

Galdós: Una biografía. By Yolanda Arencibia. Barcelona, Tusquets Editores, 2020. 896 pp. €26 (paperback). ISBN 9788490668023.

José Ortega y Gasset was the first Spanish intellectual to decry what he regarded as his compatriots' shameful indifference to Benito Pérez Galdós in the days after the latter's death in January 1920. Under that light, it seems grimly fitting that the shutdown of all cultural events due to a worldwide pandemic should have blighted the centenary commemorations of Spain's greatest nineteenth-century writer: his legacy never having sat easily in a country riven with identitarian conflict that both pre- and post-dates his career. As the writer Antonio Muñoz Molina put it earlier this year: 'Una tradición española casi escandinava también ya de tan antigua es la de mostrar la modernidad de uno mismo como novelista perdonándole la vida a Pérez Galdós'. A welcome corrective to that indifference comes, however, in the form of Yolanda Arencibia's new biography, recipient of the 32nd Premio Comillas de Historia, Biografía y Memorias. Arencibia is a longstanding scholar of Galdós, an academic who has brought a lifetime's expertise to bear on the life of an extraordinarily versatile writer. Among the tasks she has facilitated for future readers and students of Galdós is to understand three key things at each stage of his working life: 1) Where was Galdós at this moment in time? 2) What was he writing? 3) What was his state of mind? Those questions are amply answered at every juncture of his trajectory, testament to a huge archival effort to utilize press reports, publishers' proofs, and private correspondence to their maximum potential in the service of a better understanding of Galdós's career.

That said, this biography left me all the same with a sense of unfulfilled potential, something I say with no joy whatsoever. One such difficulty arises in relation to Galdós's early life; specifically in the fact that much of the information on which biographers must rely finds its

roots in family lore, attested to by Galdós's descendants when interviewed in the 1930s and beyond by his first serious biographers. What credence we should give to memories or recycled hearsay about events that had occurred up to seventy years prior to their recording seems at best difficult to gauge. Thus, we must take it on trust that key family dynamics – not least Galdós's infatuation with his cousin, Sisita, nipped in the bud with the extreme expedient of packing her off to an arranged marriage in Cuba – are the stuff of fact rather than fiction. Arencibia cites no sources for any of the speculation on what would have been for most people deeply formative, not to say traumatic, early experiences. This is hardly a biographer's fault: non-existent documents cannot be summoned by sheer force of will or frustration. All the same, one wonders whether speculation derived from sources whose reliability at this distance appears so difficult to discern might not in consequence have been treated with greater critical scepticism.

Reticence on private matters, Arencibia insists, was characteristic not only of the tight ship sailed by Galdós's redoubtable mother but also a cornerstone of 'isleño' mentality: if in doubt, say nothing; even if not in doubt, still say nothing. Galdós himself was always a picture of diffidence and discretion: correspondence with his lover Concha Morell is punctuated by his repeated entreaties that she destroy his letters on reading; requests she chose to ignore. During the author's prime, his friend and fellow writer Leopoldo Alas had asked for details of his past life, to supplement the critical study he had been commissioned to produce and to fill in the blanks of the publicly available biography, but was firmly – if politely – rebuffed. With that in mind, a biographer might best trace the shifting perspectives of Galdós's political affiliations and private opinions through the prism of his journalistic writings and published fiction, neither of which Arencibia mines with conspicuous success. Comment on the former, so successfully utilized by Inma Ridaó Carlini in her recent monograph on Galdós and nineteenth-century

economics, is miserly by comparison. Instead, Arencibia provides extensive summaries of all Galdós's novels, plays, and even short stories, rewards for which endeavour are, all the same, thin on the ground. Such extensive summarization might, ultimately, be justifiable, though the reader of a biography of – say – Dickens would not expect to read multi-page plot synopses of *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield*, or *Oliver Twist*. If such summaries were to feature, a reader might expect them to form part of an emerging portrait of the artist grappling with a vast array of contemporary cultural, political, and social issues. Sadly, that is not the case in Arencibia's study. Her comments on individual fictional works seem unduly discrete, shy of meaningful connections, and divorced from their immediate context.

What this biography does provide is a vivid portrait of Galdós the private citizen, holed up in the gilded cages of his various abodes in Madrid and Santander, ever under the watchful eyes of his sister and sister-in-law, and seeking to elude their benevolent attentions to conduct the amorous relationships that peppered his adult life. As this biography draws to a close, it is difficult to avoid the feeling that Galdós lived too long, certainly long enough to experience a cruel decline in his physical and financial health over his final decade. Arencibia reflects that slow waning until her narrative peters out in a rather anticlimactic fashion.

A few final observations on the text itself ought to include the fact that, despite its considerable length, this book has relatively few typographical errors, although those that have got past the copy editor cluster particularly around dates, a good number of which are wrong. Researchers will seek in vain for an edition of *La desheredada* edited by James Whiston (nonesuch exists) despite the reference to it in the pages of this biography (p. 790). And, how ever much it may be an established convention in Spanish publishing, to provide no more than an 11-page 'Índice onomástico' to a text 762 pages in length borders on the needlessly cruel. Equivalent works in

the Anglophone world have considerably longer and more useful indexes for the obvious reason that people's names only allow a certain kind of navigation through a complex life-story. Rosemary Ashton's 1996 biography of George Eliot (which is nearly 400 pages shorter than Arencibia's book) has 24 pages of index; Hermione Lee's 2007 study of Edith Wharton (of approximately the same length as the book under review) features 28 pages of index; Michael Slater's 2009 biography of Dickens provides 25 pages of index. Spanish publishers really need to up their game.

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