

The Dynamics of Displacement in Benito Pérez Galdós' "Doña Perfecta"

Chantal Roussel-Zuazu
University of Texas at Tyler

Doña Perfecta tells the tragic story of a young and bright engineer who is violently executed by the people in Orbajosa, a small town in Spain. There is much to learn from this novel as the components of violence do apply to many similar places in the world. The Pérez Galdós novel analyzes the progression of violence, and its snowball effect. This study attempts to highlight that the novel exists first and foremost in "space" for Pérez Galdós, instead of in "time" and that space has a predominant function within the overall structure of the novel. This study also looks at the dynamics of the displacement of Pepe, the main character, in *Doña Perfecta*, and at what happens to someone who would fail to identify this particular kind of space, and not be weary of it. Few other novels have addressed similar topics of abuse perpetrated in small, remote, rural communities such as *L'eau des collines* by Marcel Pagnol, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. A similar plight might sometimes be found in Western movies. *Doña Perfecta* is Pérez Galdós first novel, written in 1876.

In 1975, Ricardo Gullón wrote that space is rendered by reiteration, allusion, parallelism, and contrast (Gullón 12), which Pérez Galdós uses abundantly in bringing Orbajosa and its inhabitants to us. Ricardo Gullón also wrote that space functions to make explicit the meaning and scope of the novel. (Gullón 15)

In *Doña Perfecta*, the space is mainly the small town of Orbajosa, like Don Quijote's hometown, "a place which name I do not wish to recall" "en un lugar cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme", neither north nor south nor east nor west in Spain, "not very far from Madrid," suggesting that a place like this is common, insignificant and timeless. It is not located in any specific geographical point, which gives it a certain aura of universality, and it could really be located anywhere.

Orbajosa looks like: "a thousand huts showing their miserable walls of humble clay, resembling anemic hungry faces that seem to beg from the traveller" (7) "un amasijo de paredes deformes, de casuchas de tierra pardas y polvorosas como el suelo.., a cuyo amparo mil chozas humildes alzaban sus miserables frontispicios de adobes, semejantes a caras anem y hambrientas que pedían una limosna al pasajero" (7) Its inhabitants are described by the author as living in a remote area, they are poor and unemployed, they see themselves as isolated from the rest of the world and they have rallied around a few people whom they consider their leaders: the priest, the librarian, the police officer and Doña Perfecta, a rich Catholic lady who has lived there all her life and whom they worship as an ideal of perfection.

From Madrid, Pepe, the character being displaced to Orbajosa, takes a train, and then rides a horse with a guide to reach his destination. On his way to Orbajosa, different events leave him with a bad impression: as they are riding their horses to town, several shots are heard, and the explanations come out slowly from his guide: a group of youngsters vandalizes the cathedral once in a while, and the town is overlooking the fact that their police officer goes out and kills them without waiting for due legal procedure, and does so on grounds that the legal procedure "does not work" and is neither fast nor effective:

"The judge upsets them a little and then lets them out. The best is this: shoot them. They are taken to jail and on the way, as they go through a convenient spot: "Hey! dog! You are trying to escape! Pum, Pum The report is written, the witnesses are there, the sentence is given. All in one minute."(11), 'El juez les marea un poco y después les suelta..lo mejor es esto: !fuego en ellos! Se les lleva a la carcel, y cuando se pasa por un lugar a propósito, !Ah! perro! Que te quieres escapar.. pum, pum. Ya está hecha la sumaria, requeridos los testigos, celebrada la vista, dada la sentencia..

Todo en un minuto." (11) As Pepe and the guide ride along, three of these young people have just been executed. As he hears the shots, he asks if he could go and see the dead bodies, but the guide strongly advises against it as the police officer is the police department in Orbajosa.

In other words, violent means are already in place to take care of unpleasanties, a zero tolerance is already being enforced with executions, but the signs of it are not so evident. The signs of violence he therefore has observed, even before he enters town. Pérez Galdós proceeds to paint the small town: there is no economy, the church stands in the center. A prominent rich lady lives there, literally hand in hand with the priest. She is Pepe's aunt, Mrs. Perfect (Doña Perfecta). After entering the small town, lost in remote times and in no specific place, the young Pepe Rey gets to meet the rich lady (his aunt) and eats with her and the priest. The priest is a strong believer in ancient traditions, he is fiercely opposed to progress, fiercely weary of newcomers since they could potentially change people's faith or their potential donations, and he is unwilling to accept them. Hypocrisy seems to envelop the group as in a big cloud.

Pérez Galdós uses the contrast between Pepe Rey's faith in the future, and the group's faith in the past, his young age and their middle age, his innocent straightforwardness and their hypocrisy as a starting point in the process of displacement. The characters are really archetypes, which add to the dominant role of the place itself in the novel. The dynamics of displacement involve the experiences of Pepe Rey as he finds himself isolated in this unfamiliar, remote environment and attempts to socialize. The author proceeds to describe the appearance and progression of violence towards the victim, Pepe, the verbal and mental abuse inflicted upon him, which will culminate in his murder.

Joaquin Casaldueiro called *Doña Perfecta* a religious, historical, and political thesis novel. It appears that the author's main point of focus, which would represent his "thesis," is that a newcomer will never be accepted in Orbajosa, and will be harmed in a place like this.

From the beginning, Pepe Rey is told how to feel, whom he can and cannot see, and how he must think in order to "fit in". The minute he has entered town, he has completely lost his freedom of speech and he has to comply with the dominant attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors. He is barely given a few days to express his surprise before he notices the danger lurking around. As he starts to exercise more self-control, he resents the loss of his most basic right to freedom of thought, but it is already too late. The rejection unfortunately has been imposed on him, independently of his control. He is violently criticized in the home of his aunt, Doña Perfecta, also in most of the homes in the small town, where words are literally put in his mouth. He becomes a scapegoat, someone who should pay for all the lingering poverty, and other miseries which afflict the people of Orbajosa. He is ostracized first, then he is thrown out of his aunt's house and finally denied the right to keep his fiancée, Rosario (Rosary), Doña Perfecta's daughter.

Previously, as Pepe Rey had traveled towards town, he had seen the land which was his through an inheritance, and it had been mentioned to him that someone named Mr. Longstep (Sr. Pasolargo) was cultivating parts of it for himself, without his permission. And later on, as the group which Pérez Galdós refers to as "wolves of the same pack" protects the interests of their own, there will be nothing that Pepe can possibly do to reclaim his land legally. The inhabitants of Orbajosa think that they live in the most wonderful place in the world, seem very accepting of the way that things are done there, not an ounce of criticism but for what is different, and they seem happy with the general way of thinking imposed by the church. For them, the ultimate pride lays in the Cathedral in the center of town. Doña Perfecta is heard saying: "Be careful, dear Pepe, I warn you that if you speak badly of our holy church, we will cease being friends. If you say that this great building is not the eighth wonder of the world.." (35) Cuidado, Pepito; te advierto que si hablas mal de nuestra santa iglesia, perderemos las amistades. Pero si has de descubrir que esa gran fábrica no es la octava maravilla..(35) There are two sides, the conservatives, opposed to change, happy with what they have, even as it is outside of the law, and the young and innocent Pepe Rey, potential challenger of the "modus operandi," owner of some land already exploited by someone who had no right to it, educated and traveled, as far as France and Paris, and who has no interest in disregarding the law.

Pérez Galdós lets us discover an entire town of conservative people, fanatic defenders of the Catholic church, the way they create an enemy where there was none, and their passionate feelings about Catholicism, conservatism, and challengers. Doña Perfecta feels passionate about supporting the church and its conservative philosophy, she is outwardly against new ideas, and for keeping the way everything has always been done in Orbajosa, where the church uses the disguise of love for one's neighbor, and good compassionate demeanors as an excuse to abusively criticize peoples' attempt to think for themselves. She says: "Pepe knows everything, he uses all the weapons of the exact sciences.

I know well that the doctrines he believes in are false”. (60) El Sr. Don José (Pepe) lo sabe todo, es decir, tiene a su disposición todo el arsenal de las ciencias exactas. Bien sé que la doctrina que sustenta es falsa (60) The Catholic church believes in enforcing total control over everyone’s mind. Not that Pepe Rey would not be Christian, he is, even though he is repeatedly told that he is not. He does not fit in, with the general ignorance of the clergy who has all its interests and values geared towards the past. While Pepe Rey believes in new roads and bridges and in general progress for the future of Spain, violent means are already in place for those who believe in change, with the blessings of the church.

Pérez Galdós gave us a strong warning at the end of this novel: “Beware of those who seem nice and are not” This is a universal warning addressed to any and all of his readers, anywhere in the world, wherever this reader may find himself, about all places in the world exhibiting characteristics similar to those of Orbajosa and its people. The novel makes explicit that an individual displaced to such an environment should feel danger lurking, and should be weary, ready to expect the worst, and should be prepared to fight to defend his/her life. Dynamics of displacement, in general, involve caution and a process of blending in, of not disclosing too much, in intent to appear as similar as possible. It would seem customary that the character being displaced would first get a feeling for a new environment, spend some time observing it, while keeping a low profile.

There are different kinds of displacement, some more dramatic than others. Pepe Rey is not traveling through; he plans to stay, but only for a short while. Unfortunately, he is informed that he has lost his job in the capital, and he now sees himself forced to stay much longer than expected, he tries to write and ask for help from his father, but does not receive answers. Pérez Galdós lets the reader feel all the pain of facing the eventuality of having to stay in such a place: “The shadows which were clouding his soul and the interior darkness gave to all his interactions coldness and bitterness. Not even the joy of being able to play could change the somber state of his soul” (84) Aumentaban las sombras que evolvían en su espíritu y la lobreguez interior daba a su trato la displicencia y amargura.. ni aun las emociones del juego alteraron el sombrío estado de su alma..(84)

As it is always safer to proceed cautiously in an unfamiliar environment, in a normal situation of displacement, one should refrain from expressing opinions in public too soon, from criticizing, and should work at earning some trust, to adopt similar ideas and belief system to those which are observed. It also helps to have a positive attitude, give praise, and overall, not disclose anything too personal.

But in the end, an innocent and charming young man has been executed only because his ideas were perceived as different. First, on his way to town, the evidence of violence in that particular place, should have given Pepe Rey a severe warning. He noticed the way in which the abuse entered his life even though it was too late. In conversations that generally took place around the table, the group rich lady, priest and police officer emitted an opinion, with the intent to probe on which side he stood, more than ready to prove him guilty if he gave any signs of not being in complete agreement with them or to not share in all their views including killing anyone who disagreed in the slightest. They always replied to him with negative comments, qualified as “garlicky” by Pérez Galdós about him as a person, which then were soon repeated and shared by everyone in town.

The people in Orbajosa welcomed this new subject of conversation, probably out of boredom, and things always got quickly blown out of proportion. Even in the course of one single shared meal, everytime Pepe Rey opened his mouth, he was reexplained how to think, and then what he had just said was distorted, a drama was created where there had been peace, leaving the young engineer saddened at the evidence that not only he represented Madrid, the capital, the enemy and the opponent, but that he now had the entire town against him. The fast progression of the violence should have been of much greater concern to Pepe Rey. He was sad about the situation, his feelings were hurt, but he never thought that they would kill him. He definitely underestimated his enemies, and their power.

Born and raised in Madrid, he was not familiar with small town customs and found himself unable to adapt quickly enough. He was also very young. By the time he started understanding the situation, his bad reputation had already spread like a wild fire and had already been established. All along, we see on his part many efforts to be nice and kind, as he is always understanding of others, but he has not been conceited soon enough. Pérez Galdós goes further saying that actually there is nothing that Pepe Rey could have done to avoid being killed. Throughout the novel, the young man never does or thinks anything wrong. He was killed because he was new in town, and because he was made into a symbol of what was supposed to be hated by the church and by the conservatives.

The people in Orbajosa never focused on what they had in common with Pepe Rey, they focused exclusively on their differences. For that reason, only if Pepe Rey had pretended to be identical to them, could he have survived. The town, or space, operates in the novel like a machine: its system is strongly in place, and once it is started, nothing and no one can stop it. If only he had denied who he was, kept his beliefs to himself, which he eventually did, but it was too late. The reader would like to think that Pepe Rey could have avoided his fate, but with closer attention we can see that his only mistake was to express himself freely once at first, but that the system quickly took over, and Galdós helps us realize that there was nothing that Pepe could have done, short of being able to successfully escape Orbajosa.

According to Pérez Galdós, any place in the world showing some of the same components found in Orbajosa is a place where one can get killed, if one is a newcomer. Pérez Galdós illustrated well how dangerous a place like this actually is. Places like Orbajosa were widespread in late XIXth century Spain and no one paid attention to the fact that the seeds of the upcoming civil war were already present in the countryside. Nevertheless, it seems that embedded in the novel, amid the religious fanaticism and passionate personalities rendered so well by Pérez Galdós, there is a message of tolerance, and silent suggestions about what could have been done to avoid such a tragedy in this small town.

Appearances are deceiving. *Doña Perfecta*'s last chapter is made of these few words: "This is the end. That's all we can say for now about the people who seem nice but are not. End of *Doña Perfecta*" (302) Esto se acabó. Es cuanto por ahora podemos decir de las personas que parecen buenas y no lo son. Fín de *Doña Perfecta* (302) The space in this novel plays a major role and functions as the main perpetrator of the murder. It is made of religious fanaticism, bad economy, a strong police backed by the church, it is small, and remote. The name of the town "Orbajosa" literally means: "garlicky town" even though Pérez Galdós mentioned politely and ironically, that perhaps it was coming from the latin "urbs augusta." (meaning dignified or proud town)

Works cited

- Bachelard, Gaston. *La poétique de l'Espace*. Paris, 1957.
- Berkowitz, Chonon H. *Pérez Galdós, Spanish Liberal Crusader*. Madison, 1948.
- Casalduero, Joaquín. *La tragedia de España. Doña Perfecta en "Vida y obra de Galdós (1843—1920)*. Madrid: Gredos, 1961
- Correa, Gustavo. *El arquetipo de Orbajosa en 'Doña Perfecta'* San Juan de Puerto Rico: La Torre, Abril-Junio 1959.
- Gullón, Ricardo. "On Space in the Novel" *Critical Inquiry* U of Chicago P, 1975 vol. 2, #1: 11-28.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*.
- Mazzara, Richard A. *Some fresh 'perspectivas' on Galdós 'Doña Perfecta'*. Hispania XL, 570-573.
- Santana, Mario. *The Conflict of Narratives in Pérez Galdós' "Doña Perfecta"* 1998 Vol. 113 #2, (283-304).
- Santiago y Miras, Maria Angeles. *El determinismo ambiental en Doña Perfecta de Benito Pérez Galdós*. U of Madrid (Complutense), 2002.
- Zambrano, Maria. *La España de Galdós*. Madrid: Cuadernos Taurus, 1960.