.