

Narcotic Fictions: The Implosion of Narrative and Politics in Benito Pérez Galdós's *La incógnita/Realidad* (1888-1889)

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¡Ah!, la sociedad en que vivimos nos ofrece a cada instante materia narcótica en abundancia para cloroformizar la conciencia y poder operarla sin dolor.

Manolo Infante in *La incógnita*

While critics tend to classify Benito Pérez Galdós as a realist novelist, a distant cousin of Dickens, Balzac, or Tolstoy, such a generalization undercuts much of his literary output that challenges the constraints of realist discourse in late-nineteenth-century Spain. Galdós was, for many years, one of Europe's most prolific realists and the first arbiter of what constituted modern Spanish fiction following the publication of his essay “Observaciones sobre la novela contemporánea en España” (1870) in which he argues for the pioneering of a new, national novel.¹ Nevertheless, from the outset of his novelistic career, Galdós tests the limits of verisimilitude in works such as *La sombra* (1870), *El amigo Manso* (1882), and a number of short stories, although it is not until the composition of *La incógnita* in 1888 that we can pinpoint a definitive turn away from realist writing in favor of what I term Galdós's subversive aesthetic.² With the publication *La incógnita/Realidad*, Galdós endeavors to craft an innovative brand of novelistic expression that marks a decisive break with the “socio-mimetic predominance” of nearly 20 years of realist and naturalist production (Miller 126).³ This shift, which, at first glance, might only appear to indicate a new phase of artistic experimentation, is highly significant as it reveals the novelist's mounting skepticism regarding the political (un)reality of Restoration Spain.

In this essay I contend that Galdós's critical about-face should be understood as a frustrated search to supplant an exhausted mode of literary expression (Realism) with one capable of revealing the ideological stalemate of Restoration Spain, while simultaneously rejuvenating the progressive impulse of the Revolution of 1868.⁴ Articulating a poetics of impotence, Galdós's twin novels undermine the authorial integrity of a politician forced to confront his own “estéril ingenio” as he finds himself powerless within a largely oligarchic system more concerned with oratorical flair than the intellectual, political, or

social mobilization of the Spanish populace (*La incógnita/Realidad* 155). By chronicling Manolo Infante's mental dissolution and his inability to recognize his own writing (as *La incógnita* magically transforms into *Realidad*), Galdós engineers a self-reflexive critique on the act of novelistic writing while examining the efficacy of a rationalist ontology in Restoration Spain. As he deconstructs the precarious frames of Manolo Infante's narration by emphasizing his protagonist's powerlessness to "contar la historia," Galdós intensifies Infante's desperate quest to produce "el arte de vestir con galas pintorescas la desnudez de la realidad" (154-155).

This literary mission leads *La incógnita*'s protagonist into a world of obscured truths, hollowed out by "la vocinglería, el embuste [y] la difamación" of a society determined to "envilecer los caracteres y falsear todas las cuestiones" (168-169). Probing the limits of Infante's sanity, Galdós pursues artistic refuge on the frontier of fantasy while underscoring his protagonist's mental exhaustion and related physical and affective disorders, which are, in no small part, symptomatic of the socio-political climate in Spain. Forced to create a self-contained reality in *La incógnita* and *Realidad* that mirrors the absence of a definitive cultural referent, Galdós reveals the cloak of irrationality in which Spain finds itself enshrouded following the mandate of *turnismo* under the political direction of Antonio Cánovas del Castillo. In the end, Galdós asks the most provocative of questions by scrutinizing the hyperreality of the era, which has seemingly inverted the notion of what is true and what is false. After all, if the very intelligibility of the social landscape is indecipherable, how can a liberal novelist like Galdós represent a coherent vision of reality in Canovite Spain, presuming that one exists in the first place?

Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation, my discussion centers on Galdós's deployment of a novelistic imaginary in which images and signs circulate chaotically throughout the social order. Achieved through electoral fraud, the carefully orchestrated façade of Restoration stability sought only to palliate both sectors of the bourgeoisie so that they would not remain excluded from representation for inordinate periods of time. This system, determined to diffuse political dissent, disintegrated into little more than a corrupt machine bent on maintaining a peaceful state by falsifying elections and tacitly promoting malfeasance. In *La incógnita/Realidad*, Galdós interrogates what Baudrillard has described as the "closure of a system," a process that excludes binary oppositions from being questioned (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 70). For Baudrillard, such closure indicates the "vertigo of doubling," or the annulment of discursive meaning in each opposing party (70). In the case of Restoration Spain, the institutionalization of *turnismo* was predicated on the manner through which each party nullified the other, effectively obliterating the possibility of representational democracy. Simulation requires this sense of cancellation, which Baudrillard characterizes as an "implosion of meaning" (*In the Shadow* 93). It also indicates a situation in which political differences, social classes, and previously heterogeneous elements of society disintegrate into one another much like the paired protagonists of *La incógnita* (Manolo Infante/Don Equis) as well the geographical spaces used to mirror national identity (Madrid/Orbajosa).⁵

The simulated representation of Restoration Spain in Galdós's twin novels does not function as an attempt to duplicate or even parody the reality of the era but rather to demonstrate the substitutive process through which "signs of the real" are mistaken as

“the real” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 2). For Baudrillard, simulation is the process through which the instability of meaning becomes intensified as the distinction between supposed referents inevitably becomes irretrievable. Unlike Marxist philosophers, Baudrillard does not adopt the view that language is an object manipulated by the state to obfuscate the ruling classes’ dominance over the rest of the populace.⁶ Instead, he contends that—in a society dominated by the consumption of information—ideology is always at the root of one’s perception of reality since language structures how citizens experience a collective reality. With the publication of *La incógnita/Realidad*, Galdós masterfully destabilizes the realist novel’s capacity to reproduce a collective reality in Restoration Spain. In devising a “simulated” reality, Galdós explores a number of unstable binary oppositions as the protagonists of both novels—Manolo Infante/Don Equis in *La incógnita* and Tomás Orozco/Federico Viera in *Realidad*—mysteriously metamorphose into one another, much like the texts themselves. Consequently, the novelist emboldens a stunning analysis of media practices by underscoring the contamination of public discourse—journalistic practices, political oratory, and public correspondence—and pointing to the paralysis faced by liberal novelists. In his hybrid narratives, Galdós grapples with the simulation of a society and a political system he decries as perpetually “en suspenso” (qtd. by Shoemaker in *Las cartas desconocidas* 385).⁷ Constructing a dizzying hall of mirrors in *La incógnita* and *Realidad*, the novelist unleashes an ideological assault on the “mareo reparador” of the era by scrutinizing the implosion of narrative, politics, and identity in Restoration Spain (*La incógnita/Realidad* 202).

Galdós’s staunchest ideological adversaries—the Catholic Church, rural landowners, and the incipient bourgeoisie—were highly suspicious of such a liberal agenda, which they believed threatened to destabilize Spain’s supposed spiritual essence. Accordingly, the conservative base coalesced to combat the process of secularization and defend their economic dominance, which inevitably led to a scene of ideological gridlock during the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century in Spain. Following the overthrow of the monarchy in 1868 and the subsequent failure to establish a lasting Spanish republic, Isabel’s son Alfonso XII was proclaimed King of Spain in December of 1874 in an attempt to pacify the conflict between the Carlists, who for decades questioned the legitimacy of Isabel’s ascension to the throne, and the dueling moderates, liberals, and republicans. The Restoration of the Bourbons to the throne relied heavily on the employment of the *turno pacífico* (the peaceful rotation) of political power between parties, which enabled these two hegemonic powers—the *Partido Liberal Conservador* and the *Partido Liberal*—to dominate Spanish politics for 50 years. In effect, these two state-sanctioned parties relied upon the Ministry of the Interior, provincial civil governors, and corruption at the local level to pacify the bourgeoisie and ensure that no sector of this burgeoning social class felt unrepresented. This system, put into effect by the Restoration’s architect, Antonio Cánovas del Castillo, operated rather successfully from 1875 until 1898, when the population became more socially mobile and internal political divisions began to proliferate.

The imposition of the *turno pacífico* during the Restoration meant ten changes in government from December 1874 to November of 1885, with five different men assuming the role as *Presidente de Gobierno* (Cánovas, Joaquín Jovellar, Arsenio Martínez-Campos, Práxedes Mateo Sagasta, and José de Posada Herrera). Sagasta and Cánovas

kept the tightest grip on the reins, holding control for all but 15 months of the nearly 11-year period. During the 16 years of Queen María Cristina's regency (beginning with the death of her husband Alfonso XII in November of 1885 and concluding with her son Alfonso XIII's legal majority in May of 1902), there were 17 shifts in governmental power. Not surprisingly, Sagasta and Cánovas were in direct control of all but two years and two months of this 16-year span. The frequent shifts in power between the *Partido Liberal Conservador* (run by Cánovas) and the *Partido Liberal* (led by Sagasta) came off successfully by forestalling any large-scale efforts to overhaul legislation and emphasizing the stability of the Canovite system as each party gained control five times over a 22-year span of time. Cánovas, viewing the need for a two-party system as nothing more than a prop required to hold up the legitimacy of the Bourbon throne after 43 years of Carlist sniping, set out to, in his own words, "procurar, en cuanto esté a mi alcance, la formación de grandes partidos políticos, en los cuales pueda apoyarse el trono" (qtd. in Fernández Sanz 415). For Cánovas, a historian who once traced the decline of the Spanish Hapsburgs in *Historia de la decadencia española* (1854), it appears that the establishment of the *turno pacífico* was premised on a fundamental disbelief that Spain could successfully copy the type of widespread, yet no doubt heavily disputed, liberalism being forged in England and France in the last three decades of the Nineteenth Century.⁸ José Álvarez Junco has recently claimed that Cánovas's pessimism, much like that of many "mid-century Moderates and [...] end-of-century liberal-conservatives," points to a deep-seated anxiety that Spain was hovering on the brink of a national collapse (299).⁹

Redefining the Restoration as a period dominated by an authoritarian regime disguised as a legitimate democracy, liberal critics such as José Ortega y Gasset understand it not as a Canovite "continuation of history" but as "la detención de la vida nacional" during which "llegó el corazón de España a dar el menor número de latidos por minuto" (83-84). Ramiro de Maeztu, in deeming Cánovas "[e]l hombre odiado por toda España" (32), echoes Ortega's sentiment that "La Restauración, señores, fue un panorama de fantasmas, y Cánovas el gran empresario de la fantasmagoría" (*Meditaciones* 84). Cánovas's influence was so far-reaching that he is still considered to be "el artífice de la Restauración de Alfonso XII, de la Constitución de 1876 y hasta del período que comienza entonces, el 'régimen canovista,' como lo denomina cierta historiografía en el siglo XX, que lo extiende hasta 1923" (Piquerias 34). By reading the Restoration experience as one in which "la vida nacional repliega sobre sí misma, se hace hueco de sí misma" (*Meditaciones* 83-84), a liberal novelist like Galdós is forced to acknowledge that the novel (as political discourse) simultaneously represents an opportunity *and* a limitation in a society defined by its "matiz autoritario" (Suárez Cortina 20). Seeking new sources of inspiration for national expression, now that the middle classes are no longer a viable vehicle for regeneration, Galdós attempts to move beyond his previous efforts to extol the virtues of a liberal agenda that have fallen flat in a political atmosphere that allows little room for dissent. Accordingly, Galdós's novelistic work from the late 1880s is riddled with a profound sense of distress as he labors to concoct innovative narrative forms within a stifling socio-political context.

Reflecting back on his early thesis novels, particularly *Doña Perfecta* (1876), Galdós revisits his earliest targets of ideological critique in *La incógnita/Realidad* and sets out to offer something entirely distinct to Restoration discourse by crafting twin experimental novels

that cobble together a multitude of high and low forms of literary expression. Revisiting an Orbajosan reality in *La incógnita*, Galdós inverts *Doña Perfecta*'s narrative structure and returns to a type of novelistic practice that is inherently political. Moreover, by attacking the absence of true political discourse in *La incógnita* and *Realidad*, Galdós fixates on the disingenuous policies of Cánovas, Sagasta, and Emilio Castelar y Ripoll, which sought to “suprimir el concepto de partido y sustituirlo por el principio insoslayable de la regeneración de la Patria” all while advocating “un régimen autoritario” (Vaca de Osma, *Alfonso XII* 88). As “sacerdotes de [una] religión consolodora,” Cánovas, Sagasta, and Castelar are presented by Manolo Infante as the public faces responsible for “la irritación interior,” “la jarana parlamentaria,” and “[la] embriaguez” contaminating the social landscape in Restoration Spain (*La incógnita/Realidad* 202). As a result, Galdós emboldens a biting critique of Restoration Spain by crafting a bewildering fictional world hollowed out by the façade of licit democratic practices.

The Restoration, after all, in succeeding the Revolution of 1868 and a chaotic period (1869-1875) that failed to establish governmental stability (monarchy, Republic, centralism, and federalism), sought to counter what Cánovas deemed “los embates de la ‘modernidad’” by consolidating the power of the ruling classes and imposing feudalistic structures throughout rural Spain to control the largest sector of the nation’s population (qtd. in Toscano Liria 92).¹⁰ For Cánovas, whose famous edict to “continuar la historia” became his rallying cry, the Restoration was designed to become an era of institutionalized order to prevent the types of fissures amongst the governing classes that, in 1840, 1854, and 1868 had thrown the entire nation into revolutionary disarray.¹¹ Accordingly, in drafting the Constitution of 1876, Cánovas sought to impose this sense of constancy to avoid future ideological clashes amongst the ruling elite and, consequently, to forestall the possibility of another revolution by combining many of the elements present in the Constitutions of 1845 and 1869. The result, however, was a document that was considered “wholly regressive” and “utterly deficient as the fundamental document of a parliamentary monarchy” (Esdaile 146).¹² While other critics assess the document more positively, as flexible and open to various political liberties (free press, public assembly, and the creation of the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza*), they acknowledge that the promise of doctrinaire liberalism was effectively squashed by the Constitution of 1876 (Vaca de Osma, *Alfonso XII* 87).¹³

Looming rather largely throughout *La incógnita/Realidad*'s political critique is the fact that, in April of 1886, Galdós himself was elected to the Spanish Parliament “by the ridiculous number of seventeen votes” as a representative for the district of Guayama, Puerto Rico (Berkowitz 204). Galdós, once asked in an interview about his election to office, pointedly queried: “¿Cuántos votos dirán ustedes que obtuve? [...] ¡Diez y siete! [...] Diez y siete bastaron para erigirme en representante de la nación” (qtd. in Varela Olea 104). Ushered into the political arena by liberal leader Sagasta, the novelist became a product of *cunerismo* or cradle politics, which dictated that he never stray from the party line. Galdós served the liberal party faithfully by regularly attending parliamentary sessions and publishing political endorsements in the Argentine press that advocated the liberal government's aims to unify the nation. Nevertheless, the novelist quickly grew tired with the dissension amongst the members of his own party who were utterly demobilized by their lack of unity while in power, divided by multiple leadership and petty personal

ambition. As Galdós himself would later write, “un día me encontré con la noticia de que era representante en Cortes con un número enteramente fantástico de votos. Con estas y otras arbitrariedades llegamos años después a la pérdida de las colonias” (“Memorias de un desmemoriado” 1677). Less than eight months after winning his seat in Parliament, Galdós characterized Spanish politics as being entirely consumed by “[d]isidencias, desmembraciones, menudencias, todo personales, y por el vicio de que todos quieren mandar” (qtd. by Shoemaker in *Las cartas desconocidas* 210).¹⁴

By the late 1880s, Galdós had grown increasingly exhausted with the internal bickering, viewing it as a sordid spectacle largely to blame for the untenability of a true modern democracy. Galdós’s disillusionment continued to escalate upon encountering the utter apathy of the Spanish masses that seemed to care little for the nation’s political travails or philosophical doctrines that may solve them. Significantly, Galdós’s novels published directly after his election to the Spanish Parliament in 1886 addressed a number of targets for social reform such as convents built to rehabilitate women of ill repute (in *Fortunata y Jacinta*), the bureaucratic structures that controlled unemployment and pension payments (in *Miau*), absentee politicians (in *La incógnita*), and the redistribution of wealth and predatory lending practices (the *Torquemada* series). These works reflect a marked difference in Galdós’s *oeuvre*, notable for their negative portrayal of political representation following his first-hand experience as an elected official, as well as his distress regarding his fellow representatives’ disinterest in their constituencies.

As texts that veer from what might be considered a traditional, realist ontology, *La incógnita* and *Realidad* undermine the very possibility of mimetic or diegetic expression.¹⁵ In these works, Galdós’s incorporation of the fantastic, for instance, permits him to explore what Rosemary Jackson terms the “art of estrangement” which, ultimately leads to “a dismantling of the ‘real’” (175).¹⁶ By focusing on shadows, apocryphal doubles, unsolved mysteries, and the obscured psychology of his characters, Galdós strives to craft a visionary approach to novelistic writing while working to step outside the ideological confines of Canovite Spain. Galdós’s rupture with the formal tenets of traditional Realism is underscored by the confusion and incoherence cultivated throughout *La incógnita* and *Realidad*, which serve as “an obdurate reminder of all that has been silenced in the name of establishing a normative bourgeois realism” (Jackson 124). Incorporating elements from the epistolary, the dialogue novel, *la novela de tesis*, *le roman d’analyse*, detective fiction, and yellow journalism enables Galdós to assess their capacity for expressing a counter-Restoration critique as he explores new paths for novelistic expression, even as he wrestles against his own creative helplessness.

In breaking from the realist paradigm, a mature Galdós “draw[s] attention to the way language not only reflects reality but also creates it” by centering on the letters produced by a narrator whose words intend to sincerely depict the reality of everyday life in Madrid for the reader (Garlinger XXXVI). As he continues to fabricate these epistles, Manolo Infante, as narrator, becomes acutely aware that his words are shaping *and* manipulating a representation of reality in the capital city, which subsequently prompts his descent into a world of utter confusion as he “struggles to reconcile two contradictory visions of language: [as] his search for a referent behind the sign inevitably comes into conflict with his role as inventor of the autonomous language of fiction” (Tsuchiya 337). After all, in

reconsidering the power of realist ontology in 1897, Galdós explains that “[...]a palabra del autor, narrando y describiendo, no tiene, en términos generales, tanta eficacia ni da tan directamente la impresión de la verdad espiritual” (*Ensayos* 205). By challenging the very possibility of objective narration, Galdós displaces traditional Realism as a possible vehicle for the transmission of social critique and seeks refuge in a variety of narrative guises (both ‘sub-literary’ and classical forms of literary expression).

La incógnita, as epistolary, and *Realidad*, as dialogized novel, allow Galdós the latitude he needs to chart alternative novelistic routes. The two works, broken into incompatible yet mutually dependent halves, self-consciously test the limits of their own generic parameters while simultaneously exploring the production of knowledge through the lens of an unstable narrator. From the outset of *La incógnita*, Manolo Infante’s status as narrator and Orbajosan parliamentary representative living in Madrid is drawn in contrast with that of his interlocutor, the enigmatic don Equis, an exiled Madrilenian author stationed in Orbajosa. Shortly after arriving in Madrid, Infante expresses his immediate satisfaction with the highly entertaining, diverse, and stimulating metropolis. He then promises don Equis that his letters, “descritas sin galanura, pero con veracidad,” will revitalize his reader’s spirits, reminding him of the people, events, gossip, and political intrigue circulating throughout the capital, hoping to forestall don Equis’s collapse into the Orbajosan “pozo de ignorancia” (*La incógnita/Realidad* 153-154).

It isn’t long, however, before the novelty of residing in Madrid wears off for Infante and his initiation into the political circles in the capital begins to overwhelm him. *La incógnita*’s letters document Infante’s spiraling discontent over a period of three and a half months as he halfheartedly fulfills his political duties, becomes infatuated with his married cousin Augusta Cisneros, and investigates the death of his good friend Federico Viera. Throughout *La incógnita*, Infante finds himself ensnared in a number of mysteries that remain, for the most part, unresolved as the text approaches its magical transformation into *Realidad*. As the narrator’s fixation with Augusta and her marital infidelity increases, suspicions mount that she may have been romantically involved with the deceased Viera, whose death is now suspected by many to be a suicide. Infante, in a mental tailspin by the conclusion of *La incógnita*, is only able to glean from Augusta that she has indeed been unfaithful to her husband, Tomás Orozco, but fails to learn the identity of her lover just as he fails to uncover the circumstances under which his close friend Viera died. The novel closes with Infante detailing his plans to leave Madrid and return to Orbajosa. Infante informs his interlocutor: “yo estoy enfermo, yo no sé lo que me pasa [...] Estoy fuera de mí [...] La desesperación y el despecho me inspiran cosas que presumo han de ser enormes disparates. [...] Creo que si sigo en Madrid no acabaré en bien” (360).

The final two letters in *La incógnita* ensure the sense of perplexity so carefully cultivated throughout the novel as Infante receives a bulky package from don Equis that, at first glance, appears to contain “una caja de bizcochos borrachos,” precisely what the doctor ordered for the narrator who exclaims: “¡Es que necesito medicina dulce y narcótica!” (363). Galdós, playing with expectations, does not fill the cumbersome parcel with alcohol-laced sponge cake but with five notebooks, which Infante admits to glancing over “con febril curiosidad” (363). The manuscripts, soon to be known as “*REALIDAD, novela en cinco jornadas*,” thrust Infante into the depths of psychic despair as Galdós subverts his

narrator's authority in *La incógnita*'s final moments, underscoring his two-pronged analysis of Restoration discourse (364). Offering the reader very little in the way of narrative closure, Galdós challenges the Spanish reading public to dig beneath the superficial veneer of serialized romance and, consequently, to recognize the manipulation of public discourse in Canovite Spain.

In the way he binds *La incógnita* to *Realidad*, Galdós alludes to the illegibility of Spain's national character, an anxiety as "the bourgeoisie's unprecedented need to *signify* and *represent* itself" (Ríos-Font, *The Canon and the Archive* 116). The last two epistles of *La incógnita*, the penultimate letter written by Manolo Infante and the final one by his interlocutor, the mysterious don Equis, detail the bizarre metamorphosis of the epistolary novel into *Realidad*. Infante's letters, bundled up and placed into an Orbajosan garlic chest owned by don Equis, have allegedly spent some three days in close proximity to a number of crops gathered from the most recent Orbajosan harvest (garlic, onions, and peppers). As a result, they inscrutably mutate into the dramatic novel known as *Realidad*. The "sobrenatural y ajosa metamorfosis" of the politician's epistles into a theatrical piece (*La incógnita/Realidad* 366) is a transformation that evokes Baudrillard's third order of the simulacra, which the French philosopher explains as the "mutation of the real into the hyperreal" (*Simulations* 55). And it is in hyperreality where meaning becomes highly volatile and binary oppositions "implode, reverse, and become radically uncertain" (Pawlett 77).

This sense of implosion is underscored as narrator and interlocutor alternately shirk responsibility for having produced the second text, agreeing only that it has been "extraída del seno de las conciencias" (*La incógnita/Realidad* 364). In the end, to embolden his political commentary, Galdós needs Infante and don Equis to dissolve into one another, just as the novels undergo their own mutually dependent collapse. *La incógnita*'s inexplicable dissolution into *Realidad* posits a Galdosian critique of the porous frontier between fiction and reality while exposing Madrid's diabolical underbelly, a world that lies just beyond the periphery of bourgeois reality in Restoration Spain. Much like Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846-1848), Galdós's hybrid novels polemicize parliamentary mismanagement in the nation's capital by alluding to the demonic substructure of government: "¡Qué vergüenza! ¡Qué leyes! [.] ¡Y a esto llaman organismo social! La ley protege la deshonra, y el Estado es el amparador de los criminales" (421).¹⁷ Crucially, just as *La incógnita* shifts into *Realidad*, Galdós subverts the texts' authority and provenance in the same way he interrogates the formal composition of an irrational reality under the political machinations of the Restoration.

La incógnita, in self-consciously communicating its status as a novel within a novel, exposes itself as a work imbued with the "personas, sucesos, chismes y trapisonadas de esta pícara Corte" replete with all the "confusión y bullicio" of Restoration-era Madrid (153). Infante, as narrator, expresses an insecure and uncertain vision of the events that take place around him, often referring his own vertigo as "la nación va sacando de la confusión el orden y de lo negativo la afirmación, y de los disparates la verdad" (172). Educated by his anarchist uncle and godfather don Carlos María de Cisneros upon his arrival in the capital,¹⁸ Infante experiences Madrid through the eyes of revolutionary who describes Restoration Spain by referring to "estos tiempos vulgares, burgueses,

insignificantes” (172). Cisneros, who occupies an essential role within *La incógnita*, facilitates Galdós’s brutal condemnation of Infante’s generation, informing the narrator and his friend Federico Viera: “Sois unos encanijados de cuerpo y de espíritu, y en vuestros caletres hidrocefálicos no cabe ninguna idea grande” (175). Cisneros sows the seed of doubt in Infante’s psyche by querying if Dante could have authored a masterpiece such as *la Divina Commedia* in an era similar to that of Restoration Spain. Cisneros asks Infante and Viera: “¿Creéis vosotros que el Dante habría escrito la *Divina Comedia* si hubiera sido bachiller en Artes, licenciado en Derecho, después ateneísta, alcanzando fama de persona ilustrada, viviendo entre el tumulto de lo que llaman crítica, y expuesto a ser académico, diputado o quizás, quizás ministro de Fomento?” (175). Infante’s godfather goes on to claim that the narrator and Viera are little more than victims of a system that has rendered them “unos pobres idiotas, educados en las tonterías de la enseñanza oficial, de esa enseñanza” that will send humanity back to “la época de los monos, micos ilustrados si se quiere, pero micos al fin” (175). Infante is clever enough, however, to understand his godfather’s hypocrisy as he acknowledges that Cisneros is “un hombre que vive tranquilamente de las rentas extraídas de la propiedad inmueble y de la riquezamobiliaria, es decir, un fortísimo sillar del edificio del Estado” (171).

From the very beginning of *La incógnita*, Manolo Infante discusses the political scene in Madrid as a skeptical outsider from Orbajosa: “La política, tal como aquí se practica, le inspira despiadadas burlas [...] no hay ministro honrado, ni personaje que no merezca la horca” (169). The narrator, thrust into the capricious vacillations of Spanish parliament, chronicles his political initiation in the capital, which he describes as an “atmósfera de controversia febril” (203).¹⁹ Infante underscores the political anxieties in Madrid, pointing to “el temor de que el Gabinete se derrumbara,” various “alarmas,” and “el choque terrible de las ambiciones que se defienden con las ambiciones que embisten” (202). In describing his governmental service, Infante claims that it has left him physically and mentally infirm “bajo la influencia de una exaltación insana,” which, in turn has rendered him faultless for “las bobadas que pensé y [...] escribí” in *La incógnita*’s epistles (202). Moreover, the narrator insists that this pervasive “embriaguez” has disabled him from expressing the truth in his writing and from understanding the events unfolding around him as he rescinds statements made in his earlier letters (202).

Seemingly inebriated by the confusion of parliamentary life in Madrid, Infante goes on to warn Equis that Restoration society is careening violently “al disparate y a la sinrazón” (203), echoing his anarchist godfather’s apocalyptic declarations throughout the paired novels. Cisneros, whose barrage of dramatic predictions throughout *La incógnita* sends Infante into a psychological tailspin, claims that Spain is headed for:

[U]n cataclismo. La sociedad no puede seguir así. Sus bases, las célebres bases de que hablan tanto esos papeles inmundos, hacen crac crac. El matrimonio se hunde, las instituciones políticas y religiosas se desmoronan. ¡Ejército, Iglesia, Magistratura, pilares podridos que sólo aguardan un encontronazo para caerse! (318)

Infante, compelled by Cisneros’s apocalyptic predictions, dismisses his parliamentary responsibilities and expresses hatred for his constituents: “Les odio con toda mi alma, y

deseo que el cielo les aflija con mil calamidades, sequías, riadas, pedriscos y ciclones, y un terremoto de añadidura; que no quede en pie ni casa ni árbol” (335).

Ultimately, Cisneros’s revolutionary teachings have such a profound and devastating effect upon the narrator of *La incógnita* that he loses all sense of what is real and what is false in a nation that is best described as “liliputiense” (576). Infante’s thorough perplexity eventually becomes complicated by an erotic infatuation with his married cousin, Augusta Cisneros. Fluctuating between desire and responsibility, bewilderment and lucidity, Infante seeks psychic refuge in the way he defines politics as “ese arte supremo de la vida colectiva” (202). Accordingly, the narrator praises Sagasta, Cánovas, and Castelar, President of the First Republic who made way for the Restoration of the Bourbons, as the high priests of a cult whose restorative powers are reinforced by constant concerns the government may collapse. Before long, Infante expresses his own misgivings given the unpredictable atmosphere in Madrid, stating “la movilidad de mis ideas [...] me produce alarma” (203). The narrator subsequently claims to be living “en un mundo deshecho o por hacer” and vacillates regarding his own subject position, wondering if he, as a national statesman should consider himself among “los grandes demoledores o los grandes arquitectos de [la] sociedad” (203-204).

La incógnita, as a novel that chronicles the miseducation and mental collapse of its narrator, plumbs the depths of Infante’s psychological fragility as he initiates a dialogue with an interlocutor (don Equis) that is likely meant to serve as Infante’s self-projected double. In a key moment of this epistolary (therefore, one-way) conversation with his reader, Infante refers to Equis’s suggestion that he undertake some “trabajo mental” (specifically “labor literaria”) to better withstand the volatility of parliamentary Madrid (204). Nevertheless, Infante finds this recommendation to be rather comical, stating plainly that he is not, after all, “[un] hombre de imaginación” and that if he were to attempt any literary endeavor, “engendros miserables y enfermizos saldrían de padre tan estéril” (204-205). Even more laughable to Infante is Equis’s notion that he should develop his epistles into a *novela por entregas* and alter the characters’ names, change the setting (to Warsaw), and claim that the work is a translation from the French so that he can publish the text in *El Impulsor Orbajosense*. Infante rails against his interlocutor’s recommendation, exclaiming “[p]ublicar esto [...] ni aun con tales disfraces!,” before pointing out that “las personas que andan en el ajo” (the Orbajosans) would have little interest in the representation of “hechos positivos” as they are only intrigued by “perendengues” and other sensationalist fictional adornment (262). What remains entirely unclear throughout both *La incógnita* and *Realidad*, however, is whether the unstable site of Infante’s formation (the subverted *Bildung*) is his upbringing in Orbajosa or his experiences as a parliamentary representative in Madrid.

Realidad, the pointedly titled re-interpretation of the events presented in *La incógnita* (as imagined by don Equis), dramatically shifts focus by setting up a number of scenes that take place in the public sphere (cafés and salons). The theatrical monologues and asides that saturate *Realidad* provide a glimpse into the psychology of the 25 characters that populate the novel, allowing Galdós to problematize the nebulous boundary between subjective perspective and objective data in an array of public and private conversations. Even more crucially, *Realidad* examines the lifestyle of the aristocracy and wealthy

bourgeoisie in Spain, focusing primarily on the transmission and manipulation of public information through conjecture and gossip. Moreover, as the affluent characters in *Realidad* contemplate the events surrounding the Baño Street crime, a fictionalized version of the Fuencarral Street crime, Galdós points to Spain's decadence while underscoring the contamination of national discourse.²⁰ Accordingly, *Realidad* locates its upper-class characters on the brink of social upheaval and ruin; several of the novel's personages vocalize anxieties regarding Spain's future as they grapple with their own immorality (Augusta's infidelity), suicide (it is now evident that Federico Viera has killed himself), and delusion (Tomás Orozco's alienation from high society as he seeks a saintly ideal outside the realm of bourgeois possibility).²¹

In both novels, Galdós returns ceaselessly to what he perceives to be the principal defect of the Spanish race, one he describes as “dotada de fecundidad prodigiosa para poner variantes a los hechos y adornarlos hasta que no conoce la madre que los pario” (315). In *La incógnita*, Galdós utilizes Infante as narrator to further scrutinize this “raza especialmente artista y plasmadora, que crea casos y caracteres, formando una realidad verosímil dentro y encima de la realidad auténtica” (315). Such a critique allows us to consider a Baudrillardian hyperreality, which “puts an end to the real as referential by exalting it as [the] model” (85). Hyperreality, or the inability to distinguish reality from fantasy, lulls consciousness into a detachment from critical engagement which, in turn, triggers the endless reproduction of simulacral signs and referents that circulate chaotically in free play with one another. Implosion marks the obfuscation of simulation and reality, one that leads to the blurring of each until they ultimately become one and the same. Mutually dependent upon one another to produce meaning, binary oppositions between reality and artifice become further emboldened yet progressively indeterminate. As a result, the very idea of what is real metamorphoses into something increasingly precarious and inexact. By insisting on a novelistic framework that relies on two binary poles—the unknown and the known—to fulfill his narrative project, Galdós puts forth a similar quandary. He asks the reader to consider how the second text brings closure to the conflicts presented in *La incógnita*, but merely offers an iteration of the crises posited in the first. Whether related from a different point of view, that of don Equis, or whether repeated from that of Infante in the dramatic form, Galdós's refusal to distinguish between the two perspectival visions in *Realidad* signals his intent to mirror the instability of meaning of Restoration Spain.

Censuring public intellectuals enmeshed in the degradation and decay of the nation, Galdós declares that “los más sabios de entre nosotros se enredan en interminables controversias sobre cual pueda o deba ser la hendidura o pasadizo por el cual podremos salir de este hoyo pantanoso en que nos revolvemos y asfixiamos” (*Ensayos* 177). Galdós's preoccupation with both the “asphyxiation” of public discourse and the inability of novelists and intellectuals to extract the nation from the “swampy pit” underscores the dual critique that emerges in *La incógnita* and *Realidad*. While positing a contemptuous analysis of media practices under an essentially authoritarian regime, Galdós points to Manolo Infante's writer's block as symptomatic of the realist mode's exhaustion. In the end, if reality has indeed become contaminated by social entropy as “[i]nformation dissolves meaning and the social into a sort of nebulous state,” then Galdós is faced with a rather vexing quandary (Baudrillard, *In the Shadow* 100). The novelist, teetering on the

edge of an increasingly vertiginous precipice (the hyperreality of Restoration Spain), must find a way to step outside the bounds of mimetic reproduction without relying on the tenets of a rationalist ontology to *represent* the very world he seeks to scrutinize.

Ultimately, what emerges as the twin novels reach their stunning conclusion is a crisis of epistemology. Galdós, manipulating the two texts into a “site of competition between different interpretations of what the truth is or should be,” scathingly indicates that reality itself may no longer be accessible in a society that conflates fiction and fact (Ríos-Font, “*El crimen*” 344). Desperately in search of “la realidad auténtica” (*La incógnita/Realidad* 200), Manolo Infante, much like Galdós himself, grows more and more disaffected as he finds himself grasping to make sense of a world in which “the false is the true, and the true, the false” (Tsuchiya 352). Comparing Spain to a narrative hall of mirrors, Galdós scrutinizes the contamination of national discourse by finding similarities between Canovite society and the stagnant, conservative setting of his 1876 thesis novel *Doña Perfecta*. Similarly, in an 1896 letter to his friend Aureliano de Beruete, one-time member of parliament and well-known landscape artist, Galdós conveys his overwhelming disenchantment with the decay of contemporary Spanish identity by claiming, “ya no hay en España provinciano capital que no sea más o menos Orbajoroído [...] Todo es y todo será mañana Orbajosa” (qtd. in Weber 349). At the end of the letter, Galdós further agonizes over the fate of his country, bids his friend farewell, and just before signing his name, scrawls “Madrijosa—Mar 1896” (349). It becomes evident upon further inspection that, by conjuring a fictional space (Madrijosa) in *La incógnita* and *Realidad*, Galdós alludes to the lost referent (Madrid as the setting of both novels), which he exposes as little more than an imagined and illusory reality.

The narrative confusion explored in *La incógnita* and *Realidad* is highly significant, particularly given Galdós’s interest in destabilizing authorial integrity in late-nineteenth-century Spain. As *La incógnita* reaches its perplexing climax, Manolo Infante desperately attempts to transcend his own epistolary manuscript and, consequently, to find truth within and beyond his own writing. These efforts are undone by the bold reversal through which *La incógnita* inscrutably morphs into *Realidad*. It is a shocking collapse for a narrator who, at the outset of his own writing, gleefully wielded his pen, arrogantly declaring to his reader: “Yo resucito y tú mueres; yo salgo a la luz, y tú caes en ese pozo de ignorancia, malicia y salvaje ruindad” (*La incógnita/Realidad* 154). In the end, however, Infante forfeits that power to his interlocutor, lamenting, “¿[q]ué es esto, Equis de mi vida? ¿Está escrito que yo he de volverme loco, y que seas tú quien me remate” (361). Such a self-reflexive exploration of writing is a typical feature of Galdós’s later works and the metafictional paradox is on full display when the *La incógnita*’s narrator is indeed ‘finished off’ and the reader witnesses the production of a new novel that is fabricated inside of don Equis’s garlic chest. Utterly disoriented, Infante examines this new manuscript with great care before asking, “¿de quién es esta condenada letra? [. . .] La letra es tuya, tuya desfigurada” (363-364). Don Equis responds unwittingly “¿[a] tal punto has llegado en tu desvarío cerebral que ni conoces tu propia escritura?” (365). Galdós is intent until the final moments of the text to emphasize that, while the role of the writer may be to produce a manuscript, the text itself is a mutually dependent construction between both the writer and the reader. *Realidad*, which ends as the enigmatic *La Imagen* (a projected

image of the deceased Federico Viera) asphyxiates Tomás Orozco, effectively annihilating any possibility of narrative closure by suggesting the latter's magical death.

By crafting destabilized novelistic frameworks in both *La incógnita* and *Realidad*, Galdós initiates a bold new phase in his novelistic career by implementing a subversive aesthetic that questions a number of literary forms. More importantly, however, is Galdós's employment of supernatural figures and magical transformations in each novel as he scrutinizes the decay of Realism while relying on narrative experimentation to counter the ideological gridlock of the era. Pointing to Spain's reliance on narcotic fictions, Galdós polemicizes the psychic condition imposed by political practices in Canovite Spain. It is precisely this "abismo insondable" (*La incógnita/Realidad* 354) he argues, that has reoriented social hierarchies and ensured the wholesale effacement of the contradiction between the known and the unknown. The series of implosive annulments underscored in Galdós's texts, are in the end, analogous to those executed by the two dynastic parties whose legitimacy is premised on their collusive fabrication of election results. Spain's dependence on these palliative fictions, which Manolo Infante terms "medicina dulce y narcótica" (363), compels the chimeric proliferation, a series of illusions generated by the apparatus of language that ultimately renders reality unknowable.

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Notes

- ¹ Exasperated with the “fárrago de obrillas, notables sólo por los colorines de sus cubiertas,” Galdós laments that, in Spain, “no tenemos novela” (*Ensayos* 115).
- ² In *Los cuentos inverosímiles de Galdós en el contexto de su obra*, Alan Smith examines the following “doce cuentos inverosímiles” published between 1865-1897: “Una industria que vive de la muerte” (1865); “La conjuración de las palabras” (1868); “La novela en el tranvía” (1871); “La pluma en el viento” (1873); “La Mula y el Buey” [sic] (1876); “La princesa y el granuja” (1877); “Theros” (1877); “Tropiquillos” (1884); “Celín” (1889 [fechado 1887]); “¿Dónde está mi cabeza?” (1892); “El pórtico de la Gloria” (1896); y “Rompecabezas” (1897) (13).
- ³ Miller, in discussing Galdós’s evolution as novelist, argues that his works from 1866-1889 are notable for their “estética sociomimética” and that, beginning with *Torquemada en la hoguera* (1889), the author’s narrative expresses an “estética humana” newly preoccupied with “figuras en vías de separarse de los papeles y caminos normales de la sociedad” (126). While I agree with Miller’s claim that 1889 is a key year in the Galdosian *oeuvre*, I contend that, beginning with the novelist’s work for *La Prensa*, we can begin to track the evolution in Galdós’s *manera* a few months earlier (in 1888) with the composition of *La incógnita*. William Shoemaker’s research appears to support my claim using the following timeline: “At the end of the short novel *Torquemada en la hoguera* Galdós wrote “February, 1889,” and to the two prefatory pages of the volume in which the novel was first published he appended “June, 1889,” and in the text he said it was “recently written.” It would seem then that its composition intervened between *La incógnita* and *Realidad*” (*The Novelistic Art* 11).
- ⁴ I must credit the following critics whose scholarship has opened the doors for this inquiry: Gustavo Correa (*Realidad, ficción y símbolo en las novelas de Pérez Galdós: ensayo de estética realista*), Ricardo Gullón (*Galdós, novelista moderno*), Timothy McGovern (*Galdós Beyond Realism: Reading and the Creation of Magical Worlds*), and Alan Smith (*Los cuentos inverosímiles de Galdós en el contexto de su obra*).
- ⁵ The setting of Galdós’s *Doña Perfecta* provides the reference to the mythical “ajosa metrópoli” known as Orbajosa (*La incógnita/Realidad* 159). Familiar to readers of Galdós’s 1876 thesis novel, “[l]a histórica ciudad de Orbajosa” (*Doña Perfecta* 83), stands as for Orbajosans “la [nación] real” that “calla, paga y sufre” in contrast to Madrid, which, as the “nación ficticia,” “hace una farsa de gobierno y una farsa de autoridad y una farsa de todo” (249).
- ⁶ This view corresponds to what Marxist philosophers, specifically Friedrich Engels, have characterized as the “false consciousness” of ideological language. Admittedly, such a characterization can be similarly imputed to the second order of Baudrillard’s simulacra although, as I mention above, I am more concerned with exploring the hyperreality—a symptom of the third order—that emerges in Galdós’s twin novels.
- ⁷ In the same letter from 1890, Galdós urging the importance of the government moving beyond ideological gridlock, signals Spain’s “graves asuntos pendientes” and the need to continue legislative work on the “presupuesto y sufragio universal, dos puntos esenciales para el desenvolvimiento de la política liberal” (qtd. by Shoemaker in *Las cartas desconocidas* 385).
- ⁸ Pamela Beth Radcliff argues, “[c]ompared to the increasingly expansive and contested liberalism of Britain after the Second Reform Bill (1867) and France after the

establishment of the Third Republic (1871), Spain's early Restoration regime seemed both uniquely unyielding and politically enervated” (138).

- ⁹ Álvarez Junco goes on to add that, “[f]or Cánovas, the cause of the problem was rooted in some profound perversion of the country itself, because, according to Pérez de Ayala, ‘he did not believe in the Spanish people … he deemed them unfit and unworthy’. This opinion is confirmed by Antonio Ramos Oliveira: Cánovas ‘had the fixed conviction that Spain was finished’” (299).
- ¹⁰ As Manuel Tuñón de Lara states, “[e]l caciquismo, como el feudalismo, tiene estructura piramidal partiendo del burgo o aldea” (266).
- ¹¹ For Cánovas, Palacios Bañuelos argues, “[s]u talante intelectual, de historiador, hace que dé al tiempo pasado un valor especial, como algo vivo e irrenunciable” (158). Accordingly, “[l]a Restauración era en este sentido una continuación de la historia y la nación una creación histórica. La soberanía nacional reside en una continuidad histórica. Por esto, su monarquismo no era sino la lógica consecuencia de su actitud intelectual y de su conciencia de la realidad española” (158).
- ¹² Palacios Bañuelos describes it somewhat more favorably as “una Constitución ecléctica” that “pretendía ser una síntesis de las Constituciones españolas de 1845 y de 1869” (159). Nevertheless, Sánchez Agesta points out that “en esas condiciones el Gobierno parlamentario es claramente una ficción” (qtd. by Vaca de Osma in *Historia de España para jóvenes del siglo XXI* 339). Labanyi argues for a reading of the 1876 Constitution as “a self-reflexive form of political representation whereby the government holds elections to elect itself” (404).
- ¹³ It would be remiss, nevertheless, to ignore Sagasta’s cooperation throughout the process, as he accepted a constitution drafted by his political adversary. Nonetheless, while he strived to introduce reforms that would make Restoration policies more flexible to disillusioned liberals and, as a result, more attuned to the needs of the laboring classes, Sagasta is often negatively described as “un liberal con poca doctrina” (Palacios Bañuelos 160).
- ¹⁴ As Varela Olea notes, “aún en los momentos de mayor activismo político, nuestro escritor dio muestras a su escepticismo. Galdós confiaba poco en la política de partido, detestaba el parlamentarismo y las rencillas interiores, y estos hechos no cambiaron tampoco cuando se integró en el Partido Republicano” (103).
- ¹⁵ It is not my intention here to undermine Realism’s import. As John Auchard articulates: “As unengaging as the word ‘realism’ may sound, it shouldered a genuinely monumental task as it addressed the radical question of what remained of interest and value once the gods had vanished and all the altars had been stripped bare” (xviii).
- ¹⁶ My discussion of the “fantastic” is predicated upon a definition of the mode as a deviation from what is considered a consensus reality (Hume 21). Furthermore, my reading is based on Bessière’s assertion that the fantastic mode is the site of collision between two opposing ontologies (the realist and the irrational) and that this “antinomy” is precisely what characterizes the genre (32).
- ¹⁷ Similarly, Jackson locates “traces of a demonic idiom” in Dickens’s later work such as *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857), *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865), *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), and *Edwin Drood* (1870) (132), claiming that, while he may be considered a fantasist, Dickens “is tempted—like Balzac—by desire without life, but as a realist, he returns to a life of repression” (133).

¹⁸ Cisneros's anarchist beliefs are best expressed in one of his own rants to the narrator:

¡La paz!...Llamar paz al aburrimiento, a la somnolencia de las naciones, languidez producida por la inanición intelectual y física, por la falta de ideas y paz, es muy chusco. ¿Y para qué queremos esa paz? ¿De qué nos sirve esa imagen de la muerte, ese sueño estúpido, en cuyo seno se aniquila la nación, como el tifoideo que se consume en el sopor de la fiebre. En el fondo de este sueño late la revolución, no esa revolución pueril por que trabajan los que no tienen el presupuesto entre los dientes, sino la verdadera, es decir, la muerte, la que todo debe confundirlo y hacerlo polvo y ceniza, para que la material descompuesta salga una vida nueva, otra cosa, otro mundo, querido Manolo, otra sociedad, modelada en los principios de justicia.” (171)

¹⁹ Santiáñez-Tío discusses *La incógnita*'s ludic spirit by pointing to Cisneros's description of Spanish politics as “un sainete extravagante” (303).

²⁰ Between July of 1888 and May of 1889, Galdós was commissioned to write a number of pieces for the Argentine periodical *La Prensa*, based on the trial of a maid (Higiena Balaguer) who allegedly stabbed her boss (Luciana Borcino), an elderly widow, and then set her body on fire. The composition of these essays, later published collectively as *El crimen de la calle de Fuencarral*, corresponds to the period in which Galdós conceived of and completed *La incógnita* and *Realidad*, the latter just after the verdict was announced in 1889.

²¹ Aguado states: “Yo sostengo que ni esto es país, ni esto es patria, ni esto es gobierno, ni aquí hay vergüenza ya” (371). Viera claims that “la humanidad, harta de sí misma, se suicidaría, no por individuos, sino por naciones” (479). Villalonga laments: “Detesto a mi patria, la hidalga nación del garbanzo, de Recaredo y de la gramática parda. ¡Pues si yo pudiera metamorfosearme en inglés o en alemán...!” (576).

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