

PARALLEL PLOT AND FATE IN PALACIO VALDÉS,
EL ORIGEN DEL PENSAMIENTO (1894)

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Contemporary and later critics of Palacio Valdés' 1894 novel have typically been concerned with its intention. While some readers have been uncertain as to whether Palacio meant to satirize false science or science in general, most critics have described the novel as a satire on the ideas of Cesare Lombroso. As such, *El origen...* has been considered a development of the final scene of *La Fe* in which two disciples of Lombroso confidently deduced the precise nature of the protagonist's presumed degeneracy from a reading of his physical measurements¹.

El origen del pensamiento does satirize positivistic science directing its shafts not only against Lombroso but also against his disciple, Max Nordau, whose work was well known at this time². Emilia Pardo Bazán, in the 1894 articles published as *La nueva cuestión palpitante*, similarly took issue with Nordau's formulations of Lombroso's basic ideas.

Along with what he evidently viewed as bogus science, Palacio satirized religious hypocrites, religious confidence men, and perverted forms of religious observance. And, probing more deeply into

¹ G. Gómez-Ferrer Morant (400-402) and José M. Roca Franquesa (447) among recent critics and Léo Quesnel (377), Peseux-Richard (422) and Baxter (558 b) among older critics, stated that *El origen...* is a satire on Lombroso and his followers.

² Nordau's *Entartung* was published in Berlin in 1893. The French translation, *Dégénérescence*, appeared in Paris in 1894. The two volume Spanish translation by Nicolás Salmerón y García, *Degeneración*, was published in Madrid in 1902.

a question that fueled a central conflict between partisans of science and of religion, Palacio explored the role of chance vis-à-vis some version of determinism, fate or Providence. This theme was important as well in Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, a work that *El origen ...* in some ways resembles, as Baquero Goyanes has pointed out (51)³. In Flaubert's work this theme is posed as a philosophical problem to be discussed; it does not emerge from the narrative, which lacks a plot. In *El origen ...*, the problem arises from the action that ends the novel.

Causality, as it is represented in traditional realist narrative, is not always invoked in Palacio's novel. Chance appears to govern events and, considering the nature of those events, absurdity triumphs. But the satirical, absurdist tone generated by the mostly farcical events changes abruptly toward the end when don Pantaleón first assaults his son-in-law-to be, Timoteo, then abducts his four-year-old grandson, Mario. Up to this point, the largely episodic narrative has presented a sizeable cast of characters and a succession of their amusingly described *sottises*. Pantaleón's abduction of little Mario not only contrasts sharply in kind, and consequently in tone, with what has gone before, but it is also definitive in the sense that it provides the occasion for signification in the novel. This essay explores two questions raised by the novel's ending: does the appearance of chance events and actions conceal a structure of causality that authorizes the jarring (because unexpected) ending?; and, how may Mario's meditation and the conclusion of the novel be read?

Pantaleón's demented purpose in abducting his grandson is to remove the top of the child's skull so as to observe his living brain. The child would thereby become a martyr to science and his grandfather the discoverer of the origin or primary site of thought. During the two days that Pantaleón keeps the boy captive in his attic laboratory, the child's anguished parents suffer torments as great

³ Baquero Goyanes was the first to observe that Sánchez and Moreno engage in experiments that recall the scientific endeavors of Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet. The conversations of Palacio's two characters and, above all, their expedition to a town outside Madrid in order to obtain the measurements of a criminal sentenced to death, certainly bring to mind similar conversations and activities on the part of Flaubert's characters. In addition, Flaubert's irony and his clipped, dry style constitute a plausible model for Palacio's presentation of his two would-be positivists.

as those of their physically abused and terrorized son. The boy is rescued from the knife at the last moment, but the ending is not a happy one. The suffering caused by the sudden intrusion of madness and violence into the lives of decent, well-meaning people determines the sombre meditation of the boy's father, Mario. The novel then ends with the ambiguous reactions of Mario senior's friend, Miguel Rivera, and of his wife, Carlota, as they observe him lost in thought, gazing at the sunset.

The question of causality arises indirectly in the course of Mario's musings. As he gazes at the sun setting in the countryside near Madrid, he mentally addresses that star. He has seen his innocent child suffer terrible tortures. The unfortunate Pantaleón, only minutes before confined in a mental institution, inflicted that torture, he says, «por un impulso fatal. Mi espíritu sangra», he cries out, «y no comprende nada» (571 b).

What seems to be incomprehensible to Mario is that innocence has suffered at the hands of an agent who in a sense is also innocent, for he has been moved, not by his own volition, but by an «impulso fatal». It is unlikely that this fatal impulse refers to the activity of a force or a fate altogether separate from character. One would have to imagine an indifferent or even malevolent fate that maneuvers human beings into drastic collisions regardless of the bent or direction of their individual natures and this notion is not supported by Palacio's theories as noted, for example, in the *Estética del carácter* (143, 144) or by his fictional accounts of character and necessity. The term «impulso fatal» undoubtedly refers to the compulsion of Pantaleón's madness. Does the word «fatal» preclude a natural explanation of its origin? Mario himself does not pursue the implications of this word in his meditation, nor does the narrator provide suggestions as to its meaning.

That the reader has not been given an explanation of the origin of Pantaleón's madness is the odder since Palacio normally furnished information readers could use in order to explain a character's thoughts, words and actions. But while in *El Origen...* the narrator's description of Mario's childhood, adolescence and early manhood adequately explains his overriding need for a wife and family, the only other character in the novel whose conduct is accounted for in this way is Laureano Romadonga, Mario's antagonist in the novel's ongoing discussion of the institution of marriage. The remaining

characters act and speak largely without intervention by the narrator in the way of informative asides. Nor do these characters provide such information themselves.

The contrast between the two modes of characterization in this novel is striking. Mario and Laureano are recognizably determined in a traditional realist manner. The others are not. A character such as Timoteo, who is without a history and is essentially unconnected to anyone or any place except the Café del Siglo where he plays the violin and displays his grotesque repulsiveness, would not be out of place in an absurdist vision of Madrid life written in the nineteen forties. In effect, Palacio, in *El origen...*, dispensed to a surprising extent with the usual conventions of characterization believed to guarantee verisimilitude — a concept based largely on the notion of an intelligible, linear relationship of cause and effect. As for Pantaleón, the novelist did not «explain» his character's madness by reference to heredity, upbringing and environment or by reference to contemporary psychological theories. Yet Pantaleón is not, like Timoteo, a figure without real substance, a figure who is, no matter how vivid, inexplicable in realist terms. The relative depth and resonance of Pantaleón's characterization results from a convincing rendering of his increasing alienation and, above all, from his having been modelled on don Quijote.

There is no analogue to Dulcinea, but in many other respects the presentation of Pantaleón echoes Cervantes' presentation of his protagonist. Among the most notable similarities are the author's choice of a meaningful name, Pantaleón, suggestive of an elderly buffoon; the characterization of Sánchez before he goes mad as a sentimental, good-hearted, passive fellow, dominated by women; the use of a catalyst (Adolfo Moreno) to awaken in Pantaleón a desire to impose his new-found vision on others and win fame (Pantaleón's major attempt, undertaken along with Moreno, to enlighten the ignorant ends, as do some of Quijote's similar attempts, in a drubbing); the attribution of special power for triggering obsessive thought to certain words; the capacity for eloquent, or at least, high-flown, discourse. Toward the end of *El origen...*, after Pantaleón's foiled (and comic) attempt at ridding the world of Timoteo whose herpes disqualifies him in the struggle for survival, Pantaleón even falls into a deep sleep from which he awakens apparently sane. Finally, as with don Quijote, Pantaleón's family

employs a subterfuge to effect his peaceful removal to the sanatorium, i.e., they act out a comedy in which he, because of his obsession, cannot help but take part.

In the end, the identification of Pantaleón with Quijote is a major source of the reader's shocked surprise when the former radically departs from the essentially benevolent nature of his model. Pantaleón not only proposes to execute his grandchild in cold blood; he also makes the chilling declaration to the terrified child he holds captive that he will eventually have to kill the boy's father as well.

Palacio's mode of characterization, except for his representations of Mario and Laureano, does not then provide adequate realistic accounts of actions performed in the novel, and this is especially so for the crucial act — Pantaleón's abduction of little Mario. The artifice of Pantaleón's literary origin and the disregard for explanations of his madness contribute to a sense of arbitrariness which is reinforced by the apparent role of chance in the novel.

Palacio's narrative presents pictures without offering reasons for things happening. Nor, until the end, does the reader require reasons for such amusing absurdities. But confronted with the impingement of Pantaleón's life on Mario's and his family's life, the reader naturally seeks an explanation for this sudden, violent convergence.

In *El origen...* the story of Mario and Carlota unfolds alongside of but apparently separate from that of Pantaleón's growing obsession with science. Palacio's use of parallel plots in this novel resembles most closely his employment of the same structuring device in *El cuarto poder* (1888): parallel plots also figured in *La Fe* (1892) and in *Tristán o el pesimismo* (1895).

There is an obvious similarity in the problem posed by *El cuarto poder* and *El origen...* The sudden unexpected convergence of parallel plots with tragic or near-tragic results played out against a background of satire is potentially a merely mechanical device, at worst, an *efectista* way of figuring the shock the linking action may cause as its repercussions spread; especially so, if, as in the case of Mario and his family, it affects the lives of people who apparently have little or no reason to expect such a disruption. If the convergence were seen as a simple coincidence, an accident, it could be interpreted as an unfortunate, catastrophic but not wholly unlikely event considering that Pantaleón had easy access to his small victim.

Such a reading of the significance of Pantaleón's act would, however, tend to reduce the novel's ending to the meaningless sensationalism of a newspaper crime report.

The fact that the seemingly unprepared-for linking action occurs at the end of the novel suggests that the text should be re-examined for clues, signs that were undecipherable until the final action had taken place (Martin, 74). Two pieces of information, in particular, which at first reading appeared to be without special implications, in retrospect acquire new meaning for they can be seen to have contributed to a kind of patterning. The patterning consists in the temporal coincidence of momentous events in the lives of Pantaleón and Mario. The intersecting of two independent lives begins on the very day of Mario's wedding to Carlota. Her father, Pantaleón, happens upon another guest, Adolfo Moreno, who is botanizing as the wedding party amuses itself in the country setting. Their ensuing conversation originates the obsession with science which governs the rest of Pantaleón's life.

The conjunction of Mario's marriage with the origin of Pantaleón's obsession cannot be construed as merely coincidental if the reader recalls a similar «coincidence» halfway through the novel. When Mario's son is born, Pantaleón tells his son-in-law that he has a secret project which he will not reveal until it is realized. That project, as the reader soon discovers, is to ascertain the origin of thought. Thus the pattern is set midway through the novel for Pantaleón's fateful collision with Mario. In this manner the parallel plots engage on the level of action or proposed action well before the culminating act which brings them together definitively.

Entrambasaguas and Baquero Goyanes suggested that the two principal plots provide a thematic contrast or a «trasfondo dialéctico». For the former, the contrast lay in what is normal as opposed to what is abnormal. For the latter, the dialectic took shape in terms of pessimism and optimism. Entrambasaguas contrasted Pantaleón's monstrous madness to Carlota's and Mario's normality — the two of them, he wrote, are «llenos de vida humana» (49). Baquero Goyanes pointed out what he saw as a tendency — discernible in Palacio's earliest work — to establish a counterpoint to his grim pessimism, a counterpoint consisting of a «línea melódica hecha de vitalidad, buen humor, optimismo» ... (72). The present reading of *El origen...* does not support such schematic representations of contrasts or of

a governing dialectic — at least not those referred to by Entrambasaguas and Baquero Goyanes.

Mario's story is about marriage in general and about the artist's special requirements for marriage, in particular. Laureano by word and deed, and Rivera, mainly through discussion, contribute to this theme to the extent that their subplots may be subsumed in Mario's story⁴. Laureano's is a wholly dissolvent view of marriage. Rivera's is a pragmatic assessment of how Mario as an artist with special needs can enjoy and, above all, use the intellectually-limited but good and compliant Carlota to best advantage.

Mario marries into Pantaleón's family and is absorbed and fascinated from the outset by his vision of Pantaleón as father, of doña Carolina as mother, and by his idea of their relationship as spouses. It is the implicit contrast between Mario's perception of Pantaleón's marriage and the reality of his in-law's marriage that unites the parallel plots more consistently and meaningfully than does any contrast between Pantaleón's madness and Mario's normality or between whatever elements of pessimism and optimism might be assigned to each plot.

Mario's normality, at least as an accurate interpreter of reality, is precisely what is questionable. His marriage is successful because his wife conceals certain facts from him and allows him the freedom he requires as a sculptor. But, just as Mario does not wish to know everything in his own marriage and is shielded from such knowledge by an understanding wife, so his intense emotional need for a family blinds him to the real natures of Pantaleón and Carolina. He does not register his mother-in-law's hypocrisy, greed and cruelty any more than he registers Pantaleón's self-absorption, indifference to his family or his dangerous obsessiveness. Mario's virtues and endearing traits include an inability to see certain things as they are.

Mario's misinterpretations of reality do not go unnoticed by Miguel Rivera, one of whose comments midway through the novel on Mario's almost willful simplicity also constitutes a telling commentary on Rivera's worldly-wise but fundamentally selfish passivity: «Después de todo, pensó ¿qué se adelanta con sacar a los

⁴ All the characters contribute directly or indirectly to the discussion of marriage. Adolfo Moreno, for example, who is primarily involved in Pantaleón's story, deflates and upsets Mario at the end of the second chapter by asserting that marriage is not natural (483 a).

hombres de los errores que los hacen felices?» (514 a). Carlota's desire to protect her husband similarly proceeds from her awareness of his innocence and from her own passivity. Her willingness to suffer for him makes her the victim of her mother and sister, «la cenicienta de la casa» (511 a) while Mario, even on the rare occasions when he is dimly aware of her sacrifices, prefers not to think about them: «Una vaga inquietud agitó momentáneamente su espíritu; pero con la inconsciencia que le caracterizaba no pensó más en ella» (510 a).

Carlota's self-abnegation is not left entirely unquestioned, as the above citation demonstrates; furthermore, there is an implicit contrast between Carlota who is the soul of self-sacrifice and Concha who fights tooth and nail to legitimize her relationship with the egotistical cad, Laureano. Despite Concha's class and the class difference between the two women which may have allowed the author and his first readers to accept more readily the lower class woman's energetic pursuit of what she thought was due her, Carlota's passive acceptance of her lot may have marked her in the minds of at least some readers as the complicit victim of a conventionally minded, self-absorbed husband.

Victims in Palacio's fiction are seldom wholly innocent. Mario, like Carlota, is a complicit victim insofar as he resists disciplining his desire that things should be as he wishes them to be. His complicity deromanticizes him, making him more credible as a victim of what later befalls him.

Clues and insights gleaned from the ways the two main plots intersect, provide contrast, and even mirror each other (Mario's fantasizing of marriage and artist's concentration resemble Pantaleón's falsifications of science and misguided singleness of purpose) may not explain Pantaleón's act but they do suggest that it should not be interpreted as a merely chance event. The parallel plots serve to figure the just visible workings of a larger, invisible mechanism. Pantaleón's act thus appears to be the outcome of necessity, a necessity which is inexplicable, i.e., fate, but which works on its not entirely innocent victims as relentlessly as the most transparent traditional determinism, and which implies, as well, the idea of purpose, of an end. That end is to reveal to Mario what he then shows he has understood (or has not understood) in the meditation with which the novel concludes.

Whatever the ultimate source of the «impulso fatal» that impelled Pantaleón's life toward Mario's, the latter is left to react to the consequences of what has happened. More specifically, the last scene and its import are filtered through three consciousnesses: first Mario's; then his friend Rivera's; and finally, his wife Carlota's. There is no overt commentary by the narrator.

Mario's meditation moves from joy in contemplation of the sunset's beauty to a desire to escape this life. That desire is motivated, as noted earlier, by his inability to understand why the fatally-driven Pantaleón has caused — or has been allowed to cause — such suffering. Mario begs the sun to remove him from «esta misera tierra encadenada a su feroz egoísmo, a su tristeza y oscuridad ...» (571 b). The narrator writes that a tremor of longing seized the sculptor's body.

It is significant — with Lombroso's and Nordau's identification of artistic genius and madness in mind — that the Mario of this meditation is not the feckless husband and father, but rather the artist. The essential dichotomy between the two aspects of Mario's character is frequently insisted on by the narrator, who wrote in Chapter VI of the newly-married Mario: «Su alegría ruidosa, inmotivada, era realmente infantil; su inocencia para las cosas de la vida rayaba en simpleza. Tan sólo cuando se tocaba a su arte adquirían aquellos ojos una expresión grave, concentrada, y su palabra, por lo general incoherente, tomaba inflexiones profundas, se hacía precisa y enérgica» (496 a). It is the Mario possessed of the artist's capacity for concentration, among other qualities, who faces the reality he will either surmount or be defeated by.

Mario's face, we are told, seemed illumined by an immortal light, his nerves were taut with emotion. A tear trembled in his ecstatic eyes which were fixed on the western sky. His wife, realizing that Mario had remained behind as they all walked toward Madrid, asked Rivera what her husband was doing. Rivera turned to look back at his friend and, writes the narrator, when he saw the contemplative attitude of the artist and the strange mystic expression in his eyes, he understood what was happening in Mario's soul. «Déjalo — manifestó gravemente—. Tu marido quizá sepa en este momento dónde se halla el origen del pensamiento». The novel ends with Carlota's response, «¡No, por Dios! exclamó la fiel esposa, asustada, corriendo hacia él» (571 b).

There are at least two ways to read this passage. In the first, Mario's thoughts may be seen as a confrontation with the problem of evil. That he finally stands rapt in a mystic vision could indicate a religious resolution of sorts to his quandary. It is hardly a traditional, Christian resolution given the unorthodox nomenclature Mario uses in describing his vision: he yearns to behold Truth and Goodness and a Power able to reconcile contradictions and heal pain. Nonetheless, Rivera might so interpret Mario's attitude and further infer that suffering has led to a revelatory vision of the true nature of reality. Suffering then, in a sense, *is* the origin of thought. Carlota's alarmed reaction to Rivera's words would amount to no more than a thoughtless, automatic response associated to the havoc caused by her father in his search for the physical site of the origin of thought.

A different reading centering on Mario's wish to escape an existence he cannot understand is also plausible. The ecstatic look on his face might indicate a dazed submission to the incomprehensible rather than a vision of the true nature of existence. Carlota may be rightly alarmed: her fear that her husband's rapt intensity might mean that he stands on the brink of madness could be justified.

The second reading would draw tighter the connection between Mario and Pantaleón. It would, in effect, amount to a cruel irony if Pantaleón's deranged act had served to exacerbate his son-in-law's artistic sensibility and capacity for suffering to the point of reducing him to the state of an ecstatic, a mystic; in short, a degenerate in Nordau's and in Pantaleón's terms. The conjunction of the two men's fates would then be final and definitive.

Palacio's limited reliance on traditional realistic determination of characters and, above all, his use of parallel plots to bind the two main protagonists lead to the sense that fate—an obscure, unknowable force—has governed events. This perception is capped by an ambiguous and possibly ironic ending that leaves open and unresolved two issues of contemporary interest, namely, the supposed redemptive value of suffering and the links between artistic genius and madness, between mysticism and madness.

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