THE EVOLUTION OF PARDO BAZAN'S VIEWS
ON THE NOVEL, 1879-91

Since the 1950's critical interest in the work of Emilia Pardo Bazán has seldom flagged. However there has still been no attempt to make even a moderately-detailed assessment of the author's views on technical aspects of the novel as expressed in the first decade or so of her activity as a writer of fiction. Certainly, a good deal of attention has been paid to the essays of La cuestión palpitante (1882-83), and it would indeed be difficult to argue against this important work being given pride of place in any appraisal of Pardo Bazán's early theoretical stances. Yet this celebrated document of the Spanish debate on literary Naturalism has been judged principally, and to some extent understandably, as the Galician novelist's response to Naturalism and its archpriest, Emile Zola. But the critics' preoccupation with La cuestión palpitante has almost constantly overshadowed, and even occasionally supplanted, consideration of the prologues (the notable exception being the preface to Un viaje de novios) and other literary essays of Pardo Bazán's early years as a practising novelist.¹ Nelly Clémessy's massive and impressive study of Pardo Bazán devotes a chapter to commentary on the individual essays of La cuestión palpitante, while the final part of the book — entitled "El arte de la novelista" — looks at, among other things, modes of characterization, the presence of the author in the text, narrative development, and descriptive techniques.² Yet Clémessy does not attempt, here or earlier, to enumerate and discuss Pardo Bazán's theoretical positions on such technical matters.

There is thus a gap to be filled, and in this article I hope to fill a good part of it. Although Pardo Bazán continued to write literary criticism until her death in 1921, this essay will restrict itself to a collation and assessment of her principal pronouncements on fiction and the art of writing novels made between 1879 and 1891. In 1879 Pardo Bazán published her first novel, and in the following ten years wrote most of her best-known fiction. During this period she was also embroiled in the Spanish debate on Realism and Naturalism, and made many of her most detailed and forthright utterances on the art of the contemporary novel as well as setting out her own theoretical positions. Then, in 1891, the fourth edition of La cuestión palpitante was published, and in the prologue Pardo Bazán suggested that her ideas had not substantially changed since the first appearance of the essays: "no hay más deficiencias en la composición del libro que diferencia entre mis ideas estéticas de entonces y las de ahora. Si intentase corregir o refundir, tendría que añadir mucho sin variar esencialmente nada."³ Hereafter I intend to pin-point and discuss the principal aesthetic ideas of this particular work, examine the author's views on fiction which preceded it, and those which emerged after 1882-83, during the period when the Spanish debate on Naturalism became steadily less noisy and, indeed, less relevant.

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In June 1879 the Revista de España began the serialization of Pardo Bazán’s first novel, Pascual López, autobiografía de un estudiante de medicina. The opening instalment was preceded by a prologue in which Pardo Bazán reveals her awareness of the debate which had been taking place in Spain on the question of purpose in literature, as she describes it: “La acalorada polémica, a cada paso rediviva, del arte docente y el arte desinteresado” (II, 12-13). Here the author combines the issues of purpose and “beauty” in art, first stating that “toda obra bella eleva y enseña de por sí, sin que el autor pretenda añadir a la belleza la lección” (II, 13), and then noting: “De encerrar Pascual López, en su género, alguna verdadera belleza, contendría también alguna enseñanza” (II, 13). This notion of “beauty” as the essential quality of art is frequently proclaimed by Pardo Bazán during the ensuing years and will be discussed subsequently, in the light of further statements made by her on the topic. For the moment, suffice it to say that this issue and the question of didacticism in literature constitute the only points of theoretical note in the prologue to Pascual López. However two years later, when she wrote the preface to Un viaje de novios (1881), Pardo Bazán’s interest had clearly switched to the debate on Realism and Naturalism.

One of the first issues on which the author focuses in this preface is something she sees as the product of recent and current debates. This is the wide acceptance of the principle that the novel can no longer be considered as merely a form of entertainment. Pardo Bazán’s words are well known but bear repeating: “La novela ha dejado de ser obra de mero entretenimiento, modo de engañar gratamente unas cuantas horas, ascendiendo a estudio social, psicológico, histórico - al cabo, estudio” (III, 572). This idea of the novel as a “study” did not, of course, originate with Zola. Balzac had used the terms “études philosophiques” and “études de mœurs” to describe different kinds of novel within La Comédie humaine. Yet it was Zola who made “étude” and “étudier” such an important part of his theoretical armoury, and Pardo Bazán gives a clear hint of the influence of Zola on her ideas when she states in this preface: “no son menos necesarias al novelista que las galas de la fantasía la observación y el análisis” (III, 572). She also echoes Zola’s celebrated “une œuvre d’art est un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament” when she notes that “la novela es traslado de la vida, y lo único que el autor pone en ella es su modo peculiar de ver las cosas reales” (III, 572).

Up to this point in the preface it appears that Pardo Bazán has been won over to several of the tenets of Zola’s Naturalism. However, she soon denounces what she sees as some of the excesses of the new movement, describing it as “una dirección realista, pero errada y torcida en bastantes aspectos” (III, 572). Her first specific criticism is that Naturalism stresses the unsavoury aspects of life, thus failing to give a balanced view and generally emitting a depressing tone: