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Alicia Cerezo Paredes

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“Cada espíritu es un libro”: Spiritualism in Turn-of-the-Century Spain

Alicia Cerezo Paredes

On October 9, 1861, one of history's last *autos de fe* was celebrated by the Spanish Catholic Church in Barcelona. The site chosen, an esplanade leading to a fortification known as the Ciutadella, was already famous for inquisitional *autos* dating back to the Middle Ages (Abend 518). This time the moral spectacle involved the burning of three hundred books confiscated at the French border by order of the Bishop of Barcelona. Each of these books concerned a particular and relatively new religious movement known as Spiritualism. Twenty-seven years after the official abolition of the Inquisition, Catholic orthodoxy still sought to control the free circulation of ideas, and its target was now a presumably small group of people who believed in the possibility of communicating with spirits. These last gasps of the Inquisition were in vain, however, for ironically enough, the Barcelona *auto de fe* actually marks the expansion of the Spanish Spiritualist movement, which would endure and even strengthen right up until the time of the Civil War (1936-39). From today's perspective Spiritualism can seem like a harmless sect, but the reaction of the nineteenth-century Spanish Church indicates that it once represented a very serious threat to some.¹

Although most of the books that were burned at the Barcelona *auto de fe* of 1861 were written by the French author Allan Kardek, father of the movement in Europe, scholars have traced the origins of modern Spiritualism back to the town of Hydesville, New York, where, in 1848, three sisters, Leah, Margaret, and Kate Fox, scandalously insisted that they had the power to communicate with spirits through a phenomenon known as “rappings.”² Adapting to the local realities of different countries, the curious practices and beliefs of Spiritualism spread quickly throughout the world, making it a global movement. In the particular case of Spain, owing to the power held by the Catholic Church with its deeply rooted ideology, the Spiritualist movement was embraced by people who for various reasons were already locked in a struggle against reactionary ecclesiastical ideas. Because Spiritualism was generally embraced by people associated with scientific innovation and inclined toward social reform, in Spain this inevitably translated into a conflict with Catholic orthodoxy.

In this essay, I will first present the characteristics of the Spiritualist movement that made it the object of the wrath of the Inquisition, the institution that remains the archetype of

religious persecution in Spain. Studying the Spiritualist movement in Spain has obvious relevance for understanding the age-old problem of the persistence there of ecclesiastical power. Second, I will indicate the ways in which Spiritualists promoted their beliefs through literary texts, paying particular attention to Amalia Domingo Soler, whose provocative short narratives made her the “grand dame” of Spanish Spiritualism. Attention to Spiritualist texts within the broader context of the literary production of the time allows new ways in which to appreciate this relatively marginalized literature. Finally, I will attempt to demonstrate how an awareness of Spiritualism’s principal tropes and themes can reorient traditional interpretations of better-known works. Thus, I will present here a panorama of authors and texts, and suggest a variety of avenues for research, in order to underscore how the study of Spiritualism has the potential to expand and even disrupt our assumptions about canonical literary trends like Romanticism, Realism, and Modernism, and perhaps most especially, our assumptions about those authors explicitly concerned with the Spanish crisis circa 1898. I will conclude with a case study of how Spiritualism can allow a more nuanced reading of Benito Pérez Galdós’s *Electra* (1901). My ultimate intent is to show how an interdisciplinary investigation, situated at the confluence of the history of ideas, cultural history, and literary criticism, can enhance our vision of turn-of-the-century Spain and expose us to some figures that have usually been overlooked by scholars.

Defining modernity can be difficult and controversial, and I recognize the partial and limited nature of the definition I use here. For the purposes of characterizing Spiritualism, I am thinking about modernity in terms of the historical and philosophical legacies of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. On the one hand, modernity represents new thinking about economical, religious, and social relations, and on the other hand, it refers to the proliferation and appreciation of advances in science and technology. The so-called death of God proclaimed by Nietzsche, the theory of evolution described by Darwin, and the new political economy advanced by Marx all contributed to the destabilization of institutions and mentalities associated with the *Ancien Régime*. As a result, modernity involves a crisis of religion, or more generally, an existential crisis that de-centers mankind’s place in a divinely ordered universe; but it also generates new scenarios for relations between social groups in terms of gender, class, and race. The specific response by Spiritualists to this new order of things can broaden our understanding of both literary movements and modernity itself in Spain at the turn of the Nineteenth Century.

Any attempt to address these topics must begin with an awareness that the Catholic Church and Spiritualism represented two profoundly distinct reactions to the crisis of spirituality which coincided with the rise of worldly ideas throughout the Nineteenth Century. Whereas the Spanish Church sought to maintain its centuries-old power by adopting inflexible positions against scientific innovation, Spiritualism presented itself as an alternative to this conflict. The movement’s motto, “Hacia Dios por el amor y la ciencia,” which introduces the proceedings of the *Primer Congreso Internacional Espiritista* celebrated in Barcelona in 1888, evinces this desire for resolution instead of conflict (Torres). In many ways the Spiritualists dedicated themselves to collapsing traditional binary oppositions such as life and death, faith and science, individual and group, or body and spirit, which enabled them to be political activists while simultaneously maintaining a strong metaphysical belief system. Once the orthodox distinction between the corrupt

body and the sacred soul was eliminated, discriminating between races and genders became utterly pointless, and thus political and religious hierarchies were inevitably subverted.

Moreover, this anti-essentialist, hybridizing tendency led to the Spiritualists forming alliances with progressive movements like Feminism, Abolitionism, and Socialism. This inclination explains Spiritualism's links with the abolitionist movement, prison reform initiatives, socialist labor politics, and efforts to legalize divorce and women's suffrage, which were an integral part of their praxis. One example is the article "A los amantes del progreso y la civilización," which appeared on the front page of the March 11, 1910 edition of the newspaper *La voz del pueblo*, published on behalf of the workers' unions of Tarrasa, a town in Catalonia. The article contains a list of the organizations that are expected to attend a meeting to protest the education of local children by members of the Company of Jesus. Opposed to the reactionary Jesuits, the organizers of this meeting see themselves as acting "en defensa de la verdadera cultura racional y científica" (1). The local Spiritualist center, the "Centro espiritista F. H.," is on this list. Just as much, or perhaps even more, than their actual beliefs, it was Spiritualism's scientific advocacy and its sympathy with radical politics that provoked ecclesiastical hostility.³

Spiritualists' basic interest in the magical and the mystical did not make them retrograde but, rather, was part and parcel of their interest in science and technology. They were fascinated by telepathy, hypnotism, and somnambulism, but they often sought confirmation of their understandings of these phenomena in electricity, magnetism, and inventions like telegraphy and photography. There is a relatively extensive bibliography on these connections in the case of Spiritualism in countries such as United States, England, and France. However, in Spain, studies of the movement have tended to focus on its political importance for turn-of-the-century manifestations of anarchism and feminism. The pioneering work of Gerard Horta, *De la mística a les barricades: Introducció a l'espiritisme català del XIX dins el context ocultista europeu*, establishes the connections between Spiritualism and anarchism, particularly in Catalonia, from an historical perspective.⁴ More recently, Amelina Correa Ramón has prepared an excellent edition of Domingo Soler's *Cuentos espiritistas*, which includes an important introduction to this nearly forgotten Spiritualist writer. She has also worked on the relations between Spiritualism and the freedom of thought movement ("Librepensamiento y espiritismo"). Marie-Linda Ortega has paid attention to the way in which Domingo Soler, as a medium who put extraordinary narratives into words, escapes the suspicion that a woman writer might have provoked at that time. María del Carmen Simón Palmer has looked at Spiritualist women in the context of other "mujeres rebeldes," such as freethinkers and masons. These last three critics are interested in the role of Spiritualist women from a feminist perspective. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind the more material aspects of Spiritualism emphasized by historians of the movement outside of Spain, especially its connection to science and technology. Spiritualists routinely incorporated the period's new medical practices and scientific discoveries into their own perception of the magicalness of long-distance communication, often with the expressed goal of actually conversing with spirits. Such efforts, for example, led to the Spiritualist practice of capturing the electrical force that emanated from spirits through medical innovations, such as electrocardiograms, or catching images of spirits with microscopes or

photographic cameras. This is the case, for example, of an article published in the Madrilenian periodical *Lo maravilloso* by Emmanuel Vauchez on July 25, 1909, which carried the thought-provoking title of “La fotografía de lo invisible.”

Turning to the feminist characteristics of Spiritualism, as noted by Correa Ramón, Ortega, and Simón Palmer, it is fundamental to recognize how the movement quite literally became a platform for women. In particular, by presuming to give a voice to spirits, certain female mediums and writers (who often played both roles) advanced feminist causes and thus, in a very real sense, rebelled against their own status as “invisible ghosts” in traditional society. It is fascinating, for example, to examine the literary and personal relations that female Spiritualist writers maintained with other female writers of the day. As an example, in the collection entitled *Sus más hermosos escritos*, we find gathered together a series of letters that Domingo Soler exchanged with different women, including the militant feminist Rosario de Acuña. Similarly, Carmen de Burgos, who has received much attention of late in terms of her feminism, was also a practicing Spiritualist. Among her literary works, *El retorno: novela espiritista (basada en hechos reales)* is often overlooked. Some Spiritualist women writers were even published along with their non-Spiritualist colleagues. A case in point is Cándida Sanz, a dear friend of Domingo Soler, who in addition to writing for Spiritualist newspapers, contributed two sketches to the costumbrist collection *Las mujeres españolas, americanas y lusitanas pintadas por sí mismas*, edited by Faustina Sáez de Melgar. The fact that Sanz managed to publish “La espiritista” and “La sonámbula” in this collection of supposedly realist portraits might be surprising at first glance. However, it is a good indication of how deeply Spiritualist feminism permeated mainstream literary works, as well as of how many female authors did not conform to the literary precepts of “costumbrismo” itself. Also surprising is the depth of the feminist agenda advanced by a number of male Spiritualist writers, such as Miguel Gimeno Eito (1862-1941). In his book, *Agraz espiritista*, Gimeno Eito expounds upon the importance of women’s education, not only for Spiritualism but for society in general. For example, instead of a traditional list of virtuous women, he offers readers a list of important scientific women throughout history and from across the world.

Even the briefest glance at the Spiritualist movement in nineteenth-century Spain reveals that Amalia Domingo Soler (1835-1909) was by far its most important figure. She was a prolific writer of controversial short-stories and/or essays (sometimes it is difficult to distinguish the genre of these texts), which first appeared in the numerous Spiritualist newspapers of the time, and were later compiled in collections such as *Ramos de violetas* (1903), *Sus más hermosos escritos* (n.d.), and especially, *El espiritismo refutando los errores del catolicismo romano* (1880), where the author denounces the abuse and hypocrisy of the Catholic Church in a solemn anticlerical tone. Domingo Soler also directed the Spiritualist newspaper *La luz del porvenir* (1879-1900), in which female contributions were always prominent. Although she is practically forgotten today, the images that appeared in the newspaper *Luz y Unión* (May 1909) subsequent to her death (Apr. 29, 1909), which show crowds of people accompanying Domingo Soler’s coffin through the streets of Barcelona, give a good indication of the magnitude of her cultural impact (Ortega).

In terms of her feminism, Domingo Soler’s writings constitute a call for women to start thinking in more rational ways, to avoid the influences of clerics with their harmful

hypocritical version of religion, and to escape from the ideal images of women that are the legacy of the Romantic poets. Although this rational approach could be perceived as being at odds with a belief in the communication with spirits, it is however one more example of the Spiritualists' capacity to bring apparent opposites together. In philosophical terms, Domingo Soler believes that in order to progress, it is necessary to embrace science. In her short narrative "La viajera de los siglos," found in the collection *Sus más hermosos escritos*, the author personifies faith and science. The first of these, faith, says goodbye and disappears, leaving the second, science, as the sole guide for the people of modern times. Domingo Soler summarizes this idea towards the end of the narrative: "[L]os observatorios astronómicos valen más, mucho más que las gigantescas catedrales; los laboratorios de los sabios valen inmensamente más que todos los santuarios" (187).

Although Spiritualism in Spain relied on a large number of newspapers dedicated to the expansion of the movement, and their followers wrote a number of essays with that goal in mind, it should not be surprising to find that they also turned to more literary forms, such as poems, novels, short narratives, and plays, as means of spreading their ideas. Indeed, it is even common to find Spiritualists talking metaphorically about spirits as books that must be read. As the Spiritualist María Vilanova proclaims, "[c]ada espíritu es un libro" (72); and according to Domingo Soler, life is a "libro inédito" ("Mis ideales" 340). On another occasion, Domingo Soler ends one of her short narratives, entitled "¡Mercedes!" after the name of the spirit of a young girl who communicates with the man she once loved, with these words: "¡Noble espíritu!, te saludamos y te rogamos que nos cuentes tu historia. ¡Habla Mercedes!" ("¡Mercedes!" 103). There is, in fact, an inherent relation in Spiritualism between body and spirit, as well as between both of these and text. Sometimes the visual and textual artefacts of Spiritualism are themselves the ultimate results of communicating with spirits. Similarly, the medium herself is defined by her capacity to spontaneously generate a text. It is interesting to note that this kind of narrative, what a Surrealist like André Breton might have recognized as a particular kind of "automatic writing," is sometimes substituted by "automatic drawing." These are usually presented as symbols, which then call for examination in search of a secret message or prediction. This is the case of eight drawings that appeared in the September 15, 1901 edition of the Spiritualist newspaper *Luz y Unión* after an article entitled "Dibujos automáticos." The author of the article, José de Kronhelm, explains that the drawings have been made by a medium from Barcelona while in a state of trance, and that they have a symbolic and prophetic message about Russia, where the medium has lived and where he is well appreciated.

Thus, there is an immediate problem with Spiritualist literature, one that challenges our traditional conceptions of authorship and reading. This problem is compounded by the fact that more formal communications from spirits were frequently recorded by Spiritualists in the form of narratives. Even before the Renaissance, creative writing was irrevocably linked to authorial originality. But Spiritualist texts are often presumed to emanate from the spirits themselves, with the role of the writers being that of mere transcribers. In fact, oftentimes the name of the person who has put the message of the spirit into words is completely absent, as in the case of the anonymous novel *Alfieri el marino*, a text narrated through a medium by two spirits. Although we cannot dismiss the possibility that these authors were simply trying to avoid public exposure, such texts seem

to reflect a conception of authorship where their narrative content is more important than the scribe. The technique points, however, to that of automatic writing. Nevertheless, in the case of some Spiritualist authors—perhaps Domingo Soler more than anyone else—their narratives display an obvious confluence between a specifically literary impulse and a more proselytizing and documentary mode.

On the one hand, Domingo Soler clearly wants to disseminate the scientific-religious doctrines of Spiritualism by giving space in her stories to what are, from her point of view, the actual voices of real spirits. On the other hand, she is also extremely conscious of her status as an artist who has a special gift for narration which was always recognized as such by friends and colleagues. This leads to some very complicated scenarios. For example, in most of the short stories compiled in the 1925 collection *Cuentos espiritistas*, someone whom Domingo Soler knows or has recently met narrates an experience involving spirits. Sometimes this person has actually given over to Domingo Soler the papers on which the communication with a spirit has been written down. With all of this information, and due to her reputation as a talented writer, she is then charged with creating a narrative which, ultimately, becomes part of her vast collection of Spiritualist stories. This complicated trajectory might be summed up by what one of the characters in her collection says about her method of composition: “[D]el vuelo de un pájaro forma una historia” (“¡Mercedes!” 99), which makes clear that she is, in fact, a creative writer.

Domingo Soler’s stories constitute an excellent example of Spiritualist literature, not only due to their representations of the movement’s controversial communications with spirits, but also because they manifest its affiliations with other social movements like Feminism and Socialism, affiliations which played integral roles in Spiritualism’s own confrontations with the traditional, hierarchical values of the religious and political status quo. It is fundamental to understand the collection’s dual nature. While many of the stories have a strong narrative, some are clearly focused on disseminating the movement’s ideology as well as its connections with other ideologies. This can be seen, for example, in the story significantly entitled “El espiritismo debe estudiarse” or in “La mortificación de la carne.” In the latter story, Domingo Soler condemns the Catholic practices according to which the faithful subject themselves to masochistic injuries. She observes that body and spirit must work together and that an injured body does not allow the spirit to progress. Another example is “¡Qué solos iban!,” in which the author encounters a day laborer that she considers to be a philosopher. This is because the worker appreciates the virtues of a simple burial, without a priest, and at which all the family members show sincere pain, as opposed to the burials of important people, whose mourners are all paid to attend. Finally, there are stories which combine class and gender issues, such as “Flor de lis” or “¡No hay tiempo!,” which both openly discuss the experiences of working class women, or “¡El frío!,” which alerts readers to the dangers of imposing pre-arranged marriages on women.

It is also important to keep in mind that Domingo Soler is conscious that she is writing for an audience composed of both believers and non-believers. This helps explain her tendency toward narrative complexity. For example, almost all of the stories have a *mise en abyme* structure. The narrator, Domingo Soler, begins the story in the first person with some general reflections that are soon followed by an encounter with a friend, a friend of

a friend, or a completely unknown person. This individual, either directly or indirectly, then becomes the access point to the anecdote involving communication with spirits. Sometimes, this man or woman has communicated with a spirit; other times, he or she knows somebody else who feels compelled to tell his or her story to Domingo Soler, due to her reputations as a Spiritualist and a storyteller. Further narrative levels are added when the main characters not only report a communication with a particular spirit but also give Domingo Soler a written version of their experience, which she then re-transcribes. To close the narrative, Domingo Soler returns to her initial frame and reflects on how the entire experience illustrates the Spiritualist belief system and serves as guidance for the living. Beginning the narration with a casual and exceedingly everyday type of encounter has the effect of gradually seducing the reader, grounding his or her initial impressions in an aura of credibility, which sets the stage for what is yet to come. Thus, the subsequent supernatural aspects of the story remain tightly contained by a normal scenario, which has the effect of minimizing the potential shock of the communication with spirits at the story's core, and thereby promotes its more receptive and open-minded consideration by non-Spiritualist readers.

In terms of their content, the stories usually talk about a relationship between a living person and a spirit with whom he or she had a strong connection in the past. They could be father and son, husband and wife, friends, lovers, etc. Love after death is the most recurrent topic in these stories, a melodramatic touch that would have undoubtedly attracted potential readers. Death always constitutes an extremely traumatic experience, until the moment of supernatural communication, which, once clarified by Spiritualist doctrine, brings much-needed consolation. As a narrator, Domingo Soler organizes the material obtained from conversations and observations, but she also offers her own opinions about the behaviors of characters, and punctuates her narratives with affirmations of a number of basic notions defended by the Spiritualists: spirits will search for each other through successive reincarnations; spirits can be a great source of personal inspiration and only very rarely have a negative effect on people; social hierarchies, especially that of the Catholic Church, are always fictitious constructs; and those who deny the possibility of communicating with spirits need to learn to see with "los ojos del alma" ("Estrella..." 34). In general, the Spiritualists' outlook or *cosmovisión* is eminently optimistic and transcends death; they seek resolution, solace, and meaning, as opposed to conflict, fear, and confusion.

Despite what I argue are some of its very subtle and sophisticated aspects, this general absence of conflict and the controversial propagandistic goal of Spiritualist literature make it difficult to classify among the literary movements of the day, such as Romanticism, Realism, and Modernism. In the introduction to her edition of Domingo Soler's *Cuentos espiritistas*, Correa Ramón argues that these stories are a form of Romantic fiction, more specifically Gothic fiction, known as "cuentos de aparecidos" (46-47). She also points out that, unlike ghost stories, the *Cuentos espiritistas* are not considered fiction by Spiritualists. This subtle difference is worth exploring. First of all, we should clarify that, whereas the Romantics experienced emotional angst as the result of conflicts between their idealism and reality or between their personal values and those of society, the Spiritualists happily viewed such dualities as natural, even symbiotically necessary. The anxieties of authors like Goethe, Poe, Baudelaire, Espronceda, and Bécquer undoubtedly

have *something* in common with the existential concerns of the Spiritualist movement, but their dreadful fascination with the uncanny, as well as the delirious, cosmic darkness that characterizes their sensibilities, simply will not fit with the Spiritualist aesthetic. There is a profound contrast here that might be summed up by way of the difference in meaning that the terms “spirit” and “ghost” hold for an English speaker. For Spiritualists the presence of phantoms is almost always reassuring. They are thought to serve the living by guiding them, often in a very charming and even pedagogical sense. The ghost stories of the Gothics, on the other hand, are designed to provoke terror in the reader. The Gothic version of the world of the dead represents a horrifying and haunting otherness that has very little in common with the inclusive and ameliorative model proposed by Spiritualists. As an example of the continuing confusion here, the latest edition of *Cuentos espiritistas* was recently marketed in Spain along with a little booklet entitled *Historias de Halloween*, and a famous bookstore has classified it as “narrativa de terror.” This state of affairs reveals both the persistence of a general ignorance about the Spiritualist movement as well as the inherent difficulty that Spiritualist literature still poses with respect to generic classification.

The hybridizing tendencies of Spiritualism also challenge traditional perspectives on the so-called Realist movement. Although Domingo Soler’s narratives were compiled and classified as “cuentos,” which refers to a genre of fiction or fantastic literature, for nineteenth-century Spiritualists these texts represented true examples, and therefore realistic cases, of communications between the living and the dead. Although defining Realism is a difficult task, when confronted with Spiritualist literature we have to take into account that, for their followers, these texts can be considered Spiritualist testimony and Realist literature at the same time. Since for Spiritualists, the boundaries between this world and the next are far from fixed, in their view, phantoms formed a part of people’s everyday reality as much as the sights and sounds of the streets of Madrid formed a part of the everyday reality of so many characters in the period’s Realist novels. The difference would seem to lie in the organ used to experience both realities. As Domingo Soler says in her story entitled “Estrella...,” we should dismiss the eyes of the body and pay attention to “los ojos del alma, para los cuales no hacen falta ni telescopios, ni microscopios; ven o adivinan a largas distancias cuadros que oculta la polvareda de los siglos” (34). Somewhere between high Romanticism and Realism, then, Spiritualism tries to make the paranormal familiar and peaceful, while simultaneously denying the primacy of the everyday.

The characteristics of the Spiritualist movement in Spain acquire special meaning when we contextualize them with those of a group of authors writing around 1898, who explicitly reflected on the political, spiritual and identity crisis provoked in Spain around the time when Cuba and Puerto Rico finally gained their independence. Donald Shaw, among others, has described the general impulse of what has been traditionally deemed the Generation of ‘98’s futile quest to recover Spain’s national identity upon the loss of her empire, in conjunction with an equally frustrated attempt to overcome a spiritual malaise (*abulia*) provoked by the Romantics’ inability to resolve modernity’s conflict between matter and spirit. It could be said that certain themes and rhetorical strategies shared by the Spiritualists and these authors indicate anxieties that they held in common, but the outcomes are very often different. Whereas Miguel de Unamuno once confessed,

in a letter reproduced by J. Ignacio Tellechea Idígoras, that disbelief in the afterlife can have the depressing effect of making any effort to fight for the freedom of the oppressed seem a sad and unworthy task (389), the Spiritualist Gimeno Eito argued that the new, modern sense of free will, which resulted from human intelligence, was the vital engine of social change. While the idea of free will provokes an almost nightmarish anxiety and remains an unfulfilled wish for so many important figures of the time, Gimeno Eito trusts in this basic human impulse, which, if properly guided by “el regenerador Espiritismo” (93), will make for better individuals and a better society. Gimeno Eito’s absolute equation between “desear” and “poder” (40) is the antithesis of *abulia*.

The idea of regeneration, which was so often presented as a national necessity by intellectuals like Baroja, Azorín, and Maeztu, often degenerated into an impossible task when their material and concrete notions of progress came into conflict with the more static spiritual, philosophical, and metaphysical ideas that still dominated Spanish society. For Spiritualists, however, who shared the same geographical and temporal context as those authors focused on an inevitable crisis, progress and regeneration are very much at the root of their beliefs in a precisely non-conflictive way of life. And since Spiritualists believed in reincarnation as a way for spirits to improve themselves, to “progress” literally through time, the idea of regeneration has for them a strangely non-metaphorical meaning. Moreover, the movement’s belief in metaphysical communication with spirits was yet another means of regeneration, since, as Domingo Soler explains, “la comunicación de los espíritus logra en algunos hombres lo más difícil, extirpar de raíz pequeños defectos que suelen pasar inadvertidos para el mundo, pero que no por esto dejan de producir un daño inmenso al que los tiene” (“Mis ideales” 338). This notion of an eternal return, in its optimistic version, could remind us of the concept presented by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. For students of literature, it might also bring to mind the Modernist narratives of Jorge Luis Borges. Without doubt, it is based on a circular instead of a linear conceptualization of time, in which material and spiritual progress cannot be separated from each other, and access to the past through spirits is the key to humanity’s future.⁵

Considering some of the characteristics of Spiritualism and its literature as they affect the way we might regard certain cultural periods and movements, I would like to conclude with a brief literary case study that can serve as an example of how our interpretations of some canonical texts might be modified or complemented in light of Spiritualist ideas. The text I have chosen is the play *Electra* by Benito Pérez Galdós, the so-called father of the Realist movement in Spain, whose novels addressed national problems that were typically perceived as pathological and congenital in nature. The plot of this play is not complicated and those familiar with Galdós’s novels will recognize its themes. The young woman, Electra, lives with her aunt and uncle, who are very strict in religious matters. Nobody knows the identity of Electra’s father, but everyone is well aware of her mother’s dubious reputation, fearing that the younger woman will follow similarly bad inclinations. Pantoja, a friend of the family who thinks that he is the father of Electra, organizes a plot to confine her in a convent in order to protect her from her own sinful nature. Nevertheless, she falls in love with Máximo, who is related to the family. A respected scientist, he maintains a household and laboratory very near Electra’s house. To prevent their marriage, Pantoja lies to Electra and tells her that Máximo is her brother. In the

end, it is the spirit of the mother of Electra, Eleuteria, who communicates with her daughter and tells her the truth. She then runs to Máximo, who proclaims her metaphorical resurrection.⁶

Electra provoked very different reactions among the spectators at its premiere in 1901. Liberal intellectuals like Baroja and Maeztu saw in the play a progressive and anticlerical argument against religious fanaticism, and rushed to proclaim Galdós as an intellectual forefather of their literary group. But the press reports of the time reveal a debate that had much more to do with the play's technical recourse to the supernatural. On the one hand, some denounced the presence of Eleuteria's spirit as encouraging superstition, seeing her role as an unfortunate sabotage of Galdós's otherwise respectable liberal message. Salvador Canals, the reviewer of *Electra* for the magazine *Nuestro tiempo*, reacted as follows: "Cuando hay señoras distinguidas que acuden á una gitana y les entregan su ropa, su dinero y sus alhajas para que les descubra el porvenir y señale rumbo á sus acciones, ¿no es gravísimo riesgo alumbrar con resplandores de popular apoteosis un espectro, un fantasma, que acude á un punto de resolver un tremendo conflicto de conciencia?" (321). Similarly, Ernesto Martinenche wondered, as follows, about the author of *Electra*: "¿Se ha creído con derecho á representar materialmente alguna creencia espiritista?" (141). Several years later, the Peruvian writer Ricardo Palma, notably one of the precursors of Magical Realism, adopted this same attitude when he voiced his opinion that the inclusion of a spirit in the play was proof of the incompetence of its author: "No cabe en mí dudar de que faltóle esfuerzo al autor para crear un desenlace que cupiese en la esfera de la vida social, de lo humano, de la actualidad, de lo posible, y recurrió á lo sobrenatural, al milagro, á la aparición de una ánima bendita del Purgatorio" (441). Palma argued that Galdós had failed to create a credible ending, one that could be considered verosimilar or plausible within the limits of human life (442). By contrast, others who attended the play, mostly representatives of the orthodox Catholic Church, rushed to criticize *Electra*'s anticlericalism and its use of Spiritualist and heterodox rhetoric. Curiously, before the premiere, in a letter to the artistic director of the *Teatro Español*, Galdós insisted that the role of the spirit of the mother of Electra was "necesaria y lógica" and expressed his hope that the director would not do anything to alter its appearance (qtd. by Díaz Larios 69). I would argue that, for Galdós, there was an important distinction to be made between the theatrical device of *deus ex machina* and what we might call *spiritus ex machina*.

Finally, we should not be surprised to find Spiritualists voicing some of the more impassioned reactions to *Electra*. Early on, the play lets it be known that during her difficult childhood, Electra was reassured by frequent visits from her dead mother. But the climactic apparition of a spirit who brings forth a final liberating truth, which for its part seems allegorically related to Galdós's ongoing commentary on the national consciousness, must have been the real moment of ecstasy for Spiritualists in the audience that night. We know they were moved from the amount of congratulatory letters that Galdós received from groups like the *Centro barcelonés de estudios psicológicos*. One of these letters, published by the Spiritualist newspaper *Luz y Unión*, effusively congratulates the author for the success of the play, "que ha despertado en España ideas de Progreso y Libertad, atrofiadas por la indolencia y el fanatismo" (Esteva 116). The editors of *Luz y Unión*, J. Esteva Marata y R. Latorre, were also careful to accompany their praise with a

copy of a letter that Galdós had sent to them in which he presents himself as a friend of its director.

Although the powerful presence of the spirit of Eleuteria in *Electra* is the play's most arresting link to Spiritualism, I doubt this alone would have been enough for the movement's followers to have reacted so strongly. Rather, the play exhibits a constellation of characteristics that contributed to their enthusiasm. For example, Galdós expresses in the play a profound anticlericalism which without a doubt resonated with Spiritualist political convictions. What is interesting here is that, if some intellectuals interpreted the play as a radical attack on religion, Galdós subsequently made it clear in an article published in *La Nueva Prensa Libre de Viena*, and reproduced in *El Siglo Futuro*, that he was not an anti-religious person but, rather, anti-orthodox: "Tal es, no el problema religioso, como le llaman los que intentan confundir la cuestión en su provecho, sino el problema del clericalismo, que, amenazando con ahogar las energías nacionales, quiere hacer de España un Estado pontificio con todas sus tristes consecuencias" (J. J. V. 1). For him, the perennial problem of Spain was the degree to which ecclesiastic minions had always controlled the country's destiny. Additionally, Galdós, much like the Spiritualists, presents in *Electra* a radically alternative solution to the modern conflict between matter and spirit. He bases his solution on a symbolic fusion of opposites. Although Máximo is a famous scientist, he is also referred to in the play as Faust and, like the legendary German tragic hero, he is obsessed with knowledge about the world but is also forced to confront the metaphysical aspects of life.⁷ The love between Máximo, who represents materiality, and Electra, who represents spirituality (Máximo calls her "mi alma" several times) is precisely the kind of fusion that Spiritualists were proposing at the time. This dialectical union is just one of a number of instances in the play where we can observe Galdós implementing his own brand of Neoplatonism, a centuries-old movement that was undoubtedly of great interest to Spiritualists, as well. The Spiritualist activist and writer, Rosario de Acuña, in a letter included in Domingo Soler's *Sus más hermosos escritos*, explains that Spiritualists have always argued that it is necessary to bring together Spiritualism and materialism: "[E]spiritualizar el materialismo" and "materializar el espiritualismo" (357). Ironically, it would seem that the Spiritualists interpreted Galdós's play in a more accurate way than those who saw only political radicalism, on the one hand, or heresy, on the other.

To conclude, the presence of Spiritualist discourse both in and around a controversial text like *Electra* suggests that we might want to consider a final step in Galdós's career as a writer. After early novels such as *Doña Perfecta*, which are hallmarks of conflict between traditional religious and liberal scientific views of life, there is an intermediate phase of extreme spiritual novels like *Nazarín*, and finally, we arrive at *Electra*, which proposes a productive confluence of materiality and spirituality. The study of *Electra* in the broader context provided by the Spiritualist movement expands our understanding of this canonical text and suggests a more nuanced understanding of Galdós's late Realism. Moreover, an understanding of the Spiritualist reception of *Electra* allows for a more dialectical approach to the multifaceted complexity of modernity itself. In the terms proposed by the Spiritualists, who consistently viewed technology and scientific progress

on the one hand and spirituality on the other as only *superficially* in conflict, thesis and antithesis now converge in a peculiar synthesis that suggests alternative solutions to some of the deepest cultural and philosophical conflicts of turn-of-the-century Spain.

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Notes

- ¹ After the Civil War, the dictatorship of Francisco Franco oppressed certain movements that it considered heterodox, such as Spiritualism and Masonry.
- ² Excellent scholarly works in the United States have indicated the Fox sisters as originators of modern Spiritualism. See Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits*, Molly McGarry's *Ghost of Futures Past*, and Robert S. Cox's *Body and Soul*.
- ³ Spiritualism was a global movement, and these connections are present in different countries among its followers. One paradigmatic case is that of the English author Frank Podmore, founder of the famous socialist Fabian Society of England, but also author of books such as *Apparitions and Thought-Transference: An Examination of the Evidence for Telepathy* (1894) and *The Newer Spiritualism* (1911).
- ⁴ Although the Spiritualist movement spread throughout Spain, Catalonia was an important center, probably in no small part because of its own long tradition of opposition to political and religious orthodoxy.
- ⁵ Borges expressed admiration for Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), scientist and mystic, whose ideas anticipated those of the Spiritualist movement. See Borges "Emanuel Swedenborg."
- ⁶ In earlier works such as *El espiritista* (1868) or *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1887; part 3, chapter 1, section 5), Galdós included Spiritualists, but in an extremely humorous and even sardonic manner. In contrast, the theatrical effects achieved in *Electra* with the spirit of the main character are combined with a more conciliatory role of spirituality alongside rationality.
- ⁷ Máximo is one of the many men of science that Galdós presents in his works. Curiously, one of the characters in *Doña Perfecta* says that rumor has it that the liberal Pepe Rey is also a Spiritualist, and a proselytizing one at that (145-46). Also interesting is the article entitled "Los ingenieros de Galdós" in which Carlos Mendizábal, an engineer himself writing for *Madrid Científico*, mocks the inaccuracy of the reasoning displayed by some of his supposedly more rational and scientific characters. This is precisely the same reaction that Spiritualists provoked among many in the scientific community, suspicious about the rigor of their methods and their interpretations.

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