Discussions of Benito Pérez Galdós’ early short story ‘La novela en el tranvía’ (1871) tend to privilege the first half of its title: the novel. While riding a streetcar, the narrator reads a fragment of a serial novel, which he then begins to project (in Quixotic fashion) onto his fellow passengers. Critics of the story have generally focused on this fiction within the fiction, emphasizing the metatextual and intertextual dimensions of the story: the narrator’s confusion of the boundaries between fiction and reality, Galdós’ rejection of the genre of the feuilleton and its melodramatic logic and the ways in which the story anticipates his later novels. Less attention, however, has been paid to the second part of the title: the streetcar. The first tram in Madrid, the Salamanca-Sol-Pozas line, was inaugurated on May 31, 1871, only six months before the publication of Galdós’ text in La Ilustración de Madrid in two installments (November 30, 1871 and December 15, 1871). ‘La novela en el tranvía’, thus, is one of the earliest reactions to the experience of tram travel in Madrid.

Collective transportation arrived relatively late to the Spanish capital. In the 1820s horse-drawn omnibuses began to appear in Paris, London and other European cities, but the innovation never took off in Madrid, despite several attempts to establish a similar service. The ‘Compañía general de ómnibus de Madrid’, which received a concession in 1856 to run six omnibus lines for a period of twenty years, collapsed before it even began to operate, leaving the city with very limited means of conveyance (López Gómez 21). At the time of the introduction of the first horse-drawn tram, consequently, the residents of Madrid had relatively limited experience
of public transportation. Adolfo de Foresta (1829-1902), an Italian aristocrat who travelled through Spain in 1877, drew attention to this anomaly:

¡Cosa singular! En Madrid no existen, ni han existido nunca, ómnibus para el servicio de la ciudad, y se ha pasado directamente de la ausencia absoluta de estos medios de transporte tan populares y baratos a la última forma de los mismos, es decir, al tranvía (cited in Santos, 341).

Galdós’ story, therefore, is not only one of the earliest reactions to the tram but also to the experience of collective transportation itself.

This essay will examine the representation and role of streetcar travel in Galdós’ story and attempt to understand its relation to the first part of the title: the novel-reading. The first part of the analysis will situate the text within the literary tradition around the omnibus and show how he draws upon some of its main tropes. The second part will examine how Galdós adapts the plot of Cervantes’ novel to this new social space; his new social space influences the treatment of the serial novel and the narrator’s quixotism: what happens when Don Quixote is set on a streetcar? At a number of points in the story, the narrator insists on a causal relation between the omnibus and his growing madness: ‘poco tardó mi mente en apoderarse de aquel mismo asunto, para darle vueltas de arriba abajo, operación psicológica que no deja de ser estimulada por la regular marcha del coche y el sordo y monótono rumor de sus ruedas, limando el hierro de los carriles’ (76). How exactly does the tram contribute to the narrator’s folly? In what follows, I seek to answer these questions by tracing the steps of the narrator’s journey and analysing the role of the streetcar in his descent into madness.
The introduction of the omnibus in Paris, London and other cities gave rise to a vast body of cultural representations—both images and texts—that probed the unique social experience of public transport. These expressions, which included stories, songs, plays, novels and panoramic literature, took many forms. Before entering into a discussion of Galdós’ story, it will be useful to survey some common features of these works. For the sake of this article, I will propose four basic dichotomies by which these representations may be classified:

1. **Interior vs. exterior focus**: In some texts, the emphasis lies on the exterior of the vehicle, which the narrator-passenger observes from the window. The omnibus offered a sedentary form of *flânerie* that allowed riders to discover new neighbourhoods, to observe the transformations of the urban space and to see it from a different (and often defamiliarizing) vantage point. Other texts, however, focus more on the dynamics inside the coach. Omnibus vehicles were cramped, uncomfortable and jolting and put people into awkward proximity with complete strangers. Many early descriptions offer grotesque evocations of the awkward interactions and jostling of the passengers: the pregnant woman who vomits on a neighbour, the reeking food items brought on board, the clothing torn or stained by collisions, the dog who bites a neighbour, etc. The interior, however, can also be represented as a space of pleasure, adventure or insight.

2. **Small vs. large world**: Another way of classifying these cultural representations is according to their vision of the urban space. Some omnibus
texts (particularly early ones) represent the city as a small world. In these
texts, coincidences—felicitous and otherwise—abound as passengers run into
long-lost friends; debtors, into creditors; or the young man in the company of
a grisette, into his disapproving father. Such representations reduce the
vastness of the metropolis, making it a familiar and recognizable space. Other
texts, however, depict the city as an alienatingly large world: in the omnibus
passengers encounter individuals whom they will never see again and whose
lives and stories they can only guess at. These variants evoke the melancholy
and anomie of modern urban life.

3. **Sound on vs. sound off:** Yet another classifying feature is the degree of
speech or silence represented in these works. Some authors depict the omnibus
as a community or miniature family in which passengers of various classes
share cigarettes, advice and small talk. In other texts, the omnibus is a frame
for storytelling or a place where stories are overheard. In all of these variants,
the sound is on; the omnibus is a space of speech and exchange. In other texts,
however, the streetcar is an eerily and uncomfortably mute space in which
passengers become statues to one another. When represented in this way, the
omnibus becomes a text of sorts—a series of visual signs devoid of voice—
that the passenger seeks to read.

4. **Legible vs. illegible:** Finally, representations differ in the extent to which they
represent the omnibus as a legible space. Some nineteenth-century works
attempt to help their readers to decipher the omnibus by offering
physiognomic analyses of common passenger types (for example, *La
physiologie de l’omnibus*). Other texts, however, emphasize the unknowability
of the omnibus and the gap between appearance and reality.
Omnibus texts combine these elements in different ways and sometimes even incorporate both terms of a dichotomy (for example, alternating between an internal and an external focus or between speech and silence). This essay will examine the representation and role of streetcar travel in Galdós’ story. The first part of the analysis will situate the text within the literary tradition around the omnibus and show how he draws upon some of its main tropes. The second part will examine how Galdós adapts the plot of Cervantes’ novel to this new social space: what happens when Don Quixote is set on a streetcar? At a number of points in the story, the narrator insists on a causal relation between the omnibus and his growing madness: ‘poco tardó mi mente en apoderarse de aquel mismo asunto, para darle vueltas de arriba abajo, operación psicológica que no deja de ser estimulada por la regular marcha del coche y el sordo y monótono rumor de sus ruedas, limando el hierro de los carriles’ (76). How exactly does the tram contribute to the narrator’s folly? In what follows, I seek to answer these questions by tracing the steps of the narrator’s journey and analyzing the role of the streetcar in his descent into madness.

**Tram Sociability: Omnibus Tropes**

At this point we may examine how Galdós represents the experience of streetcar travel and how he uses the various features of omnibus literature in his story. The opening of the story work reveals that the narrator, despite the recent introduction of the tram in Madrid, is no novice to public transportation. To assure himself a seat, he bypasses the queue grabbing onto the bar that supports the staircase to the *impériale*, the upper level of the streetcar. In the process, he bumps into a fellow passenger, Don Dionisio Cascajares de la Vallina, who enters from the other side and
who in turn collides with an Englishwoman behind him, knocking her straw bonnet with his cane. The opening of the story, thus, draws attention to the awkward proximity of omnibus travel. The damage caused to women’s clothing—particularly to hats—is a common trope of omnibus literature as is the lack of gallantry on the part of the male passengers, who often pushed their way into the vehicle before their female companions. Later on in the story, the narrator falls asleep, and his head droops onto the Englishwoman’s shoulder, an episode that recalls Daumier’s ‘Intérieur d’un omnibus’ (Types parisiens). Still later, he pets a dog, who bites her and rips her dress. From the outset, thus, the omnibus focus lies on the interior of the vehicle, which is defined as a space in which boundaries between the public and private—self and other—are violated.

The first character introduced in the story, Don Dionisio, is in many ways the incarnation of this space. Just as the streetcar is frequented by many social classes (‘omnibus’ means in Latin ‘for everyone’), the narrator introduces Dionisio ironically as ‘amigo mío, como lo es de todo el mundo’ and as the doctor of choice of a ‘multitud de familias de todas jerarquías, mayormente cuando también es fama que en su bondad presta servicios ajenos a la ciencia, aunque siempre de índole rigurosamente honesta’ (72; emphasis mine). Like the streetcar, moreover, Dionisio has a tendency to blur the boundaries between the private and the public. Not only does he transgress the physical space of the Englishwoman bumping into her hat, but he also intrudes on the mental space of the narrator, cornering him into a conversation in which he has no interest. This exchange, moreover, consists of a series of indiscretions. As the narrator observes, ‘[n]adie sabe como él sucesos interesantes que no pertenecen al dominio público, ni ninguno tiene en más estupendo grado la manía de preguntar, si bien este vicio de exagerada inquisitividad se compensa en él por la
prontitud con que dice cuanto sabe’ (72). Dionisio intrudes on and makes public what belongs to the private domain.

As the narrator evades Dionisio’s prying questions, the doctor begins to ‘desembuchar’, spilling the latest gossip. Notably, the story that he tells revolves around the threat of exposure. One of his clients is an unhappy countess who, neglected by her profligate and unfaithful husband, has become the victim of a plot by an evil butler who seeks to destroy her by revealing a compromising secret. In narrating this story, Dionisio adopts many of the commonplaces of popular fiction and, particularly, of the melodramatic novel. He draws a Manichaean opposition between the butler, ‘un hombre abominable’, and the Countess, who resembles the ‘ángel del hogar’ so common in the nineteenth-century novel: ‘una mujer excelente, angelical, tan discreta como hermosa’. Furthermore, he introduces a notion of legibility that is common in popular fiction. The butler’s character is evident in his physiognomy: ‘Bien claro indica su rostro que de allí no puede salir cosa buena’ (74). It is therefore not surprising that the narrator will conflate this story with the fragment of the serial novel that he reads in a later scene. Not only is the plot the same but so too are the style and the literary conventions.

What has generally gone unnoticed in critical discussions, however, is the way in which Dionisio’s description subtly undermines the melodramatic tropes with which he frames his story. His first observation about the countess is: ‘Si hubiera seguido mis consejos no se vería en situación tan crítica’ (73). The heroine, it seems, is not entirely blameless; had she heeded the doctor’s advice, she would not be in her current predicament. Dionisio goes on to insist on her discretion, but his description of her conduct raises questions: ‘¿Es extraño que trate de sofocar su pena divirtiéndose honestamente aquí y allí, donde quiera que suena un piano? Es más, yo
mismo se lo aconsejo y le digo: “Señora, procure usted distraerse, que la vida se acaba”’ (74). The use of the word ‘honestamente’ echoes the narrator’s ironic characterization of Dionisio’s non-medical ‘servicios ajenos a la ciencia’. And just as we suspect that the latter are shady (why else would the narrator resort to euphemism?), so we imagine that the countess has been rather undiscriminating in her amusements: ‘donde quiera que suena un piano’, after all, could include some rather improper venues. Our suspicions are partially confirmed when Dionisio mentions the existence of a young man who has taken upon himself ‘la empresa de distraer a la Condesa’ (74). But what truly raises red flags is the mention of a butler ‘que se ha apoderado de cierto secreto que la compromete, y con esta arma pretende qué sé yo…’ (75). By definition, the ‘ángel del hogar’ is a woman above suspicion; she can have no compromising secrets. Indeed, as the conversation evolves, we begin to wonder whether the countess is in trouble not so much for ignoring the doctor’s advice but rather for heeding it, for distracting herself a bit too much.

At first, none of this seems to interest Dionisio’s interlocutor and fellow passenger, the narrator. The count’s adultery leaves him indifferent; male infidelity, after all, was common in the nineteenth century. The possible indiscretion of the countess is perhaps more transgressive but far from uncommon in aristocratic circles. Only when Dionisio mentions the butler does the narrator react: ‘ello merece un ejemplar castigo—dije yo, descargando también el peso de mis iras sobre aquel hombre’ (75). The gerund clause in this sentence, however, suggests that the narrator is responding not so much to the story as to Dionisio himself: he is projecting his annoyance with his chatty neighbour onto the villain of the latter’s story. With this displacement, Galdós creates a subtle parallelism between the butler’s intrusion in his mistress’ life and Dionisio’s indiscretions: both Dionisio and his villain represent the
danger of the private becoming public. At this point, the tram reaches Cibeles where Dionisio descends, leaving the narrator in suspense.

The opening encounter with Dionisio has several functions in the narrative. First, it introduces an element of ‘reality’ that gives a partial grounding for the narrator’s subsequent projections. At the same time, it establishes the awkward form of sociability that characterizes the tram. After this initial encounter, the story can be divided into two main sequences (1 and 2), each of which has three main parts: (a) observations of and reflection upon the tram, (b) the introduction of a stimulus (in the first sequence, the serial novel, and in the second, the dream) and (c) the application of the stimulus to the tram. In what follows, I will refer to the three steps of the first sequence as 1a, 1b and 1c and to those of the second as 2a, 2b and 2c.

Once Dionisio is gone, the narrator begins to reflect on the awkwardness of public transportation (1a):

¡Cuán distintas caras y cuán diversas expresiones! Unos parecen no inquietarse ni lo más mínimo de los que van a su lado; otros pasan revista al corrillo con impertinente curiosidad; unos están alegres, otros tristes, aquél bosteza, el de más allá ríe, y a pesar de la brevedad del trayecto, no hay uno que no desee terminarlo pronto. Pues entre los mil fastidios de la existencia, ninguno aventaja al que consiste en estar una docena de personas mirándose las caras sin decirse palabra, y contándose recíprocamente sus arrugas, sus lunares, y este o el otro accidente observado en el rostro o en la ropa. (76-77)

The narrator’s description of this experience recalls a well-known passage from the sociologist Georg Simmel:
The person who is able to see but unable to hear is much more ... troubled than the person who is able to hear but unable to see. Here is something... characteristic of the big city. The interpersonal relationships of people in big cities are characterized by a markedly greater emphasis on the use of the eyes than on that of the ears. This can be attributed chiefly to the institution of public conveyances. Before buses, railroads and streetcars became fully established during the nineteenth century, people were never put in a position of having to stare at one another for minutes or even hours on end without exchanging a word. (cited in Benjamin, 191)

The experience of seeing without hearing is very similar to that of reading. Like a reader, the modern urban dweller is confronted with visual signs that s/he must decipher without the assistance of an authorial voice. For both Simmel and Galdós’ narrator, this perspective is a troubling and alienating one. In the first section of the story, the narrator experiences the omnibus as a ‘small world’ with the ‘sound on’: he runs into an acquaintance, who speaks of an unnamed countess assuming that the narrator knows her. After Dionisio leaves, however, the narrator begins to see the tram as a space of awkward proximity with strangers, an arbitrary slice of an alienatingly large world. The emphasis now lies on the randomness, heterogeneity and odd juxtapositions of the tram—the metonymies of the urban space.

Confronted with such haphazardness and unfamiliarity, the narrator seeks to find (or project) a meaning:

Al entrar, ya encontramos a alguien; otros vienen después que estamos allí; unos se marchan, quedándonos nosotros, y por último también nos
vamos. Imitación es esto de la vida humana, en que el nacer y el morir son como las entradas y salidas a que me refiero (77).

Where in the initial observations the tram is pure metonymy—random juxtapositions of disparate things—it now becomes a meaningful metaphor. Mark Malin considers Galdós’ simile to be a ‘philosophical interlude’ in the text, something that lifts it above ‘popular formulaic plots’ (88). Galdós’ metaphor, however, is actually a common trope of omnibus literature. The image of the streetcar as a symbol for life or the world appears in some of the earliest texts on the subject, such as Ernest Fouinet’s contribution to the collection *Paris ou Les cent-et-un*:

L’omnibus est l’image du monde; on vient, on s’en va : qui s’en occupe ? A moins que vous ne soyez le Roi, le premier enfant qu’attend une jeune mère, ou le célibataire que guettent ses collatéraux, le prêtre qui baptise, le prêtre qui enterre, vous regardez-vous entrer, vous regardez-vous sortir ? (74)

Similarly, in an essay in *Nouveau tableau de Paris au XIXème siècle*, Louis Huart represents the ride as a metaphor for life itself:

Car notre vie est-elle rien autre chose qu’un voyage en omnibus ? Comme les voyageurs d’omnibus, nous arrivons tous on ne sait d’où; nous prenons place à côté de ceux qui sont installés; nous faisons quelques connaissances avec les personnes qui voyagent de concert avec nous. —Si elles descendent en route, leur souvenir est bien vite effacé de notre mémoire par d’autres voyageurs qui viennent prendre leur place; —puis, dans l’omnibus comme dans le monde, nous nous marchons sur les pieds les uns des autres, parce que partout les rangs sont pressés, et que nous cherchons à faire notre chemin sans penser à
nos voisins;—puis enfin l’omnibus étant arrivé à sa station, au terme de la course, chacun de ces voyageurs venus on ne sait d’où, se dispersent et disparaissent pour aller on ne sait où. (IV, 177-178)

What is interesting in the Spanish passage is not the metaphor itself so much as Galdós’ manipulation of it. As the narrator begins to project an image and meaning onto the tram, he moves away from a vision of the vehicle as a random slice of a large and infinitely diverse world:

Y para que la semejanza sea más completa, también hay un mundo chico de pasiones en miniatura dentro de aquel cajón. Muchos van allí que se nos antojan excelentes personas, y nos agrada su aspecto y hasta les vemos salir con disgusto. Otros, por el contrario, nos revientan desde que les echamos la vista encima: les aborrecemos durante diez minutos; examinamos con cierto rencor sus caracteres frenológicos y sentimos verdadero gozo al verles salir. (77)

Where Huart and Fouinet use the metaphor of the omnibus ride as life to underscore the indifference and unknowability of the world, the image serves in Galdós to refamiliarise the space for the narrator, who returns to the idea of a ‘mundo chico’.

Significantly, he also introduces in these lines a notion of legibility. Whereas before he found himself confronted by a series of meaningless signs—a random collection of wrinkles and birthmarks—he now approaches the vehicle as a legible text. Unlike Huart who underscores the unknowability of the passengers (on ne sait où, on ne sait d’où), the narrator is confident in his ability to decipher them. The narrator’s ‘phrenological’ approach echoes Don Dionisio’s initial characterization of the butler (‘Bien claro indica su rostro…’). Almost as soon as he begins to ‘read’ the text of the tram, moreover, he introduces a binary logic. The multiplicity in the initial
description is reduced to two sorts of characters: good and bad. In the rest of the story, the narrator will seek to decipher not only the *feuilleton* serial novel but also the novel that is the tram itself.

Returning to the four categories discussed at the beginning of this section, we may now make the following observations:

1. Although the narrator makes occasional allusions to Madrid landmarks (Cibeles, the Puerta del Sol, etc.), the main focus of Galdós’ story is the interior of the vehicle and the dynamics of the tram.

2. Galdós combines ‘sound on’ with ‘sound off’ episodes. It is with the latter that the narrator begins to experience the tram as an alienating and unfamiliar space.

3. To deal with this unfamiliarity, the narrator attempts to assert the legibility of the space, insisting on his ability to decipher signs and faces.

4. At the same time, he attempts to reduce the largeness and randomness of the urban space to more familiar and comprehensible dimensions, converting the tram into a ‘small world’ with his metaphor.

**Reading (in) the Tram: Streetcar Quixotism**

At this point, we may turn from examine how Galdós’ representation of the *streetcar* and use of the tropes of omnibus fiction relate to the way he accommodates the Quixote story to the new social space of the tram. This process begins when, after his initial reflections on the tram, he...
narrator accidentally drops the package of books that he has been carrying with him. Upon picking them up, he notices that the newspaper in which they are wrapped includes a fragment from a serial novel (1b). As the paper is ripped, both the beginning and end of the story are missing, but the narrator is able to make out an episode in which a ‘mayordomo insolente’ named Mudarra seeks to extort sexual favors from a countess by threatening to expose a secret. To the narrator, the excerpt seems a continuation of the story that the narrator has just heard from Dionisio.

The fragment, however, departs from the doctor’s narrative in an important way. Where the doctor hints at a certain frivolity in the countess’ part that might have led to her predicament—she is a woman with compromising secrets—the feuilleton represents its heroine as an innocent victim. In the final scene, the butler imitates her handwriting and forges a compromising letter to a young admirer. The secret that he threatens to reveal is not a real sin but a fabrication. Moreover, the frustrated desires of the countess in Dionisio’s story are transferred in the novel to Mudarra: it is not the heroine’s indiscretion but the villain’s lust that creates the situation. The feuilleton, thus, offers an even more radical opposition between good and evil: where the story told in ‘reality’ includes details that undermine its melodramatic discourse, the serial novel adopts a pure Manichean logic. In so doing, it continues and reinforces the binary opposition that the narrator has introduced in his reflections on the tram.

The newspaper fragment conforms to the conventions of melodramatic fiction not only in its binary oppositions and theatrical confrontations but also in its emphasis on gestures and body language. As Peter Brooks has observed, melodrama derived from a mute form of theatre—pantomime dialoguée—in which characterization was achieved through gesticulation, posture and facial expression
The text that the narrator reads insists on physical features and movements that reveal the hidden intentions and nature of the characters. Mudarra’s perversity, for example, is clear from his appearance and gestures:

Era Mudarra un hombre como de cincuenta años, moreno, rechoncho y patizambo, de cabellos ásperos y en desorden, grande y colmilluda la boca. Sus ojos medio ocultos tras la frondosidad de largas, negras y espesísimas cejas, en aquellos instantes expresaban la más bestial concupiscencia. […] El mayordomo […] era como una fiera a quien se escapa la presa que ha tenido un moment antes entre sus uñas. Dio un resoplido, hizo un gesto de amenaza y salió despacio con pasos muy quedos. (79-81)

The feuilleton, thus, not only seems to continue Dionisio’s story but also reinforces the notion of legibility that the doctor introduced in the opening conversation. We might say that the logic of the feuilleton is metaphorical: it insists on similarity, the resemblance between appearance and character and between the beast and the man. The novel creates a world in which the smallest gestures signify and gives clues to the hidden essence of its inhabitants.

It is at this point that the story begins to veer in a quixotic direction. As many critics have observed, the narrator, like Don Quixote, reads a false and degraded literature and projects its contents onto the world around him (1c). Galdós’ treatment of this quixotism, however, differs from Cervantes’ in several ways. The first is the description of the protagonist’s descent into madness. In Cervantes this transition takes place in a single sentence: ‘él se enfrascó tanto en su lectura, que se le pasaban las noches leyendo de claro en claro, y los días de turbio en turbio, y así, del poco dormir y del mucho leer, se le secó el cerebro, de manera que vino a perder el juicio’
Galdós, in contrast, offers a more gradual and detailed account of the onset of insanity. At first, the narrator’s reaction to the feuilleton passage is lucid and cynical, in keeping with the ironic tone of his observations about Dionisio in the opening of the story:

Me puse a pensar en la relación que existía entre las noticias sueltas que oí de boca del Sr. Cascajares y la escena leída en aquel papelucho, folletín, sin duda, traducido de alguna desatinada novela de Ponson du Terrail o de Montepin. Será una tontería, dije para mí, pero es lo cierto que ya me inspira interés esa señora Condesa, víctima de la barbarie de un mayordomo imposible, cual no existe sino en la trastornada cabeza de algún novelista nacido para aterrizar a las gentes sencillas. (81-82)

The narrator distinguishes clearly between Dionisio’s story and the serial novel and recognizes the latter for what it is: bad literature, a falsification of reality. The juxtaposition of Mudarra’s forgery of the letter at the end of the newspaper fragment with the description of the feuilleton author reinforces this point, creating a parallelism between the anonymous author and the villain of the story: both imitate the works of others (translating or forging), construct dangerous ’plots’ and seek to terrorize the innocent (the Countess, simple readers). Indeed, the real evildoer in Galdós’ story is ultimately the serial novelist, whose fictions provoke the narrator’s madness.

The narrator himself shows some awareness of this parallelism, when he wonders, ‘¿Y qué haría el maldito para vengarse? Capaz sería de imaginar cualquiera atrocidad de esas que ponen fin a un capítulo de sensación’ (82). But instead of recognizing the author as a villain, the narrator represents the villain (Mudarra) as an author. It is interesting to note, moreover, that the narrator slides from a metonymical
logic (a relation of cause and effect) to a metaphorical one (the perception of a similarity). Where in his first reaction the butler is the product of the novelist (a product of the author’s ‘trastornada cabeza’), in this quotation Mudarra is equated with the author or becomes one himself. Just as the narrator projects a simile upon the random juxtapositions of the tram, so in his reading he converts metonym into metaphor.

This slide from metonymy (the defining feature of the tram) into metaphor (the principle of the feuilleton) lays the ground for the narrator’s subsequent confusion. Despite himself, he finds himself wondering how the story will end: ‘¿Y el Conde, qué hará? Y aquel mozalvete de quien hablaron Cascajares en el coche y Mudarra en el folletín, ¿qué hará, quién será?’ (82) Where at the beginning of the passage, the narrator drew a distinction between the ‘noticias sueltas’ and the serial novel, he now assumes that Dionisio’s ‘cierto joven’ and Mudarra’s ‘caballerito’ are one and the same (‘aquel mozalvete’). Notably, the first quixotic confusion occurs at the level of discourse. At this point, the narrator is not projecting what he reads (words) onto what he sees (image) but is rather mixing up a story he has heard with a story he has read. To put it another way, he is conflating two sets of words.

The next step in the narrator’s descent is the confusion of word and image, of the story on the page and the visual spectacle of the tram. Looking up from his reading, he notices a man sitting across from him—‘sus rodillas tocando mis rodillas’—whose appearance curiously resembles the description of the butler in the feuilleton:

No podía ser otro: hasta los más insignificantes detalles de su vestido indicaban claramente que era él. Reconocí la tez morena y lustrosa, los cabellos indomables, cuyas mechas surgían en opuestas direcciones
como las culebras de Medusa, los ojos hundidos bajo la espesura de unas agrestes cejas, las barbas, no menos revueltas e incultas que el pelo, los pies torcidos hacia dentro como los de los loros, y en fin, la misma mirada, el mismo hombre en el aspecto, en el traje, en el respirar, en el toser, hasta en el modo de meterse la mano en el bolsillo para pagar. (83)

The narrator not only identifies the passenger with the character but also applies to the tram the same strategies of reading that the serial novel has encouraged: he studies and seeks meaning in the smallest details of the passenger’s appearance and interprets his most minimal movements. The narrator’s attention has shifted from the feuilleton to the streetcar, but he is still reading, deciphering the visual text of the tram.

Galdós, indeed, insists on reading in this episode in a number of ways. When the tram passenger removes a letter from his wallet and starts to read glances over it, the narrator attempts both to decipher his facial expression—his ‘sonrisa de demonio’—and to read his lips: ‘hasta me pareció que decía entre dientes: “¡Qué bien imitada está la letra!”’ (83). He even tries to read into the letter itself peering over the man’s shoulder. The narrator, thus, passes from reading the text of the feuilleton to reading the text(s) of the tram. In each case, he is deciphering silent signs.

This insistence on the silence of the space is another feature that distinguishes Galdós’ story from Cervantes’. Both Don Quixote and the narrator project their readings onto their world, and both do so in public spaces: the inn and the tram. Where the inn is a place of encounter and speech, however, the streetcar is generally a place of silence—brief and elusive encounters—in which the signs are primarily visual. Where Don Quixote’s literary vision is constantly placed in dialogue with the earthy, oral culture of Sancho, moreover, the narrator is alone in his encounter with
the signs of the city and the text. What is in Cervantes an opposition of world (orality) and fiction (text) becomes in Galdós an opposition between two forms of textuality: the silent signs of the serial novel and the silent signs of the tram. By representing the tram with the ‘sound off’ in 1a, Galdós prepares the quixotic conflation, which is ultimately the projection of one text onto another.

Another difference in this form of quixotism is the nature of the protagonist’s transgression. The divide that Don Quixote crosses when he projects his fiction is a temporal one: the boundary between the Middle Ages of chivalric romance and the early-modern world in which he lives. Galdós’ narrator, in contrast, is reading contemporary fiction. The line that he crosses is not temporal but social. In projecting the feuilleton onto the tram, he is invading the privacy of a fellow passenger: ‘[el pasajero] miró [el sobre] bien, recreándose en su infame obra, hasta que observó que yo con curiosidad indiscreta y descortés alargaba demasiado el rostro para leer el sobrecrito’ (83). The confusion between text and reality goes hand in hand with a blurring of the divide between the public and the private space. The streetcar, indeed, seems to lend itself to this type of confusion. As we saw in the first section, the tightness of the coach and the awkward proximity of strangers tended to compromise the divide between self and other.

The narrator’s reaction to Mudarra confuses not only the boundary between the public and private but also the distinction between reading and writing. The details of the wild hair and thick eyebrows are present in the feuilleton excerpt, but the rest of the description above is pure invention (the unruly beard, the sunken eyes, the twisted feet, the cough, the gestures). As in his reflections on the tram, the narrator has converted a random contiguity (the happenstance that led this passenger to sit next to him) into a series of metaphors (the snakes of Medusa, the parrot-like feet).
The narrator, however, is still somewhat aware of his authorial role:

Cuando salió el hombre en quien creí ver el terrible mayordomo, quedéme pensando en el incidente de la carta y me lo expliqué a mi manera, no queriendo ser en tan delicada cuestión menos fecundo que el novelista, autor de lo que momentos antes había leído. Mudarra, pensé, deseoso de vengarse de la Condesa ¡oh, infortunada señora! finge su letra y escribe una carta a cierto caballero, quien hubo esto y lo otro y lo de más allá. En la carta le da una cita en su propia casa; llega el joven a la hora indicada y poco después el marido, a quien se ha tenido cuidado de avisar, para que coja in fragranti a su desleal esposa: ¡oh admirable recurso del ingenio! Esto, que en la vida tiene su pro y su contra, en una novela viene como anillo al dedo. (84-85; emphasis mine)

Although it is possible to read the gerund clause in italics as a retrospective observation (the viewpoint of the ‘cured’ narrator who looks back), the use of exclamation points in the evocation of his ingenio suggests that the observation represents the character’s thoughts on the tram. The narrator, that is, is still aware of his own invention. He has not altogether lost sight of the distinction between fiction and reality. It is interesting to note that his extension of the plot combines the story and style of the serial novel (the forged letter, the revenge plot) with Dionisio’s insinuations: ‘esto y lo otro y lo de más allá’ suggests that the Countess has something to hide. The narrator has not yet accepted the idealizing version of the feuilleton. At the end of the first sequence, thus, the narrator has not completely lost his bearings in reality: he recognizes the fiction for what it is, he is aware of the role of his own imagination and he offers a slightly cynical version of the story itself.
At this point, however, the story begins to double back on itself, and the second sequence begins. Once again, the narrator turns his attention to the streetcar and its passengers (2a), and as before, he establishes a relationship between his thought process to the movement of the tram: ‘ya por causa del calor que allí dentro se sentía, ya porque el movimiento pausado y monótono del vehículo produce cierto mareo que degenera en sueño, lo cierto es que sentía pesados los párpados’ (85). Where his initial musings are lucid and philosophical, however, his thoughts now degenerate into hallucination. As in the first sequence, his reflections are provoked by the odd juxtapositions of the public vehicle: ‘la hilera de caras de ambos sexos […] barbadas unas, limpas de pelo las otras, aquéllas riendo, éstas muy acartonadas y serias’ (85). This perception of difference, however, gradually gives way to a sense of sameness and connectedness between the passengers:

Después me pareció que obedeciendo a la contracción de un músculo común, todas aquellas caras hacían muecas y guiños, abriendo y cerrando los ojos y las bocas […] las bocas se abrirían en línea horizontal, produciendo mudas carcajadas, o se estiraban hacia adelante formando hocicos puntiagudos, parecidos al interesante rostro de cierto benemérito animal que tiene sobre sí el anatema de no poder ser nombrado. (86; emphasis mine)

Once again, the narrator projects a metaphor (the comparison with the ass) and coherence (sameness) onto the random differences and contiguities of the tram.

As the narrator begins to doze, his perceptions of both time and space are distorted. Although the early streetcars in Madrid averaged twelve kilometers per hour (López Bustos, 18), the tram seems to move ‘con toda la velocidad que puede suponer la imaginación, tratándose de la traslación de lo sólido’ (86). In the
hallucination that follows, indeed, the tram seems to pass from one state of matter to another. The solidity of the world around him gives way first to liquid—an underwater fantasy in which the coach is surrounded by fish and molluscs—and then to gas as the vehicle seems to fly through the air, ‘arrastrado por algún volátil apocalíptico, más fuerte que el hipogrifo’ (87). As Peñate Rivero (252) and Malín (91) point out, this flight recalls the Clavileño episode of Part II of Don Quixote, an allusion that is reinforced by a passing reference to a windmill: ‘el rumor de las ruedas y de la fuerza motriz recordaba el zumbido de las grandes aspas de un molino de viento’ (87). In Cervantes’ novel, the Clavileño episode marks a turning point in the nature of the hero’s quixotism. Where in the first part of the novel he generally brings his readings into his world, actively projecting them upon the people and situations he comes across in his travels, in the Clavileño episode he enters the fictional world (staged by the Duke and Duchess) and passively allows himself to be transported through the heavens. The dream episode in Galdós’ story will have a similar function, allowing the narrator to step into the world of the feuilleton.

Lulled to sleep by the movement of the tram, the narrator has a dream (2b) that continues the story of the serial novel. Her young admirer, who has received the forged letter, follows its instructions and goes to her rooms at the appointed time. Surprised by his visit, the Countess immediately tells him to leave, but her husband arrives before he can get away. In the scene that follows, the Countess plays the piano while the young man drinks a cup of tea that is probably laced with poison. In this dream episode, the narrator not only continues the story of the serial novel but also adds many details: the Countess’ lapdog, the brand of biscuits served at tea, a piano piece by the American composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk, etc. Although asleep, he continues to function as an author.
His dream, however, differs somewhat from the story that he imagines after identifying his fellow passenger as Mudarra. Where in the latter episode the narrator retains Dionisio’s cynical assumptions about the Countess, the dream represents her as an ideal heroine:

Estaba peinada sin afectación, y en esto, como en su traje, se comprendía que no pensaba salir aquella noche. [...] Yo observaba con creciente ansiedad la hermosa figura que tanto deseaba conocer, y me pareció que podía leer sus ideas en aquella noble frente donde la costumbre de la reconcentración mental había trazado unas cuantas líneas imperceptibles, que el tiempo convertiría pronto en arrugas (89).

In contrast to Dionisio’s earlier insinuations about the Countess’ indiscriminate amusements, the heroine here has no intention of going out, and her modest dress reflects her virtuous domesticity. The dream continues the emphasis of the feuilleton on both the virtue-innocence of the heroine and the legibility of appearance. As in the serial novel, moreover, the action focuses on gesture and facial expression. The language of the body replaces that of the tongue: ‘La Condesa quiso hablar, érale imposible articular palabra. El Conde la miró de tal modo, que la infeliz cedió ante la terrible expresión de sus ojos, como la paloma fascinada por el boa constrictor’ (91). The metaphor of the snake even recalls the style of the feuilleton with its emphasis on dangerous beasts. As the narrator loses his sense of reality, he drifts further and further toward the conventions of popular fiction.

In the initial description of the Countess in the dream, the narrator’s position is still that of the tram rider who attempts to interpret the character of someone whom he does not know (‘la hermosa figura que tanto deseaba conocer’, 89) and with whom he cannot interact. When the heroine begins to play the piano, however, the narrator
inserts himself into the scene: ‘no podía ver el semblante de la Condesa, sentada de espaldas a mí; pero me la figuraba en tal estado de aturdimiento y pavor, que llegué a pensar que el piano se tocaba solo’ (91). Once again, the story confuses the fictional and the real, but where in the first sequence the narrator brings his reading into his world (the streetcar), projecting the feuilleton character onto a fellow passenger, in the second he inserts elements of his world (most notably, himself) into his fiction (the Countess’ rooms).

As in the first sequence (particularly 1c), this transgression of the divide between fiction and reality involves a blurring of the boundary between public and private space. In the dream, the narrator leaves the collective space of the streetcar and enters the domestic space of the aristocratic drawing room. Up until this point, the characters in the story (with the exception of Mudarra) have been known by their titles (count, countess) or attributes (young man). Once the narrator penetrates the private space, however, they are referred to by their given names: the Countess becomes Antonia, and the young man, Rafael. As the divide between reality and fiction blurs, the social distance between the narrator and the characters diminishes (after the dream, the young man is always referred to by his Christian name). The ending of the dream sequence reinforces this familiarity and intrusion on private space. Suddenly, the Countess stops playing the piano and screams. At the same moment, the narrator is roused from his dream slumber by the cries of his neighbour on the tram, the Englishwoman, on whose shoulder he has fallen asleep. Her indignation underscores the confusion of the public and private domains: ‘¡Oooh! Usted creer… my body es… su cama for usted… to sleep’ (92). At the same time that narrator penetrates the private rooms of the Countess in the dream, he treats the public space as a boudoir in ‘reality’.
The final step in the second sequence is the application of the stimulus (dream) to reality (2c). Once again, the narrator projects the story of the dream onto the passenger sitting across from him: ‘Figúrate, ¡oh cachazudo y benévolo lector! Cuál sería mi sorpresa cuando vi frente a mí ¿a quién creerás? Al joven de la escena soñada, al mismo D. Rafael en persona’ (93). The narrator here seems to confuse cause and effect. The order of events (the narrator’s initial examination of his fellow passengers followed by the dream) suggests that the passenger across from him is the inspiration for the representation of Rafael in the dream. The narrator’s subconscious has simply fused elements of the serial novel with the random visual data of the tram, giving the character the physiognomy of the passenger. The narrator, however, assumes that Rafael’s appearance on the tram is a coincidence, another example of the ‘small world’ phenomenon. Before the dream, the narrator was at least somewhat aware of his authorial role. Now, however, he fails to recognize the creations of his own imagination. He has not only stepped into the text but he has altogether lost sight of its textuality.

The relation between the serial novel and reality, thus, inverts between the two sequences of the story. In the first the narrator projects (with some self-consciousness) the fictional world onto his own (the tram), while in the second he projects his world (his fellow passenger and himself) into the fiction. A similar inversion takes place around the other text in the story: the streetcar. As we have seen, the tram is a series of silent signs that the passenger must decipher. In the first part of the story, the narrator is the reader of these signs. As he loses his reason, however, he increasingly becomes an object of curiosity for his fellow passengers. On the return trip (from Pozas to Salamanca), the narrator, who has until now been a spectator, becomes himself the spectacle: ‘sin duda el trastorno interior debía pintarse en mi rostro,
porque todos me miraban como se mira lo que no se ve todos los días’ (100). His physiognomy is now the text that the other passengers interpret. The Englishwoman, with whom he once again coincides, makes a gesture to suggest that he is insane (100), while a washerwoman becomes convinced that he is drunk (103).

The inversions of Galdós’ story point to the oddity of the streetcar as a social space. The tram and its passengers are a text that invites an interpretation, but in deciphering it, we inevitably project meaning and plot. In such a space, the line between reading and writing is easily blurred. There is always the danger that we may lose sight of our own projections. As we have seen, Galdós aligns the distinction between reading and writing with the opposition between the public and the private. As the narrator loses his sense of his own authorship, he also loses his sense of the divide between self and other, between his own invention and the reality of the passengers.

At this point, we may return to the categories laid out in the first part of this study. At the beginning of each sequence (1a, 2a), the narrator experiences the tram in an alienating and defamiliarised way, as a haphazard collection of elements taken at random from the ‘large world’ of the metropolis. In each case, however, the introduction of a stimulur (1b, 2b) seems to reduce the unfamiliarity of the space. The serial novel (1b) introduces a notion of legibility that encourages the narrator to see the tram as a decipherable space, as a text to be read. The dream sequence (2b), similarly, converts the silent tram into a drawing room with the ‘sound on’. When the narrator applies the stimuli to the tram in 1c and 2c, the tram has now become a more recognizable and familiar space, a ‘small world’. By applying the commonplaces of the serial novel to the common place that is the tram, the narrator seeks to reduce the alienation of the modern urban experience.
NOTES

1 See Extramiana; Fernández Cifuentes; Malin; Oliver; Peñate Rivero; Polizzi; Spires (pp. 27-31); Sánchez Fernández and Padilla Mangas.

2 An exception to this is Rogers who argues that the tram is a ‘twilight zone’ that has an ‘otherworldly effect’ (120).

3 The earliest trams in Madrid were horse-drawn and hence known as ‘tranvía de sangre’. The electric tram was introduced in 1898. On the early history of the tram in Madrid, see López Bustos and López Gómez.

4 For two very insightful explorations of this literature in the French context, see Belenky.

5 Many of these inconveniences of omnibus travel are present in one of the earliest French texts about the experience: Les Omnibus. Premier voyage de Cadet La Blague, de la place de la Madeleine à la Bastille et retour (1828).

6 On the conventions of melodrama, see Brooks. On the ángel del hogar, see Aldaraca and Jagoe.

7 On the connection between Galdós’ story and Cervantes’ novel, see, for example, Baah (4-6), Baker (76), Fernández Cifuentes (297), Malin, Peñate Rivero, 1995 (253), Rogers (123-124) and Spires (31).

8 I disagree here with Ed Baker, who considers that ‘Galdós’s character deploys an archaic narrative form to apprehend a modern reality’ (76). As is clear from Galdós’ article ‘Observaciones sobre la novela contemporánea en España’ (1870), published just a year before the short story, the ‘novela de salón’ and serial fiction were very much the popular literature of his day. The narrator is not guilty of anachronism so much as but of bad taste in his choice of literature.
9 Just as Alonso Quijano takes on a title above his status (‘don’), Galdós’ narrator, who is most likely bourgeois, imagines himself mixing in superior social circles. This ascent contrasts with the path of the tram, which moves from the neighborhood of Salamanca, populated by the bourgeoisie and aristocracy (López Carcelén 23), to Pozas, another new but primarily working-class zone (Montesinos 500). As the narrator crosses Madrid, he is descending socially, and his interlocutors and the people about whom they speak become increasingly more common: a doctor who frequents aristocratic houses (Dionisio), a businessman (‘Mudarra’), a maidservant with a dog, a man with an ‘hablar campanudo que imponía respeto’ (99) and a couple who discuss a washerwoman.

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