

## MISERY, HOPE AND HUMANITY IN BENITO PÉREZ GALDÓS'S *MISERICORDIA* (1897)

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Amidst the great turmoil, appalling conditions and ineffable hardships of impoverished nineteenth-century Spain, the realist writer Benito Pérez Galdós brilliantly weaves a tale of humanity and friendship in *Misericordia*, a story about the compassion, unfaltering loyalty and devotion of the main character, Benina, towards her neighbors. The plot revolves strategically around the lowest and most economically deprived social group, the beggars, thus separating Galdós's *Misericordia* from the work of his contemporaries. In this fictional work, the lower class is given great social visibility via Benina, who constitutes the embodiment of all the values, ideology and principles the writer seeks to praise and emphasize in the story.

KEY WORDS: Benito Pérez Galdós, Realism, society, humanity, compassion, power.

### **Miseria, esperanza y humanidad en *Misericordia* (1897) de Benito Pérez Galdós**

Entre el tumulto bullicioso, la omnipresente desolación y el caos vesánico y disruptivo que produce la inefable miseria económica de la España decimonónica, el escritor Benito Pérez Galdós nos presenta en *Misericordia* un relato único sobre el valor y la verdadera significación de la empatía, la humanidad y la compasión hacia el vecino a través de Benina, su protagonista. *Misericordia* constituye una excepción significativa tanto dentro de la obra de Galdós como en la narrativa de sus coetáneos, al ser de las pocas novelas que tienen como protagonista y visibilizan, con toda la crudeza y realismo de la paupérrima vida de escasez, soledad y privaciones del indigente, a la capa social matritense más baja, los mendigos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Benito Pérez Galdós, Realismo, sociedad, humanidad, compasión, poder.

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Widely acknowledged as being one of the most relevant and beloved writers in the Spanish literary tradition, Benito Pérez Galdós's (1843-1920) work was characterized by an unrelenting desire to lift up his country and improve its living conditions, a desire which he arduously strived to convey through his prolific oeuvre.<sup>1</sup> It was precisely Galdós who presented, in *Episodios nacionales*,

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<sup>1</sup> Susana Esperanza Cano Méndez's introduction to her 1987 edition of *Misericordia* offers a pithy synthesis of this idea: "Galdós no describe la realidad para apoyar el tipo de sociedad

the most ignominious failures and greatest triumphs of our history better than any historiographical treaty, who depicted the Spanish idiosyncrasies, who expanded, polished and elevated our language to new dimensions. Most significantly, however, it was also Galdós who showed us, through the constructive criticism of his art, the enormous potential we could reach as a nation. In order to fulfill this agenda and challenge his society for the better, Galdós, like many realist writers of his time who were, as explained by Adolfo Sotelo Vázquez in *El naturalismo en España: crítica y novela*, “moralistas del cuerpo social, conciencias críticas de la sociedad burguesa” (Sotelo Vázquez, 2002: 164), had his own literary strategy: it consisted not in promoting subversive rebellion, but in merely *re-presenting*,<sup>2</sup> that is, in presenting reality to the reader as a way of raising his/her awareness. In *El mundo de Galdós* Stephen Miller further explains this collective agenda, focusing on Galdós and his heartfelt and earnest commitment to his reality and to enacting a reform of society: “Para Galdós el arte existía más como medio de dar forma a su visión social que como fin primordial que requeriría material social como pretexto sobre el que estructurarse” (Miller, 1983: 26). Or, similarly, and as expressed alternatively by Ángel del Río in *Estudios Galdosianos*: “Lo religioso, o dicho con mayor precisión, lo moral, es inseparable de la visión del mundo, de la vida, en Galdós. Está en la raíz misma del drama histórico y psicológico español que es, en rigor, el tema fundamental de toda su obra” (Del Río, 1953: 14-15).

The aim of this article is to analyze how *Misericordia* (1897), written after the author had become deeply disillusioned at seeing the Spanish regeneration projects fail to save the country from poverty and decadence, offers visibility to and awareness of the appalling economic situation in Spain through the depiction of the lowest social class of Madrid, the beggars. Further, the novel also makes a point of illustrating through the protagonist, Benina, how greatness is not determined by material wealth and social status, but by compassion, courage and an indomitable will to help others.

In order to fully understand *Misericordia* and its underlying meanings and significance, the novel must be set against the backdrop of the theoretical basis, parameters, methods and rationale by which Spanish literary realism of the second half of the nineteenth century operated. The Spanish realist literary tradition was based, first and foremost, both in theory and praxis, on a close observation and documentation of objective reality, which aimed at producing a

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existente —como los anteriormente nombrados—, sino para criticar, con humor a veces, con desesperanza otras, el sistema desigual” (Esperanza Cano, 1987: 25).

<sup>2</sup> In Yvan Lissorgues’s *Realismo y Naturalismo en España*, John W. Kronik brilliantly paraphrases this concept in his “La retórica del realismo: Galdós y Clarín”, following closely Erich Auerbach’s definition: “Lo cierto es que la idea de ‘reproducción’ es despistadora en un contexto artístico. Por eso Auerbach, en su importante libro *Mimesis*, habla no de la ‘reproducción’ sino de la ‘representación’ de la realidad” (Kronik, 1988: 51).

mimesis of life in the literary text.<sup>3</sup> It is no wonder that writers like Galdós were tremendously popular, especially among the middle classes, for these saw their very own mannerisms, flaws, strengths, mishaps and habits cunningly reflected in his novels.<sup>4</sup> The witty and talented writer Emilia Pardo Bazán, a contemporary of Galdós, explains the essence of naturalism in her text *La cuestión palpitante* with great detail and proficiency:

En resumen, la literatura de la segunda mitad del siglo XIX, fértil, variada y compleja, presenta rasgos característicos: reflexiva, nutrida de hechos, positiva y científica, basada en la observación del individuo y de la sociedad, profesa a la vez el culto de la forma artística, y lo practica, no con la serena sencillez clásica, sino con riqueza y complicación. Si es realista y naturalista, es también refinada; y como a su perspicacia analítica no se esconde ningún detalle, los traslada prolijamente, y pule y cincela el estilo. (Pardo Bazán, 1970: 64)

Much later, after Pardo Bazán defined the realist and naturalist tradition of her time, other scholars and specialists in the subject, such as Adolfo Sotelo Vázquez, have described the literary school of the second half of the nineteenth century in Spain in similar terms: “[...] la novela como forma total del arte naturalista [...] pretende presentar con la máxima diafanidad la vida, creando una ilusión de realidad mediante unos artificios que son exclusivamente propios de la novela: la impresión de verdad nace de los artilugios de la ficción” (Sotelo Vázquez, 2002: 142). Specifically, Galdós’s aesthetics and ethics, objectives, interests and focus have been brilliantly synthesized by Ricardo Gullón in *Técnicas de Galdós*, where he observes that Galdós “[v]io claro lo que a otros parecía turbio: que la vida es materia novelable, pero no la Vida en abstracto, sino la vida cotidiana, según acontecía en los medios sociales y entre las gentes que integraban la sociedad española de su tiempo” (Gullón, 1970: 16).

In Galdós’s earlier novels, the middle class was always the great protagonist of the narrative, because until that moment in time, and as stated in his

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<sup>3</sup> As expressed by Galdós himself in his 1897 speech “La sociedad presente como materia novelable”: “Imagen de la vida es la novela, y el arte de componerla estriba en reproducir los caracteres humanos, las pasiones, las debilidades, lo grande y lo pequeño, las almas y las fisionomías, todo lo espiritual y físico que nos constituye y nos rodea, y el lenguaje, que es la marca de la raza, y las viviendas, que son el signo de familia, y la vestidura, que diseña los últimos trazos de la personalidad: todo esto sin olvidar que debe existir perfecto fiel de balanza entre la exactitud y la belleza de la reproducción” (Pérez Galdós, 2012: 2).

<sup>4</sup> José F. Montesinos in his elaborate and highly analytical *Galdós* defines the writer’s contribution in the following manner: “La obra madura de Galdós es como una gran ventana abierta sobre toda la vida española. Todo se ve desde ella; nada se escamotea o se disimula” (Montesinos, 1968: 63).

“Observaciones sobre la novela contemporánea en España” (1870), Galdós believed that this social group was and would be the motor, propeller, and strongest force of change and improvement in society.<sup>5</sup> Also, prior to the publication of *Misericordia*, Galdós had been a great advocate of the so-called *regenerationist* method,<sup>6</sup> which was a contemporary discourse based on the belief that ideological debate and abstract thinking had proven to be ineffective in solving the nation’s problems, and these could only be efficiently fixed by paying close attention to the pragmatic, economic and social issues of the nation.

However, Galdós was now faced with the miserable and alarming conditions in which a vast majority of Spaniards lived, and which no ideological discourse or political approach had succeeded in eradicating, and he was deeply disappointed. The fiery idealism and irreverent irony which had previously characterized the author had now evolved into a spiritual dimension, one that was no longer preoccupied with material conditions, but rather with humanity, empathy and compassion, as embodied in Benina, the protagonist of *Misericordia*. At age 54, and after seeing politics, institutional economics and education all fail to save Spain, Galdós lost faith in and rejected these material and societal issues, and turned instead, through the writing of *Misericordia*, to the very thing men and women turn to when everything else seems lost: their inner realm or spirit, the endogenous dimension denominated *soul*.

It is precisely this change of attitude and perspective by the writer that brought about the creation of Benina, who symbolizes all the traits traditionally associated with a great spirit: compassion, altruism, unyielding generosity and kindness. In fact, *Misericordia* is very much a story of love, not of the romantic or carnal sort, but perhaps of the highest expression of human love: the ability to look at another human being, even a stranger, and truly understand him/her, to see oneself reflected in the suffering of our neighbor, just as Nina looks at Almudena, a blind Moroccan beggar she meets in the city and whom she cares for as if he were her own son.<sup>7</sup> In the creation of the relationship between Benina

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<sup>5</sup> However, and as succinctly expressed by Luciano García Lorenzo in his edition of *Misericordia*, by 1897 Galdós had lost his until then unflinching faith in bourgeois leadership as enactor of societal development and reform.

<sup>6</sup> In *Galdós Regeneracionista*, María Ángeles Varela Olea elaborates on the ideological and historical idiosyncrasies of the mid-nineteenth-century Spanish novel as follows: “Se trata de una época en que el escritor se siente inmerso en un ambiente reformador y comprometido en debates que pretenden solucionar las grandes cuestiones sociales, religiosas y políticas. Por eso, las intenciones reformadoras de los regeneracionistas desembocaron en los más diversos campos de actividades del español de la época” (Varela Olea, 2001: 9).

<sup>7</sup> Nina does not only relentlessly look after Almudena, but also functions as a collective economic and moral support system, observes María Zambrano in *La España de Galdós*: “Benigna. Todos viven sobre su frágil espalda, sostenidos por la incansable actividad de su ligeros pies, consolados por la imperturbable alegría de su ánimo” (Zambrano, 2004: 105).

and Almudena, who seem to bond regardless of their traits, origins or circumstances, Galdós transcends class, sex, race and religion to reach individual humanity as a universal value, much like Herman Melville did, according to nineteenth-century specialist Rodrigo Andrés in his *Herman Melville: poder y amor entre hombres*, creating unlikely bonds among his fictional characters (Andrés, 2007: 142), which surpass and exceed all expectations and conventionality.

The plot and thematic outline of *Misericordia* begin with the main character, Nina, an elderly woman who serves an impoverished middle-class widow, Francisca Juárez. Francisca, far from paying her maid a salary, actually depends on Nina's wit to economically support the whole Juárez family. It is precisely Nina who relentlessly searches the streets of the city for something to feed Paca (Francisca) and her two idle offspring, rather than herself. Continuously compared to a saint through the use of numerous biblical references in the text, we begin to see by her attitude to this family that Benina truly embodies the values of compassion, unselfish love and loyalty, as well as those of discipline, industry, ingenuity and bravery.<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, the plot undergoes an expected twist when the Juárez family receives a generous inheritance and Paca decides to callously dismiss Nina, who is then forced to spend the rest of her days in the streets of Madrid with her blind Moroccan friend Almudena. It is also relevant to note the type of "poetic justice" that takes place in the text; the economic redemption of Paca is not based on merit, as she has not worked a day in her life for the money she has received, but rather she has been saved by a fortuitous and arbitrary turn of events. It is pertinent to observe this detail, as Galdós was a firm believer in hard work, effort and individual merit, and it is no accident that Nina, unlike Paca, makes all her gains through intelligence and determination.

The actual story begins with Galdós setting *Misericordia* in context, and thoroughly describing the endemic poverty of Madrid and the psychological and physical implications it has for his characters. Notice the crudity and realism with which the narrative voice describes Pedra, a young orphan driven to prostitution by a series of unfortunate events:<sup>9</sup>

Era hermosa: por tal la celebraban; su voz sonaba como las músicas bonitas. Primero se puso a cambiar y luego a vender churros, pues tenía tino de comerciante: pero nada le valió su buena voluntad, porque hubo de cogerla de su cuenta la Diega, que en pocos días la enseñó a embriagarse, y otras cosas peores. A los tres meses, Pedra no era

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<sup>8</sup> Note that in the novel, while upper-class members like Paca embody negative qualities such as greed, selfishness, ignorance, folly and weakness, Nina, albeit being economically deprived, symbolizes the opposite values.

<sup>9</sup> Galdós had confessed to spending some months among the beggars of Madrid disguised as a doctor in order to fully document their lives.

conocida. La enflaquecieron, dejándola en los puros pellejos, y su aliento apestaba. Hablaba como una carreterona, y tenía un toser perruno y una carraspera que tiraban para atrás. [...] Sólo duraba en ella el gusto del aguardiente; y cuando se *apimblaba*, que era un día sí y otro también, hacía figuras en medio del arroyo, y la toreaban los chicos. Dormía sus monas en la calle o donde le cogía, y más bofetadas tenía en su cara que pelos en la cabeza. Cuerpo más asistido de cardenales no se conoció jamás, ni persona que en su corta edad, pues no tenía más que veintidós años, aunque representaba treinta, hubiera visitado tan a menudo las prevenciones de la Inclusa y Latina. (Pérez Galdós, 1998: 142-143)

Note in this fragment the lack of moral judgment, condescension or prejudice regarding the characters in the narrator's voice. This is not a patronizing description, but one which simply seeks to make the reader aware of the fact that a lack of resources in Spain can ruin and corrupt a girl who is as naive and innocent as Pedra. In addition, the prevalent misery which strikes Madrid in *Misericordia* affects not only the individual, but creates also a general atmosphere of chaos, disorderly agitation and turbulent uprisings. Observe the collective hysteria with which an upper-class wedding takes place, after a group of starving indigents has decided to literally jump on them, at seeing the conspicuous luxury of the wealthy participants:

Al fin los del funeral no repartieron cosa mayor; y si los del bodorrio se corrieron algo más, acudió tanta pobreza de otros cuadrantes, y se armó tal barullo y confusión, que unos cogieron por cinco, y otros se quedaron *in albis*. Al ver salir a la novia, tan emperifollada, y a las señoras y caballeros de su compañía, cayeron sobre ellos como nube de langosta, y al padrino le estrujaron el gabán, y hasta le chafaron el sombrero. Trabajo le costó al buen señor sacudirse de la terrible plaga, y no tuvo más remedio que arrojar un puñado de calderilla en medio del patio. Los más ágiles hicieron su agosto; los más torpes gatearon inútilmente. La *Caporal* y Eliseo trataban de poner orden, y cuando los novios y todo el acompañamiento se metieron en los coches, quedó en las inmediaciones de la iglesia la turbamulta mísera, gruñendo y pataleando. (Pérez Galdós, 1998: 185)

These extracts are just two examples of several in Galdós's *Misericordia* in which the reader is presented with an extensive prosopography on how misery influences, impacts and shapes the mindset, health and psychological conditions of individuals, as well as with a panoramic view of nineteenth-century downtown Madrid. Concisely, the author sets the fictional stage on which Nina will soon reappear to make her grand entrance, this time to be analyzed and presented to the reader in detail. From a narratological standpoint, the conscientious and

exhaustive description of the atmosphere and context surrounding the protagonist could be a narrative strategy of contrast and comparison. Having previously submerged the reader, who by this stage of the story feels overwhelmed by misery, into the crude, dark and ineffable hardships of poverty, Galdós can now reintroduce Nina with great effect as the exact opposite, that is, as the light and hope of that very same society.

It is precisely at this stage in the novel that the story becomes almost hagiographic, narrating the deep and gradual transformation of the protagonist into a quasi-saintly figure. In fact, the narrative voice of *Misericordia* continuously establishes parallels between Nina and Jesus, citing and paraphrasing the Bible extensively. This process of change in Benina, which is not really a metamorphosis as she has always been kind and nurturing, but an improvement and significant upgrade on her outlook and attitude towards the world, begins while she is still working as a servant for the Juárez family. The relationship between Benina and Paca is so paradoxical that it is the servant who is left to wander alone the streets of Madrid, incessantly hustling and negotiating, in a sort of nervous frenzy, for a way to pay off Paca's numerous debts:

—Sí, sí...Pongo lo mío de hoy, y ya falta tan poco, que no quiero molestarte más.<sup>10</sup> ¡Gracias a Dios! Me parece mentira. ¡Ay, hijo, qué bueno eres! Mereces que te caiga la lotería, y si no te cae, es porque no hay justicia en la tierra ni en el cielo... Adiós, hijo, no puedo detenerme ni un momento más... Dios te lo pague... Estoy en ascuas. Me voy volando a casa... Quédate en la tuya... [...] Ya te contaré, ya te contaré. Y salió disparada, las monedas metidas en el seno, temerosa de que alguien se las quitara por el camino, o de que se escaparan volando, arrastradas de sus tumultuosos pensamientos. (Pérez Galdós, 1998: 94)

Nina supports her employer's family not only financially, but also psychologically, as she is continuously encouraging and comforting Paca and both her children when crisis strikes. Yet again, the contrasting personalities of both Paca and Nina reveal another contradiction considering their professional relationship of employer and subordinate. While Paca is the querulous voice in the house, endlessly complaining about her problems and comfortably establishing herself as a victim and always refusing to take any responsibility for her problems, Nina, assertive, resolute and determined, is the one that solves all the problems, crises and incidents. However, what sets Nina apart from the Juárez family, more than anything else, is her kind and sincere heart as well as her strength and capacity for work. As Paca spends her time in useless digressions about her tragic situation, Nina sets out to take action and find pragmatic solutions, endlessly struggling to make ends meet.

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<sup>10</sup> Nina is speaking to Almudena.



Once she is undeservedly dismissed from her job in the Juárez house, Nina is ruthlessly left to her own luck on the streets of Madrid, where she meets once again with her blind Moroccan beggar friend, Almudena. He soon falls in love with the kindness and nurturing generosity of the elderly woman, though this love is unrequited. Albeit being herself in a terrible situation, Nina takes responsibility for Almudena and establishes with him a sort of mother and son relationship, feeding and guiding him through unspeakable hardships.

The story finishes after Nina, having been deeply hurt and angered at being abandoned by a family she had profoundly cared for and believed in, suddenly realizes the tremendous mediocrity of spirit and ingratitude of those to whom she had unconditionally given her heart. As if in a sort of *anagnorisis*, Nina achieves a small triumph, a calm serenity, a tranquil appeasing of her conscience and mind:

Las adversidades se estrellaban ya en el corazón de Benina, como las vagas olas en el robusto cantil. Rompíanse con estruendo, se quebraban, se deshacían, en blancas espumas, y nada más. Rechazada por la familia que había sustentado en días tristesísimos de miseria y dolores sin cuento, no tardó en rehacerse de la profunda turbación que ingratitud tan notoria le produjo; su conciencia le dio inefables consuelos: miró la vida desde la altura en que su desprecio de la humana vanidad la ponía; vio en ridícula pequeñez a los seres que la rodeaban, y su espíritu se hizo fuerte y grande. Había alcanzado glorioso triunfo; sentíase victoriosa, después de haber perdido la batalla en el terreno material. (Pérez Galdós, 1998: 307)

The life lesson in *Misericordia* seems self-explanatory and obvious to the attentive reader: true beauty, greatness and a superior soul come not from external possessions, hereditary wealth or status, not even from material or pecuniary achievements, but from an insurmountable will to save the other, which, in a way, is a form of saving oneself. It is the capacity to strip *the other* of external circumstances and previous knowledge and to truly identify the universal humanity in him/her, to feel compassion and empathy for those who are weaker or less capable, and to challenge them to be better, to improve their perspective, situation and opportunities in the world. According to the always subjective exegesis of the text, then, it would seem that Nina's ability to love others truly and sincerely is not a sign of weakness, but an indicator of an indomitable strength of character. *Misericordia*, then, offers the readers two very relevant ideas: not only a panoramic and privileged view of the ineffable hardships of poverty in nineteenth-century Spain, but also a vague, however hazy or indefinite, hope: a hope for redemption. The answers we desperately seek are not in a superior, abstract and inscrutable being, but in ourselves, within us, who are, after all, the greatest expression of humanity and power.



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