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Linda M. Willem
Butler University, lwillem@butler.edu

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THE NARRATIVE PREMISE OF THE DUAL ENDING TO GALDÓS’S LA FONTANA DE ORO

LINDA M. WILLEM

The readers of the 1871 edition of Galdós’s La Fontana de Oro are greeted with not only two alternative conclusions to the novel, but also with an invitation by the narrator to freely choose a preferred ending after considering them both. The situation is further complicated by the narrative pretense that the tragic version is the true account of the facts while the happy one is an artistic rendering. By presenting his reading public with this dilemma over a century ago, Galdós raised questions about the nature of narrative conventions which are similar to those issues being addressed by narratologists today.

The dual ending appears only in the 1871 edition (reprinted in 1872 and 1883). The violent denouement is absent in all other editions, which merely close with an expanded version of the happy ending. It is midway through the novel’s last chapter that this major difference in the text occurs. Immediately after a statement dismissing Clara’s contention that she had seen Coletilla’s face in the window (“Indudablemente había sido efecto del miedo”), the narrator of the double-ended variant directly addresses the reader to explain the situation and inform us of his original intention. He says

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that rather than slavishly adhering to historical truth, he first “había escrito la conclusión y desenlace del modo mas natural y lógico, creyendo que era buen fin de jornada para aquellos amantes, el casarse después de tantas amarguras y vivir en paz, y mucha felicidad y muchos hijos. Esto, en su entender, se avenía mejor que nada á las condiciones artísticas que quiso dar á su libro.”

However, his collaborator and primary informant for the novel, Bozmediano, strongly objected to this poetic license and demanded a complete disclosure of the true facts as they happened. To pacify his friend, the narrator agreed to present the truth exactly as told to him. Before doing so, however, he once again affirms the superiority of his own rendition “imaginado á mi antojo, y conforme á lo que parecía mas lógico y artístico.” Since the prime virtue of Bozmediano’s less artistic version is its truthfulness, the narrator conveys the information to the reader in a faithful transcription of Bozmediano’s words recalling the actual events. The facts are these: while Clara and Lázaro are attempting to leave Madrid later that night, their carriage is overtaken and attacked by a group of men, one of whom – possibly Coletilla – kills Lázaro, and as a result, the brokenhearted Clara dies four days later. After Bozmediano is given his opportunity to put the record straight, the narrator once again speaks to the reader and says that “no renunciemos por completo el desenlace primitivamente imaginado. Puede el lector aceptar el que mejor cuadre á su gusto y sentimientos, ya dando crédito al trágico fin revelado por Bozmediano, ya suponiendo que los dos amantes descansaron al fin de sus tenaces desventuras en una larga vida de amor y tranquilidad.”

Although the two distinct closures to La Fontana de Oro have been the subject of some examination, thus far no study has dealt with the narrative importance of the aforementioned comments by the narrator to the reader. Rather, previous critical efforts have been directed toward determining the order of publication for the early editions in an attempt to ascertain the number of times that Galdós altered the novel’s final outcome. Various possible motives behind

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2 In his article Smieja reproduces the ending of the 1871 Noguera edition in its entirety, correcting printer’s errors but retaining the accentuation irregularities. Due to the relative inaccessibility of the original text, quotes are taken directly from Smieja’s readily available reprint. See Smieja 426-9.
these changes have been proposed based on these findings. According to Florian Smieja and Joaquín Gimeno Casalduero, the optimistic ending first appeared in the 1870 edition and was reinstated in the 1885 edition. Thus, these scholars endeavor to account for Galdós’s adoption and subsequent abandonment of the pessimistic ending during the brief interim period. Recently, Walter T. Pattison has argued that the 1870 edition is a falsification, thereby transforming the 1871 edition into the first to be published. Consequently, he focuses on what it was that prompted Galdós to reject his original sad ending in favor of a joyful resolution to the lovers’ adventure. These studies raise important questions concerning the early developmental stages of this novel and provide insights into Galdós’s creative process. Nevertheless, they tend to treat the 1871 edition as if it contained a single tragic ending at variance with the single happy ending found elsewhere. However, the tragic account is but one of two alternate finales found in the 1871 edition. Furthermore, these studies give only scant attention to an aspect of this dual ending which deserves further scrutiny—the narrative pretext of having a factual account rival a fictional one for the reader’s approval. Herein lies the innovation of the alternative conclusion format which asks the reader to consider the very conventions underlying narration and how the demands of narrative fiction differ from those of narrated history.

Jonathan Culler has done much to clarify the issues being raised daily in the burgeoning field of narratology. In his essay, “Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative,” he makes several points which are germane to our discussion of the double ending to La

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3 Smieja (430-3) contends that Galdós briefly experimented with the violent repercussions implied in the novel, only to return to his original ending when he realized its artistic superiority. Gimeno Casalduero (62-5) states that the ending where the lovers escape reflects the hopeful outlook inspired in Galdós in 1870 by General Prim, whereas the ending in which the lovers die victims of Coletilla’s revenge is a product of Galdós’s despair over the assassination of this heroic symbol of liberty; and, moreover, that the original ending was restored in the 1885 version when Galdós entered into a new phase of his art in which tragic endings serve another purpose.

Fontana de Oro. First Culler establishes the distinction between what he calls the story, “a sequence of actions or events, conceived as independent of their manifestation in discourse” and what he calls the discourse, “the discursive presentation or narration of events.” Then he distinguishes between narratives and non-narratives by stating that “narratives report sequences of events.” Finally and most importantly for our purposes, he demonstrates that narratological analysis has traditionally established a priority of events (i.e. the story) to the discourse, but that this hierarchy is often subverted by the narratives themselves which present the events “not as givens but as the products of discursive forces or requirements.” This situation precludes the possibility of a synthesis and forces the analyst to shift back and forth between two standpoints: “either the discourse is seen as a representation of events which must be thought of as independent of that particular representation, or else the so-called events are thought of as the postulates or products of a discourse.” That is, story and discourse must alternate in dominance when under critical consideration. This is precisely the stance which the narrative premise of La Fontana de Oro’s double ending obliges the reader to adopt.

The narrator makes the confession that he had substantially altered the true facts in order to design a denouement which is more logical and artistic. In so doing he sets up a dichotomy between a fictional narrative, which has certain discursive requirements that must be fulfilled, and a factual narrative which, ultimately, needs to obey no other rule than to be a truthful relaying of the events that occurred. Of course, both versions actually are fictions, but Galdós projects one into the realm of history by presenting it under the guise of fact. The reader must choose between the two endings, but in order to do so, he must jockey between the two positions noted by Culler. While considering the unhappy fate of the lovers, the reader is obliged to give prominence to the story level – the events independent of their presentation. Since these events are offered up for our consideration as facts, aesthetic and artistic concerns do not enter

into this discussion. It is sufficient that the events are plausible enough to preclude any doubt on the part of the reader that Bozmediano is telling the truth. Indeed, given Coletilla’s egoism, ideological obsession, and political connections, it is believable that he could engineer and carry out just such a plot against his enemy. Therefore, the main criteria for the acceptance of this outcome—verisimilitude—has been fulfilled. The ending both sounds true and is true. Bozmediano has satisfactorily executed his role as historian. However, the narrator also enjoins the reader to reconsider his own fabricated ending. This involves a shift of focus by the reader who must now allow the discourse to dominate. The narrator repeatedly refers to the internal artistry and logic of his ending, thereby alluding to the discursive conventions and requirements inherent in fictional narrative. The thematic coherence of the novel is at issue here, and it requires Lázaro to learn from the past mistakes caused by his naiveté and overzealous idealism, and to emerge a somewhat disillusioned but wiser individual who finds peace and happiness in his life with Clara. This fictitious ending is in accord with the demands of the narrative fiction into which the narrator has suddenly metamorphosed his text. Clara’s stoic suffering throughout and Lázaro’s final brave act of restitution earned them this imaginary reward. When the discourse takes prominence over the story, the important question is one of inner logic rather than external veracity. The true ending, which makes Lázaro a martyr and Clara the topic of metaphysical musings, is inconsistent with the fate they deserve. The narrator vindicates himself by repeatedly asserting that he has satisfied the demands of his discourse, and therefore implies that his fiction is superior to Bozmediano’s truth since it is not only verisimilar, but also artistic. The reader is the final judge. However, since each ending satisfies its particular narrative requirements, the decision is largely one of preference. Whatever the choice, it is secondary in importance to the act of making the selection—a process which involves the consideration of two distinct narrative forms and the conventions associated with each of them.

It is important to note that Galdós did not simply publish two different single endings in the various editions of *La Fontana de Oro*, but rather, that at one point he created a double conclusion in which the entire narrative premise discussed above is established. Had the
narrator not presented one version as fact and one as fiction, then both would simply have been examined in light of discursive demands. That is, one would have been deemed better than the other solely on the grounds of being a more artistically appropriate means of working out the thematic, structural, and stylistic concerns of the novel. Instead what Galdós offers the reader is an opportunity to view his narrative from alternating perspectives. Through his fictional narrator and his fictional collaborator – who have been elevated to the status of actual people with the capacity to choose between life and art – Galdós makes explicit the implicit differences between narrated history and narrative fiction. Thus, in the short-lived double ending to this very early novel, Galdós poses the question with which he shall continue to grapple throughout his literary career.

Butler University

Works Cited

