

Emilia Pardo Bazán

(1851-1921)

THE COUNT Pardo Bazán's only daughter, an infant prodigy, was able to read and write at the age of four, and at fourteen recited long excerpts from the *Bible*, the *Iliad*, the *Divine Comedy* and *Don Quixote*, often commenting on aspects of these classics in essays which evidenced a keenly perceptive mind. Her early poems, written when she was only eight, celebrated the victorious homecoming of the Spanish troops who had been fighting in Africa. After her marriage in 1868 she settled in Madrid, then an extremely lively city, and spent her summers in her beloved Galician countryside. During 1870-1875 she traveled extensively in Europe, becoming intimately familiar with English, French, Italian and German literary trends. She knew foreign literatures better than her own, and was late in finally discovering the prose fiction of her Spanish contemporaries: especially Alarcón, Valera and Pérez Galdós. In 1879 the "Revista de España" published her first novel, *Pascual López*. What especially interested her was the newest literary movement, naturalism, which she championed in her book of criticism *La cuestión palpitante* (1883), for which she was bitterly attacked by Catholics and belated Romantics. That she emerged victorious is proven by her magnificent cycle of naturalist novels: *La*

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tribuna (1883), *Los pazos de Ulloa* (1886), *La Madre Naturaleza* (1887). In addition to her powerful longer narratives, Pardo Bazán wrote numerous short stories collected in sundry volumes—*Cuentos de Marinada* (1892), *El saludo de las brujas* (1898), *Cuentos sacroprofanos* (1899), etc.—all of which show her tremendous versatility, gifted craftsmanship, psychological insight, unerring suspense and, of course, vivid intelligence.

EL REVÓLVER

por Emilia Pardo Bazán

EN UN acceso de confianza, de ésos que provoca la familiaridad y convivencia de los balnearios, la enferma del corazón¹ me refirió su mal, con todos los detalles de sofocaciones, violentas palpitaciones, vértigos, síncope, colapsos, en que se ve llegar la última hora . . . Mientras hablaba, la miraba yo atentamente. Era una mujer como de treinta y cinco a treinta y seis años, estropeada por el padecimiento; al menos tal creí, aunque prolongado el examen, empecé a suponer que hubiese algo más allá de lo físico en su ruina. Hablaba y se expresaba, en efecto, como quien ha sufrido mucho, y yo sé que los males del cuerpo, generalmente, cuando no son de inminente gravedad, no bastan para producir ese marasmo, ese radical abatimiento. Y, notando cómo las anchas hojas de los plátanos, tocadas de carmín por la mano artística del otoño, caían a tierra majestuosamente y quedaban extendidas cual² manos cortadas, la hice observar, para arrancar confidencias,³ lo pasajero de todo, la melancolía del tránsito de las cosas . . .

— Nada es nada—me contestó, comprendiendo instantáneamente que, no una curiosidad, sino una compasión, llamaba a las puertas de su espíritu.—Nada es nada . . . a no ser⁴ que nosotros mismos convirtamos ese nada en algo.

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IN A BURST of confidence, one of those provoked by the familiarity and companionship of bathing resorts, the woman suffering from heart trouble told me about her illness, with all the details of chokings, violent palpitations, dizziness, fainting spells, and collapses, in which one sees the final hour approach. . . . As she spoke, I looked her over carefully. She was a woman of about thirty-five or thirty-six, maimed by suffering; at least I thought so, but, on closer scrutiny, I began to suspect that there was something more than the physical in her ruin. As a matter of fact, she spoke and expressed herself like someone who had suffered a good deal, and I know that the ills of the body, when not of imminent gravity, are usually not enough to produce such a wasting away, such extreme dejection. And, noting how the broad leaves of the plane tree, touched with carmine by the artistic hand of autumn, fell to the ground majestically and lay stretched out like severed hands, I remarked, in order to gain her confidence, on the passing of all life, the melancholy of the transitoriness of everything . . .

"Nothing is anything," she answered, understanding at once that not curiosity but compassion was beckoning at the gates of her spirit. "Nothing is anything . . . unless we ourselves convert that nothing into something. Would to

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Ojalá lo viésemos todo, siempre, con el sentimiento ligero, aunque triste, que nos produce la caída de ese follaje sobre la arena.

El encendimiento enfermo de sus mejillas se avivó, y entonces me dí cuenta de que habría sido ⁶ muy hermosa, aunque estuviese su hermosura borrada y barrida, lo mismo que las tintas de un cuadro fino, al cual se le pasa el algodón impregnado de alcohol. Su pelo rubio y sedoso mostraba rastros de ceniza, canas precoces . . . Sus facciones habíanse marchitado; la tez, sobre todo, revelaba esas alteraciones de la sangre que son envenenamientos lentos, descomposiciones del organismo. Los ojos, de un azul amante, con vetas negras, debieron de atraer en otro tiempo, pero ahora los afeaba algo peor que los años; una especie de extravío, que por momentos les prestaba relucir de locura.

Callábamos: pero mi modo de contemplarla decía tan expresivamente mi piedad, que ella, suspirando por ensanchar un poco el siempre oprimido pecho,⁶ se decidió, y no sin detenerse de vez en cuando a respirar y rehacerse, me contó la extraña historia.

— Me casé muy enamorada . . . Mi marido era entrado en edad respecto a mí; frisaba en los cuarenta, y yo sólo contaba diez y nueve. Mi genio era alegre, animadísimo; conservaba carácter de chiquilla, y los momentos en que él no estaba en casa, los dedicaba a cantar, a tocar el piano, a charlar y reír con las amigas que venían a verme y que me envidiaban la felicidad, la boda lucida, el esposo apasionado y la brillante situación social.

Duró esto un año—el año delicioso de la luna de miel. Al volver la primavera, el aniversario de nuestro casamiento, empecé a notar que el carácter de Reinaldo cambiaba. Su humor era sombrío muchas veces, y sin que yo adivinase el por qué,⁷ me hablaba duramente, tenía accesos de enojo. No tardé, sin embargo, en comprender el origen de su transformación: en Reinaldo se habían desarrollado los celos, unos celos violentos, irrazonados, sin objeto ni causa, y por lo mismo, doblemente crueles y difíciles de curar.

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God we could see everything, always, with the slight but sad emotion produced in us by the fall of this foliage on the sand."

The sickly flush of her cheeks deepened, and then I realized that she had probably been very beautiful, although her beauty was effaced and gone, like the colors of a fine picture over which is passed cotton saturated with alcohol. Her blond, silky hair showed traces of ash, premature gray hair. Her features had withered away; her complexion especially revealed those disturbances of the blood which are slow poisonings, decompositions of the organism. Her soft blue eyes, veined with black, must have once been attractive, but now they were disfigured by something worse than age; a kind of aberration, which at certain moments lent them the glitter of madness.

We grew silent: but my way of contemplating her expressed my pity so plainly that she, sighing for a chance to unburden her heavy heart, made up her mind, and stopping from time to time to breathe and regain her strength, she told me the strange story.

"When I married, I was very much in love. . . . My husband was, compared to me, advanced in years; he was bordering on forty, and I was only nineteen. My temperament was gay and lively; I retained a child-like disposition, and when he was not home I would devote my time to singing, playing the piano, chatting and laughing with girl-friends who came to see me and envied me my happiness, my brilliant marriage, my devoted husband, and my brilliant social position.

"This lasted a year—the wonderful year of the honeymoon. The following spring, on our wedding anniversary, I began to notice that Reinaldo's disposition was changing. He was often in a gloomy mood, and, without my knowing the cause, he spoke to me harshly, and had outbursts of anger. But it was not long before I understood the origins of his transformation: Reinaldo had conceived a violent, irrational jealousy, a jealousy without object or cause, which, for that very reason, was doubly cruel and difficult to cure.

Si salíamos juntos, se celaba de que ⁸ la gente me mirase o me dijese, al paso, cualquier tontería de éstas que se les dicen a las mujeres jóvenes: si salía él solo, se celaba de lo que yo quedase haciendo en casa, de las personas que venían a verme; si salía sola yo, los celos, las suposiciones eran todavía más infamantes . . .

Si le proponía, suplicando, que nos quedásemos en casa juntos, se celaba de mi semblante entristecido, de mi supuesto aburrimiento, de mi labor, de un instante en que, pasando frente a la ventana, me ocurría esparcir la vista ⁹ hacia fuera . . . Se celaba, sobre todo, al percibir que mi genio de pájaro, mi buen humor de chiquilla habían desaparecido, y que muchas tardes, al encender luz, se veía brillar sobre mi tez el rastro húmedo y ardiente del llanto. Privada de mis inocentes distracciones; separada ya de mis amigas, de mi parentela, de mi propia familia, porque Reinaldo interpretaba como ardides de traición el deseo de comunicarme y mirar otras caras que la suya, yo lloraba a menudo, y no correspondía a los transportes de pasión de Reinaldo con el dulce abandono de los primeros tiempos.

Cierto día, después de una de las amargas escenas de costumbre, mi marido me advirtió:

—Flora, yo podré ser un loco, pero no soy un necio. Me ha enajenado tu cariño, y aunque tal vez tú no hubieses pensado en engañarme, en lo sucesivo, ¹⁰ sin poderlo remediar, pensarías. Ya nunca más seré para ti el amor. Las golondrinas que se fueron no vuelven. Pero como yo te quiero, por desgracia, más cada día, y te quiero sin tranquilidad, con ansia y fiebre, te advierto que he pensado el modo de que no haya entre nosotros ni cuestiones, ni quimeras, ni lágrimas,—y una vez por todas sepas cuál va a ser nuestro porvenir.

Hablando así me cogió del brazo y me llevó hacia la alcoba.

Yo iba temblando; presentimientos crueles me helaban. Reinaldo abrió el cajón del mueblecito incrustado donde guardaba el tabaco, el reloj, pañuelos, y me enseñó un revolver grande, un arma siniestra.

"If we went out together, he was watchful lest people stare at me or tell me, in passing, one of those silly things people say to young women; if he went out alone, he was suspicious of what I was doing in the house, and of the people who came to see me; if I went out alone, his suspicions and suppositions were even more defamatory. . . .

"If I proposed, pleadingly, that we stay home together, he was watchful of my saddened expression, of my supposed boredom, of my work, of an instant when, passing in front of the window, I happened to look outside. . . . He was watchful, above all, when he noticed that my bird-like disposition, my good, child-like humor, had disappeared, and that on many afternoons, when I turned on the lights, he found my skin shining with the damp, ardent trace of tears. Deprived of my innocent amusements, now separated from my friends and relatives, and from my own family, because Reinaldo interpreted as treacherous artifices the desire to communicate and look at faces other than his, I often wept, and did not respond to Reinaldo's transports of passion with the sweet abandonment of earlier times.

"One day, after one of the usual bitter scenes, my husband said:

"Flora, I may be a madman, but I am not a fool. I have alienated your love, and although perhaps you would not have thought of deceiving me, in the future, without being able to remedy it, you would. Now I shall never again be your beloved. The swallows that have left do not return. But because, unfortunately, I love you more each day, and love you without peace, with eagerness and fever, I wish to point out that I have thought of a way which will prevent questions, quarrels, or tears between us—and once and for all you will know what our future will be."

"Speaking thus, he took me by the arm and led me toward the bedroom.

"I went trembling; cruel presentiments froze me. Reinaldo opened the drawer of the small inlaid cabinet where he kept tobacco, a watch, and handkerchiefs, and showed me a large revolver, a sinister weapon.

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—Aquí tienes—me dijo—la garantía de que tu vida va a ser en lo sucesivo tranquila y dulce. No volveré a exigerte cuentas ni de cómo empleas tu tiempo, ni de tus amistades, ni de tus distracciones. Libre eres, como el aire libre. Pero el día que yo note algo que me hiera en el alma . . . ese día, ¡por mi madre te lo juro! sin quejas, sin escenas, sin la menor señal de que estoy disgustado ¡ah, eso no! me levanto de noche calladamente, cojo el arma, te la aplico a la sien y te despiertas en la eternidad. Ya estás avisada . . .

Lo que yo estaba era desmayada,¹² sin conocimiento. Fue preciso llamar al médico, por lo que duraba el síncope. Cuando recobré el sentido y recordé, sobrevino la convulsión. Hay que advertir que les tengo un miedo cerval a las armas de fuego; de un casual disparo murió un hermanito mío. Mis ojos, con fijeza alocada, no se apartaban del cajón del mueble que encerraba el revólver.

No podía yo dudar, por el tono y el gesto de Reinaldo, que estaba dispuesto a ejecutar su amenaza, y como además sabía la facilidad con que se ofuscaba su imaginación, empecé a darme por muerta. En efecto, Reinaldo, cumpliendo su promesa, me dejaba completamente dueña de mí, sin dirigirme la menor censura, sin mostrar ni en el gesto que se opusiese a ninguno de mis descos o desaprobases mis actos; pero esto mismo me espantaba, porque indicaba la fuerza y la tirantez de una voluntad que descansa en una resolución¹³ . . . y víctima de un terror cada día más hondo, permanecía inmóvil, no atreviéndome a dar un paso. Siempre veía el reflejo de acero del cañón del revólver.

De noche, el insomnio me tenía con los ojos abiertos, creyendo percibir sobre la sien el metálico frío de un círculo de hierro; o, si conciliaba el sueño, despertaba sobresaltada, con palpitations en que parecía que el corazón iba a salirse del pecho, porque soñaba que un estampido atroz me deshacía los huesos del cráneo y me volaba el cerebro,¹⁴ estrellándolo contra la pared . . . Y esto duró cuatro años, cuatro años en que no tuve minuto tranquilo, en que no di un paso sin recelar que ese paso provocase la tragedia.

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"Here," he said, "is your guarantee that in the future your life will be peaceful and pleasant. I shall never again demand an accounting of how you spend your time, or of your friends, or of your amusements. You are free, free as the air. But the day I see something that wounds me to the quick . . . that day, I swear by my mother! Without complaints or scenes, or the slightest sign that I am displeased, oh no, not that! I will get up quietly at night, take the weapon, put it to your temple and you will wake up in eternity. Now you have been warned. . . ."

"As for me, I was in a daze, unconscious. It was necessary to send for the doctor, inasmuch as the fainting spell lasted. When I recovered consciousness and remembered, the convulsion took place. I must point out that I have a mortal fear of firearms; a younger brother of mine died of an accidental shot. My eyes, staring wildly, would not leave the drawer of the cabinet that held the revolver.

"I could not doubt, from Reinaldo's tone and the look on his face, that he was prepared to carry out his threat, and knowing also how easily his imagination grew confused, I began to consider myself as dead. As a matter of fact, Reinaldo kept his promise, and left me complete mistress of myself, without directing the slightest censure my way, or showing, even by a look, that he was opposed to any of my wishes or disapproved of my actions; but this itself frightened me, because it indicated the strength and tyranny of a resolute will . . . and, victim of a terror which every day grew more profound, I remained motionless, not daring to take a step. I would always see the steely reflection of the gun barrel.

"At night, insomnia kept my eyes open and I imagined I felt the metallic cold of a steel circle on my temple; or if I got to sleep, I woke up startled with palpitations that made my heart seem to leap from my breast, because I dreamed that an awful report was ripping apart the bones of my skull and blowing my brains out, dashing them against the wall . . . And this lasted four years, four years without a single peaceful moment, when I never took a step without fearing that that step might give rise to tragedy."

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— ¿Y cómo terminó esa situación tan horrible?—pregunté para abreviar,¹⁵ porque la veía asfixiarse.

— Terminó . . . con Reinaldo, que fué despedido por un caballo y se rompió algo dentro, quedando allí mismo difunto.¹⁶

Entonces, sólo entonces, comprendí que le quería aún, y le lloré muy de veras, ¡aunque fué mi verdugo, y verdugo sistemático!

— ¿Y recogió usted el revólver para tirarlo por la ventana?

— Verá usted—murmuró ella. —Sucedió una cosa . . . bastante singular. Mandé al criado de Reinaldo que quitase de mi habitación el revólver, porque yo continuaba viendo en sueños el disparo y sintiendo el frío sobre la sien . . . Y después de cumplir la orden, el criado vino a decirme: "Señora, no había porqué tener miedo . . . Este revólver no estaba cargado . . ."

— ¿Que no estaba cargado?

— No, señora; ni me parece que lo ha estado nunca . . . Como que el pobre señorito ni llegó a comprar las cápsulas. Si hasta le pregunté, a veces, si quería que me pasase por casa del armero y las trajese, y no me respondió, y luego no se volvió a hablar más del asunto . . .

— De modo—añadió la cardíaca,—que ¹⁷ un revólver sin carga me pegó el tiro, no en la cabeza, pero en mitad del corazón, y crea usted que, a pesar de digital y baños y todos los remedios, la bala no perdona . . .

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"And how did that horrible situation end?" I asked, in order to bring her story to a close, because I saw her gasping for breath.

"It ended . . . with Reinaldo, who was thrown by a horse, and had some internal injury, being killed on the spot.

"Then, and only then, I knew that I still loved him, and I mourned him quite sincerely, although he was my executioner, and a systematic one at that!"

"And did you pick up the revolver to throw it out the window?"

"You'll see," she murmured. "Something rather extraordinary happened. I sent Reinaldo's manservant to remove the revolver from my room, because in my dreams I continued to see the shot and feel the chill on my temple. . . . And after he carried out the order, the manservant came to tell me: 'Señora, there was no cause for alarm. . . . This revolver wasn't loaded.'

"'It wasn't loaded?'"

"'No, Señora; and it looks to me as though it never was . . . As a matter of fact, the poor master never got around to buying the cartridges. Why, I would even ask him at times if he wanted me to go to the gunsmith's and get them, but he didn't answer, and then he never spoke of the matter again.'

"And so," added the sufferer from heart disease, "an unloaded revolver shot me, not in the head, but in the center of my heart, and believe me when I tell you that, in spite of digitalis and baths and all the remedies, the bullet is unsparing. . . ."