volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 2, Issue 1

Spring 2019

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Leire Barrera-Medrano

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 30 May 2019

Date of Publication: 21 June 2019

Citation: Leire Barrera-Medrano, 'Chapter I of *The Black Siren* (1908) by Emilia Pardo Bazán: A New Translation with Introduction and Notes', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 2.1 (2019), 120-126.

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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Chapter I of *The Black Siren* (1908) by Emilia Pardo Bazán
A New Translation with Introduction and Notes

Leire Barrera-Medrano

University of Bath

Countess Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921) was one of the most influential and controversial Spanish writers and literary critics of the nineteenth century. The only female writer mentioned by Arthur Symons in his 'Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893), she is primarily known for introducing French Naturalism into Spanish literature at a moment when Naturalism was seen as little less than a sin.[1] A staunch Catholic, she added to this semi-imported style her own 'Spanish' hints of Catholic spirituality, creating what has been almost paradoxically defined as 'Catholic Naturalism'. Her most famous work is perhaps *Los Pazos de Ulloa* [*The House of Ulloa*] (1886). Set in a rural town in Pardo Bazán's native Galicia, it recounts the story of a degenerate aristocratic family and delineates an unsurpassed portrait of Galician rural society in the midst of the liberal revolution. The novel depicts the ongoing conflict between social classes, the modern and the old, the urban and rural, the moral and the amoral.

Indeed, Pardo Bazán's work is characterized by unresolved aesthetic and ethical tensions and contradictions. Throughout her life, there were constant strains between her ethical and Catholic considerations and her art. Her personal life was equally complex and contradictory. A devoted Catholic, she was also a prominent feminist figure who separated from her husband and had an extramarital relationship for more than twenty years with the Spanish novelist Benito Pérez Galdós, as well as with other younger men. She also maintained close friendships with renowned Decadent Spanish figures like Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent, open homosexual and dandy, who aspired to be the decadent antihero he described in his novels. While Pardo Bazán is primarily known as a Naturalist writer, her late writing increasingly makes use of a Symbolist and Decadent style, evident in her exploration of aesthetic, sensorial and psychological issues, of female aesthetes

and male dandy characters, and in her ornamental language. Another salient element of her late novels is her engagement with the supernatural and the occult, in response to established esoteric doctrines in *fin-de-siècle* Spain.

Her relatively unknown 1908 novel *La Sirena Negra* [*The Black Siren*] is a fine example of Pardo Bazán's late Decadent-Catholic style, packed with the spiritualist elements that permeated Spanish society of the time: spectres, life in inanimate objects, premonitory dreams, the transmigration of the soul and, most prominently, demonic practices. The book offers a character study of a satanic dandy, a luxury-loving sensualist named Gaspar de Montenegro, who is obsessed with Death, and haunted by a desire for self-destruction. He feels that his world-weariness is due to an inheritance from a worn-out, degenerated family. After a hundred pages of perversely Decadent descriptions, with Gaspar reflecting on and committing all sorts of depravities, including a rape, Pardo Bazán returns, somewhat artificially, to her Catholic message in the last five pages of the novel.

For the first time in English, we include here a translation of the first chapter of the novel.

Translator's note

This translation uses the original text published in Madrid in 1908 by M. Pérez Villavicencio. Emilia Pardo Bazán's style in this piece is ornate and baroque, and her meaning is ambiguous at times. She also uses abundant and sometimes obscure punctuation. This translation preserves these idiosyncrasies in order to retain the strangeness of the text.

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The Black Siren, Chapter I

Emilia Pardo Bazán

At the corner of Red de San Luis and Caballero de Gracia,[2] I separated from the group that was walking with me from the Apolo theatre, where we had just attended a successful premiere.[3] If I were to be speaking aloud, I would have said 'group of friends', but, for my own sake, what need have I to sugar the pill? I hope not to have any friends; not so much for the faults of those close to me, but because of my own. If I have ever let myself be carried away by the longing to communicate, to expand, to search my soul and to reveal a little of its dark side — within half an hour of doing so I felt ashamed and regretful, like a Hebrew priest who permits a layman to touch the Ark of the Covenant.

For that same reason, I refused to get involved in the controversy they created around 'the idea' of the play. Such an idea was already familiar to me: for the sixth time this winter, an author takes it up. According to the *zarzuelilla*'s recitations, songs and dialogues, life is good, joy is holy and those who do not walk around gushing satisfaction are stupid.[4] I do not know why (perhaps because of the debates among the group that bounced off my brain with a drumroll of dry and light hammer blows on a sounding board) the question, at that time, worried me. No question, for the living, will be of more interest than this question of the quality of life itself.

And, despite my uneasy state, through that self-splitting facility that we, the sensual, meditative types, possess, I could not help but notice a series of insignificant circumstances. Under my steps the metallic pavement reverberated. The night was clear; the cold, sharp; and in the shelter of the silk-mesh mask, my breath settled into icy droplets, moistening my beard. I considered taking a coach; then decided to keep walking. The harsh cold pricked me into thought, and in that same moment I decided to pose the question to myself, taking advantage of all the opportunities leading to its resolution, not for the benefit of the human race, but for mine only. The 'human race' is the emptiest of terms; there is no humanity, there are men. If something is said of the human race, men deny it at once. While ruminating on these statements, I took out my handkerchief and dried the droplets that wet my beard, fragrant with brilliantine.

Upon entering Jacometrezo street, a grey-shawled, gloomy-eyed creature interrupted my musings. What will this woman, whom I flick away like an irritating fly, think of living? I do not need to ask: if there is anything expected, known, of rudimentary psychology, it is the mood of these coy streetwalkers. They call them *of life*, par excellence, and, even, *of joyful life*.[5] In order to

forget for a moment the joy of their life, they smoke, shout, quarrel, drink, insult, — and their aim, their golden dream, is to lie down early and sleep soundly.

A hundred steps away, the night watchman leans over a man lying spread-eagled on the floor. The guard responds to my helpful gesture and to my question in a solicitous manner, and with compassionate disdain to the fallen man. Nothing, the everyday: a drunkard who falls every night exactly in that same corner ... He never reaches his house, which is two steps away ... And it's a shame for him: a carpenter, expert in his trade, with five kids that fit beneath a basket ...

When we managed to stand him upright, something liquid, slimy, slipped down my hand; I shook it with disgust. It was blood. 'He is wounded,' I warned the night watchman; and we took him with great care to his dwelling, a narrow and obsolete building, one of those that abound in the most central roads of old Madrid. The wife came out, stupefied with sleep, dishevelled: she saw the wound in her husband's head, and cursed disdainfully: 'Now we'll need to pay for doctors and drugs!' Upon hearing the gloomy comforts of the night watchman — if he had hit the edge of the sidewalk in a different manner, instead of wounded, we might have brought him dead — the mother complained: 'The dead don't feel nowt. He's always saying the poor folk we never better than belly up.'[6]

I left some money for the chemist's and asked for some water to wash my spotted hand. A basin was taken from the back room; it was so dirty that I chose to wipe my hand with a handkerchief. I walked away, feeling a sting of irritation, a dull anger. The night offered me nothing but 'dark-coloured' impressions, like the words read by Dante on the gates of hell. Notwithstanding, celebrated works do stem from impressions of this nature, where the themes of vice and drunkenness are occasion for rejoicing. Wisdom must consist of looking at all things from a gay and lively point of view; surely, I do not know how to place myself there: worse for me, what the hell!

Yet I reproached myself again. Despite not believing in humanity — hollow concept, a word used in *meetings*[7] — an instinct for moral aesthetics induces me to appear pious to the unfortunate and the insignificant, when I meet them along the way. I regretted not having stayed to care for the carpenter, not having sought a doctor and remedies and having even failed to give him advice on the evils of alcohol. What were the reasons behind my abstention? I will declare two reasons. The first, a sort of shameful prudishness to practise what is called *good*, *charity*, which I do not comprehend in relative terms, but as a whole — devoting one's whole existence. — Doing something charitable entails being pursued doggedly, or being praised for one's goodness, and other utter nonsense, for what kind of goodness is there in being deprived of our leftovers? — The second, a fear of action that I cannot (nor want) to overcome. Action is the enemy of reveries

and reflections, in which I find singular attraction. Nor is there any action as noble as an idea: to think what I am thinking is worth more than running to Alejandro San Martin's house and bringing him to the bedside of a drunkard who had done himself an injury on a protruding paving slab.[8] Psst! It's up to him, whether there's more or less sediment in the barrel...

Shrugging my shoulders, I continue towards my house — without haste —. At this late hour, workers of the sewer system and the canal labour in the small square. It looks as though their work cannot be interrupted. A stream of icy water runs under their feet. Trying not to freeze, they have lit a brazier that they use in turns, snorting and stretching their stiff hands. To prevent accidents to pedestrians, they have hung a warning lamp on the dislodged cobblestones that had been stacked there. Rather than engaging in such work, would I prefer ... *something else*? Could it be that they, like the chorus girls that were singing out of tune an hour ago in the Apolo, also think life is

> rich and good,
> a divine garment
> full of charms...?

A little further on — a tumble that could be fun — two women, not badly dressed, neatly shod, advance along the sidewalk close to the houses, suspicious of their surroundings. I recognise them: they are the dressmakers from the third floor of my building, girls from San Sebastian, who have come to settle in Madrid. I usually encounter them on the stairs. The older one is graceful, still fresh, despite the work and sedentary lifestyle. The youngest is a cripple; her uneven leg makes her jump like a quail, an exceedingly ridiculous image. I approach them and proffer my company: I toy with the idea of finding out if they also think life is good. They presume my intentions are otherwise: sinful and pleasurable ones. The older woman takes credit for the conquest; the other, in the humility of the crippled, never imagines that such things might happen to her. To get to the point, I ask them if they are happy with Madrid and how things are going.

> — So, so. We don't know as yet ... Ladies are strange! We must get used to their whims ... Where were they coming from? — A most surprising coincidence! From the same theatre as me, with the only difference that, when they left, some friends had invited them for a hot chocolate ... The premiere? Beautiful; very lively music.
> — And what do you think about life being good? Pilita ... Manola ... Are you glad to have been born?[9]

The question was answered with laughter and bywords. They thought that I was in jest, and they were not wrong. Probably (it occurred to me later) these two bees whose sting is sharp as a needle are not unhappy. I had been ingenuous indeed to have lighted upon such subjects for my inquiry. In order to divert the conversation, I paid them a few insipid compliments, before leaving them at my door. Going up with them as their chaperone was an unbearable task, and I preferred to wander a little more.

I do not know what it is about them, the streets of a crowded capital, during those hours before dawn, especially in winter, when the night feels deeper and more itself. Behind the imposing palace doors; behind the windows, like eyes that close their eyelids when falling asleep — what infinitude of mystery! Why is it that life pauses in the whole city at the same time? — The crowd, secluded in their miserable or comfortable chambers, are they really not as if they had died? Is not every bedchamber, enclosed and warm, a tomb's entrance hall? And this silence, this lethal peace of the night, is it not the one delicious, sweet, peaceful period of the twenty-four hours that knit up the course of the day?

When, by chance, the night owl meets another night owl, do not both feel a sense of distrust, of fearful curiosity? Only the souls abandoned to misery, to crime or to clandestine love, stay awake and leave the grave that is their bedchamber. If I see a defeated night owl, beggar or criminal; or a rich well-dressed man, with a mask, the overcoat collar turned up: hidden lover. And the thing is that I am neither one nor the other, but lazy, tormented and already stiff with that early, dormant cold, which is not like that at dusk, because it is aggravated by tired, nervous, insomniac exhaustion. — This thought makes me stop at the foot of the white, upstanding, reassuring façade of the Royal Theatre.[10] — What am I doing in the streets, with my teeth chattering? Do I not have my silent, cosy chamber, my comfortable, golden bronze bed, with a frame and a welcoming mattress, with a duck-feather eiderdown that bounces softly up and down at the touch of a hand?

— How many would envy me? — I thought; but when commencing the retreat towards my hole, my will failed me and I continued along Arenal street. A livid clarity spread across the firmament: the dawn. — The parish church opened its doors for the first mass. I climbed the stairs, crossed the atrium, slipped into the shady sacristy, — and entered the nave through a small door. The touch of the rough matting was sympathetic to my feet, which, despite the walk, were two lumps of ice. In a corner, a bench welcomed my fatigue; I fell on it; and, without being able to resist, defeated, livid, I gave in to a sudden lethargy, like that which accosts the horseman on his saddle, or the helmsman with his hand on the tiller.

When I awoke, it was already daylight, I did not know where I was, and was startled to see, out of the corner of my eye, the altarpiece and, next to me, a pulpit. To tell the whole truth, I woke up to the sacristan patting me on the shoulder; infuriated, he whispered 'Psst, oy! Sir!' into the hollow of my ear. It seems that there is a type of night owl that exists and has been classified: those who enjoy decapitating dreams in the peaceful precincts of the churches at dawn; altar boys are rightly chary of this breed and throw them out as they would stray dogs.

I genuflected and left the temple unnerved, with the discomfort of the dissatisfied, whose bodily rhythms have been interrupted. I drank a hot coffee in the first place I saw to sober up, but, instead, it only increased my longing for rest, my yearning for temporary death, my thirst for nothingness. I jumped into a coach and gave my address. Drowsy and nodding against my chest in the corner of the coach, where I did not dare to lie down in fear of the wanton stains left there by so many heads, I was thinking that fearing certain ways of dying is a human triviality, for however it is that we die, the thing is that we rest. The sleep that I was looking for in my chamber, where refinements are not lacking, would not be sweeter and fuller than the one stolen on a hard bench in the corner of a church. Once sleep has been tracked down, annihilation achieved, what matter what came before?

I entered with my latchkey; the servants would probably be asleep; my sister, certainly; the house was silent. I turned on my gas ring and, four minutes later, I had hot water for my ablutions. Once lathered up, and the thousand-eyed sponge applied, I put on my nightgown, bony, exhausted, and the magical instant arrived: I lifted the bedclothes and slid, nimble yet exhausted, into the wide bed, sighing with pleasure. The coldness of the sheets soon yields to the warmth that the body gives off; the mattress bounces with soft elasticity when I turn and wrap myself up; the street noises are no more for me ... For the last time, I sigh with bliss ... I sleep.

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[1] In 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', Symons wrote of Pardo Bazán that she had 'formed herself, with some deliberateness, after Goncourt, grafting his method, curiously enough, upon a typically Spanish Catholicism of her own'. Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, November 1893, p. 866.

[2] Central streets in Madrid. The whole chapter takes place in central Madrid.

[3] The Apolo Theatre in Madrid was one of the most important venues for traditional Spanish operettas (see note 4). It opened in 1873 and closed its doors in 1929.

[4] *Zarzuela* is a traditional Spanish operetta. It stages alternating sung and spoken parts, generally of a light character. Historically, we can divide *zarzuela* in two types: Baroque (c. 1630-1750), and Romantic (c. 1850-1950). The latter can be further divided into two: *género grande* and *zarzuelilla* or *género chico*.

[5] In Spanish, prostitutes are euphemistically called 'women of joyful life' or 'mujeres de vida alegre'. In italics in the original.

[6] The Spanish grammar is also non-standard in the original text to represent working-class vernacular.

[7] In English in the original.

[8] Alejandro San Martín (1847-1908) was a Spanish doctor and politician.

[9] Spanish nicknames for women called Pilar and Manuela.

[10] The Royal Theatre is a major opera house in Madrid, founded in 1818.