

Introduction to Valle-Inclán Between Europe and the Americas: Aesthetics, Language, History

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Few writers like Ramón del Valle-Inclán (1866 – 1936) have been able to make will of style and aesthetic viewpoint, projected onto the world or onto human reality, fundamental tools for understanding the scales on which we view the course of history. Dealing with important events and daily occurrences, the Spanish narrator and playwright worked conscientiously, with indubitable determination and with great confidence in the illuminating power of his artistic language, which was permanently pushed to the limits of expressivity and plasticity. He carried out this project of his in short stories, novels, melodramas, farces and other literary genres, especially dealing with modern Spanish history; but this also involved dealing with the European crisis surrounding the First World War and the vestiges of Latin American and African colonization, and the lengthy processes of revolution and war that were putting an end to this domination.

For many years, specialists in Valle-Inclán's work accepted that the constant search for an artistic language truly capable of revealing the non-official history, the hidden records of conflicts and abuses and also of romantic and festive social practices, had passed through two main stages.¹ The first, associated with Latin American modernism, was of an aestheticizing nature, decadentistic and even esoteric through its link to theosophy and occultism. The second, more politically committed, is generally linked to the artistic-literary renewal caused by the appearance of cinema, firstly, and later, by the explosion of the avant-garde, with the possible influence of cubism and expressionism.

It even became a habit to interpret these two positions as having their ideological correlates in two opposite movements. First we have the traditionalism of the 19th century, which in a Spain removed from the ideals of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution, aspired to maintain the old social, economic and institutional structures, with strong ties to the most immovable Catholicism and to the dynastic struggles that led to successive civil confrontations between 1833 and 1876 (known as the *Carlist Wars*). Second we have a progressive direction, in some ways close to historical materialism and to Marxism; marked simultaneously by the Soviet and Mexican revolutions, and exploring the mechanisms belonging to all consciousness-raising art

and, for that reason, given to grotesque characterization, to carnivalization or comic deformation and to all that which converges in the name of *esperpento* (something akin to *theatre of the grotesque*). This concept is complicated to understand if we do not bear in mind the notions of history as contingency and as discourse and, at the same time, of language as representation and as performative mediation. Valle-Inclán explained it by referring to the effect of concave mirrors, before which heroism and beauty lose all their splendour. The *esperpento* was a way to exhibit national history and to contrast it with what it could have been, hence its character of *tragedy deprived of dignity*. Thus, we can understand it as an aesthetic of agitation, revolutionary in the sphere of consciousness and in the denunciation of social cynicism in the service of an anachronistic power, indeed useless for any modernizing and democratic aim.

Of course, this is a rather simplistic way of interpreting an aesthetic-ideological evolution which in Valle-Inclán is impossible to separate from a long series of biographical factors: his book- and community-based education, his family and cultural background, his conflict-filled and passionate relationship with the theatre world, his various trips to America (Mexico and South America), his interpretation of the long-established Spanish militarism and of colonization as an element of economic-moral legitimization, his experiences of various instances of armed conflict (he even flew over the French-German border in 1916 and turned that fact into a journalistic and literary account), his family's complex economic survival, his difficulties in establishing himself in the various career paths he achieved—some of which were of significant institutional relevance, such as the directorship of the Spanish Academy of Arts in Mussolini's Rome (1933 – 1934)—and his own personal extravagance.

Furthermore, the simplification to which I refer tends to ignore elements which are in no way secondary and which, so to speak, span the entire career of this writer, who perhaps—along with Federico García Lorca—had the most influence on Spanish theatre of the second half of the 20th century. Among these elements are his Galician cultural and anthropological roots, his reception of contemporary thought and philosophy, an aesthetic with a very strong visual arts and theatrical framework, a conception of the occupation of writing as a space conducive to intertextuality and as a permanent exercise of revisiting foreign texts and of rewriting own texts, and, ultimately, an attempt to intervene and to be noticed in the public sphere, for which purpose he not only cultivated a provocative attitude towards society and power (dandyism, rebellion, mannerisms. . .) but also assumed numerous artistic and civil risks, and not just in his early years.

The five essays that constitute this dossier on Valle-Inclán aim to offer a general perspective on the topics presented here. With their contributions, the authors have achieved a well-rounded perspective, which is very effective at highlighting the most important critical points of agreement and also at showing alternatives to the contemporary interpretation of the significance of Ramón del Valle-Inclán's rich and plural work, from a comparatist and world literature perspective.

Darío Villanueva's article focuses on the coordinates of European and American modernism in order to explore Valle-Inclán's narrative poetics in its various aesthetic phases, comparing it to the form-, perspective- and spatial/temporal-structure-rene-

wing processes developed by important novelists such as Marcel Proust, Jules Romain, Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, James Joyce and William Faulkner.

Robert Lima devotes his analysis to the notion of the *esperpento* as an appropriate choice for revealing the social, political and religious reality of Spain at the beginning of the 20th century, but he manages to avoid the temptation to reduce everything to the national, and shows the theatre of the grotesque in relation to the theatre of the absurd and the theatre of cruelty and connects it with historical and avant-garde movements, both literary and artistic.

Margarita Santos' article discusses the interartistic nature of Valle-Inclán's entire body of work, with detailed attention paid to its relationship with painting, both in its dealings with institutions and artists (Zuloaga, Romero de Torres and others) and in its own critical and essay output, including, of particular note, a sort of aesthetic program that the author developed in a 1916 work, *The Lamp of Marvels. Aesthetic Meditations*.

Antonio F. Pedrós-Gascón's essay develops the view that Valle-Inclán was one of the European writers who tried hardest to incorporate Latin American historical reality into his work. The stated goal is to observe and analyze in *The Tyrant Banderas* (1926), his dictator novel, the traces of the ideologeme that opposes civilization and barbarity, keeping in mind the sociocultural dimension of Mexican muralism and the author's own ideological evolution.

Rosario Mascato-Rey's work deals with Valle-Inclán's reception of Bergson's philosophy, particularly as it affects the comprehension of temporality, and with special attention to the Galician author's first collection of poetry (*The Fragrance of Legend*, 1907), an orientation which doubtless affects the rhythmical-musical elements of his writing, and not only in the lyric genre.

Note

1. I offer an alphabetical list of Valle-Inclán's works mentioned in this dossier as they have been translated or rendered into English in various places. I am grateful for my colleague Dru Dougherty's invaluable assistance in compiling this list: *Aromas de leyenda* (1907) [*The Fragrance of Legend*]; *Claves líricas* (1930) [*Lyrical Keys*]; *Las Comedias Bárbaras* (1907-1922) [*Barbaric Comedies: Cara de Plata (Silver Face), Águila de blasón (Heraldic Eagle), and Romance de lobos (A Romance of Wolves)*]; *Divinas palabras. Tragicomedia de aldea* (1920) [*Divine Words. A Village Tragicomedy*]; *Farsa italiana de la enamorada del rey* (1920) [*Farce of the Girl who Loved the King*]; *Farsa y licencia de la reina castiza* (1919) [*Farce of the True Spanish Queen*]; *Flor de santidad* (1904) [*Flower of Sanctity*]; *La Guerra Carlista* (1908-1909) [*The Carlist War Novels: Los cruzados de la causa (The Crusaders of the Cause), El resplandor de la hoguera (The Glow of the Bonfire), and Gerifaltes de antaño (Notables of Days Gone By)*]; *Jardín umbrío* (1914) [*The Shadowy Garden*]; *La lámpara maravillosa* (1916) [*The Lamp of Marvels. Aesthetic Meditations*]; *La marquesa Rosalinda. Farsa sentimental y grotesca* (1913) [*The Marquise Rosalind. A Sentimental and Grotesque Farce*]; *La medianoche. Visión estelar de un momento de guerra* (1917) [*Midnight: A Stellar Vision of a Moment during the War*]; *Luces de bohemia* (1920, 1924) [*Bohemian Lights*]; *Martes de carnaval* (1925-1930) [*Mardi Gras. Grotesqueries: Los cuernos de don Friolera (The Horns of Don Friolera), Las galas del difunto (The Dead Man's Duds), and La hija*

del capitán (*The Captain's Daughter*)] ; *El Pasajero* (1920) [*The Passenger*]; *La pipa de kif* (1919) [*The Pipe of Kiff*]; *Retablo de la avaricia, la lujuria y la muerte* (1927) [*Tableau of Avarice, Lust and Death*]; *El Ruedo Ibérico* (1927 – 1932) [*The Iberian Bullring; La corte de los milagros* (*The Court of Miracles*), *Viva mi dueño* (*Long Live My Lord*), and *Baza de espadas* (*Tricks of Spades*)] ; *Sonatas* (1902 – 1905) [*The Pleasant Memoirs of the Marquis de Bradomin. Four Sonatas; Sonata de primavera* (*Sonata of Spring*), *Sonata de estío* (*Sonata of Summer*), *Sonata de otoño* (*Sonata of Autumn*), and *Sonata de invierno* (*Sonata of Winter*)] ; *Tirano Banderas. Novela de Tierra Caliente* (1926) [*The Tyrant Banderas. A Novel of Warm Lands*].

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