

Carlist Carnage: War in Valle-Inclán's Carlist Novels and in *Voces de gesta*

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Abstract This study investigates Ramón del Valle-Inclán's view of war in the Carlist series (three novels and a tragedy) that appeared between 1908 and 1911. The subject of the series was the Spanish civil war of 1872-1876 known as the last Carlist War, a conflict in which insurgent troops and peasant guerrilla bands revolted to defend their traditional forms of life against modernizing trends: secularization, republicanism, and bourgeois economies. Central to the argument is the focus on situational irony, a device that structures all four works and calls into question readings that discover an heroic exaltation of war in the series. This essay proposes that Valle-Inclán "disenchants" such a view by presenting war as rooted in fratricidal murder, political corruption and the passion for revenge, a vision that influenced the shift in his art toward a poetics of the grotesque.

Key words history and literature; irony; Valle-Inclán's Carlist series; war in literature

In 1916 Valle-Inclán visited the Western Front of World War I and shortly thereafter published *La media noche. Visión estelar de un momento de guerra* (Night on the Western Front, 1917). That book has been credited with playing a major role in the shift in his poetics from symbolist harmony—"the harmony of opposites"—to grotesque dissonance inaugurated in *La pipa de Kif* (The Marihuana Pipe, 1919). As John Lyon notes, *La media noche* "has generally been considered by critics as a key work for the understanding of the author's transition from a heroic to an anti-heroic vision of life... It has been inferred... that the shock of first-hand experience of trench warfare must have been instrumental in producing the grotesque anti-academic humour of *La pipa de Kif*" (Lyon, "Crossroads" 135). My intention is not to discuss whether *La media noche* marked the crossroads in the writer's poetics, although this essay casts doubt on that hypothesis. Rather, it is to amplify the inference mentioned by Lyon and investigate its force in an earlier series of works whose subject was Spain's nineteenth-century civil war known as the Carlist Wars.¹

The linkage made by Lyon between war and a “anti-heroic” vision of life is a key to uncovering the fundamental questions that the Spanish author asked in the works just mentioned: is war the crucible of heroism in Spanish history or its grave? Is it the arena in which tradition and national character are voiced and defended to the death, or the site of meaningless slaughter occasioned by humanity’s hubris, venality and base cruelty? Valle did not have to visit the Western Front in order to seek answers to those questions. Before his trip to France in 1916, he immersed himself in the history of the Carlist Wars, which raged from 1833 to 1840 and again from 1872 to 1876. The war fought in the 1870s was the one he chose to novelize. To prepare the trilogy he visited its terrain and interviewed veterans when possible (Fernández Almagro 127-37). Still within living memory, the Carlist Wars provided early access to both written and oral testimony of war’s glories and horror.

Valle’s sustained interest in war derived, to some degree, from his circumstances: born two years before the Revolution of 1868, he was six years of age when the second Carlist War broke out in 1872, thirty-two when Spain surrendered its last overseas imperial colonies in the War of 1898, and fifty when he toured the Western Front. For Valle-Inclán’s generation, warfare was part of the fabric of life, worthy of a serious writer’s attention. This was especially so for a novelist who considered Tolstoy a model (Dougherty, *Guía* 131-38) and cast himself as “the historian of a world that ended with me” (Rivas Cherif 8) — a world that disappeared in the wake of modernity’s expansion in Spain during the nineteenth century.

To address fully the question of Valle-Inclán’s vision of war inscribed in his *oeuvre* would require much more space than is available for this essay. I have therefore chosen to focus on the novelistic trilogy devoted to the second Carlist War published in 1908 and 1909, *La Guerra Carlista*, as well as the tragedy on the same theme, *Voces de gesta*, staged and published in 1911.²

The Carlist series is a key to clarifying Valle-Inclán’s vision of war during the years prior to World War I.³ Among the representational devices he employed in the series, situational irony stands out most saliently. It is worth recalling that the common effect of irony is to evoke the opposite of what is stated. By “situational” irony I mean the production of opposite meanings by agents who are situated in different locales, which may be spatial, ideological, affective, etc. Because irony generates contrary meanings, it lends itself to the creation of dialectical polarities and thematic binaries, a practice found throughout the works examined here. Perhaps the principal conclusion I draw from the series is that Valle placed the origins of war in fraternal strife, as the story of Cain and Abel reminds us, making all wars civil wars in which there are no heroes and no glory, only death and devastation.

Unholy Holy War

The Carlist wars were sparked by a dynastic dispute among the Spanish Bourbons. A schism arose in 1832 when King Ferdinand VII restored the ancient Spanish law that allowed females to succeed to the Crown (it had been rescinded by Philip V in 1713). When Ferdinand died the following year, his brother, to be known as Carlos V, refused to recognize Ferdinand's daughter, who went on to reign as Isabel II, and claimed his right to the throne. Declaring himself the legitimate successor, Carlos immediately found support in Navarre and the Basque provinces from the ultra-absolutists and the apostolic Catholics who opposed Liberalism. As Edgar Holt writes, the ideals that motivated Carlos's supporters to take up arms "were those of religion and absolutism, combined with an agrarian population's deep-rooted suspicion of all innovations and economic developments coming from towns and cities" (44).

It would be too simple to think of the Carlist wars as only a dynastic dispute. They may be best understood as a popular, fundamentalist rebellion against the forces of modernization that were altering Spain's political and economic structures in the nineteenth century. Margarita Santos Zas states that the civil wars represented the "collective defense" of Spanish traditions still grounded in a semi-feudal rural hierarchy composed of impoverished nobles, reactionary priests, peasant farmers and herders. Stirred by the threats perceived in Liberalism, these inhabitants of Navarre, the Basque provinces and sections of Catalonia "were united by feelings of solidarity to reject everything that the bourgeois revolution represented and brought about" (Santos Zas, *Tradicionalismo* 363).⁴

It was within that specific socio-historical context that Valle-Inclán set the initial novel in the Carlist trilogy, *Los cruzados de la causa* (The Crusaders of the Cause, 1908). The action begins, however, with a chorus of voices that characterize war as timeless, when considered by the mothers and wives left to keep the home fires burning:

"No one will be left to work the fields. The young men who don't volunteer to defend their faith [in the Carlist cause] will be forced to serve in the battalions of the other King."

"No one has seen what we're seeing today! Two Kings at war in the kingdoms of Spain!"

"Not since the days of the Moors!" (*Cruzados* 671)⁵

Immediately war is given a double frame for Valle-Inclán's twentieth-century readers. It is foremost a sacred cause, a crusade to save the Christian faith from being

corrupted by the doctrines of a foreign culture. “Two Kings who follow different laws. One is a good Christian, who rides with his troops and breaks bread with them. The other has more than a hundred wives, like a Moor, and never sets foot outside his grand palace in Castile” (*Cruzados* 672). The medieval allusions cast the conflict as pre-modern. The temporal removal from modern warfare could not be more obvious. Indeed, the anachronism is so pronounced that one suspects that modernity itself is being cast as the enemy.

The “good Christian” King mentioned by the women was Charles VII, Carlist pretender to the Bourbon throne and rival of Isabel II who had been driven into exile by the Revolution of 1868. The “other” King alluded to was Amadeo de Saboya (Extramiana 220), an Italian prince who was invited to replace Queen Isabel and reigned briefly from January 1871 to February 1873.⁶ However a symbolic reading of that “other” sovereign points in another direction, toward modern, political warfare waged by a standing army for a powerful, competing faith sweeping across the Americas and Europe since the late eighteenth century: liberal nationalism. The modern nation—ever more secular, constitutionally grounded and devoid of royalty—and bourgeois capitalism were the new creeds threatening the traditional way of life embodied in the Carlist cause. They had shown their colors in the American and French Revolutions, in the debates over the Spanish Constitution of 1812 and in the draft of the stillborn Constitution of the First Spanish Republic. Indeed, in the second and third volumes of the Carlist trilogy, the Carlist forces are fighting against Republican troops while the Third French Republic is taking shape only a few days march across the Pyrenees. Against such stirrings of modernization in Spain, what chance did the “feudal soul” of Carlism have?⁷

Numerous critics have held that the first Carlist novel expresses Valle-Inclán's nostalgia for the Carlists' “heroic” defense of their traditional way of life.⁸ They argue that, doomed to fail, the Carlist cause was presented as a heroic resistance to the forces of modernization. However, as Gogorza Fletcher suggests, the cause and its “crusaders” had to seem oddly archaic to most early twentieth-century readers (85-86). A living anachronism, Carlism had sought to place on the Spanish throne a king who would rule according to Christ's teachings, after purging the country of Jacobin politicians and their corrupt clients—such was the “legitimist” view conveyed by the gentry and clergy we meet in *Cruzados*. Their purpose in the novel is to raise money in order to purchase and ship arms from Galicia to guerrilla bands in Navarre. These members of the ancien régime, whose interests were in the balance, believe “the legitimate King [Carlos VII] defends God's cause” —reason enough to extend civil warfare “like a great conflagration” across Spain (*Cruzados* 673-74). Christian faith suffices to fan the flames of holy war.

Yet all we see take place in the opening novel of the trilogy is a botched attempt to transfer rifles from a convent, where they have been cached, to a sailing ship that founders while the insurgents watch from the beach. The irony conveyed by this action—a storm extinguishes the crusaders’ holy flame—runs through the Carlist series in whose pages grandiose visions of Spain’s spiritual deliverance are undercut by mundane scenes of discord, disarray and futile sacrifice. For Valle-Inclán, as Miguel Gil observes, “The Carlist War is not a glorious episode in the history of Spain but a locus of misery and sorrow whose outcome is mourning and emptiness, not a celebrated victory” (124).⁹

On what grounds, then, do scholars (see note 8) base their claims that Valle-Inclán was a nostalgic apologist of Carlism? The main evidence is found in the writer’s public associations with Carlist leaders (Fernández Almagro 128-36), his “traditionalist” speeches given in Spain and Buenos Aires (Alonso Seoane xxx-xxxix), and the epic allusions that appear frequently in the Carlist series. While such details frame Carlism as a “living force” that animated a collective tradition in the nineteenth century (Lyon, *Theater* 58-66), they take on a different hue when one considers that by 1908-1911 that “living force” was long spent. The title of the second novel in the series—*El resplandor de la hoguera* (The Bonfire’s Afterglow)—suggests as much, namely that only the “afterglow” of Carlism persisted in the first decade of the twentieth century (Nora 79).¹⁰ The movement’s glorification in literature could not help but collide with the facts of history. Valle-Inclán’s feat was to focus on the collision itself. Hence the ironic structure that opened a gap between the resurrection of Carlism’s “heroic” cause and the post-war horizon of Valle’s reading and viewing public.

Situational Irony

The situational irony deployed in the trilogy issues from the fractured structure devised by Valle for his novels. By shifting the narrator’s gaze from one camp to the other and from one locale to another, the conventional forward moving plot is replaced by an episodic narrative in which events are often simultaneous and discontinuous (Juan Bolufer 215). Fernández Almagro observed early on that this mosaic structure captured the raw reality of war: “War, for those who experience it directly, is like life itself: fragmentary, bewildering, haphazard” (132-33).¹¹ The observation is significant, for it suggests that Valle-Inclán’s understanding of war was the opposite of ordered. It embraced a mix of actions and perspectives that the writer refused to meld into an artificially coherent vision. In this respect, he diverged markedly from Unamuno’s *Paz en la guerra* (Peace in War, 1897) whose narrator describes how the protagonist and his friends go about making an intelligible story out of their diverse experiences

in different guerrilla bands once they are reunited in Bilbao:

In the city, transformed into the home of Carlist forces, the impressions of each of them were congealing as they talked to each other... In those gatherings Ignacio became aware of the diverse characters of his comrades in arms and began to make his selection of their stories. (158)

Although the war was experienced differently by each combatant, Ignacio joins different episodes he hears to make a composite narrative in his head. In fact, in his novel about the Carlist siege of Bilbao Unamuno sought to reconcile the dialectical poles of warfare —peace *in* war. Valle-Inclán's answer to his predecessor's model was to leave the reconciling, if it were possible, to his readers.

Thus, in the Carlist trilogy the narrator eschews a composite picture of the war, a refusal that implies its impossibility. The numerous shifts from Republican officers to Carlist volunteers, civilian onlookers to peasant spies, etc., create a rhythm of contradictory positions on war (both intellectual and affective) that readers are asked to process. No single position is allowed to dominate; what is advanced as true about the campaign in one instance is challenged shortly thereafter by another. "In almost every reference to the 'heroic,' one glimpses an ironic nuance" (Ciplijauskaitė 191).¹² López de Martínez argues that the apparent irony is resolved "in the narrator's perspective" (72), but I find just the opposite is true, that the narrator's oscillating gaze denies us a comforting resolution.¹³

A significant case of "zigzagging perspectives" (Mainer 331) is found in the second volume of the series, *El resplandor de la hoguera* (The Bonfire's Afterglow, 1909), whose main point of affective focalization is the Abbess of the convent in which the firearms were hidden in *Cruzados*. Guilt-ridden by the lives lost because of her conspiring with the insurgents, Isabel pledges to sacrifice herself by joining the conflagration whose glow she has seen in the eastern sky from her native Galicia. Anxious to reach the war's purifying flame, she longs to feel the spiritual ardor of the Carlist volunteers fighting for the cause. Once in Navarre, however, the sacred aura she seeks eludes her and is replaced by the grotesque reality of war:

The war began to seem like a sad, drawn-out death throe, a painful epileptic grimace. [...] She had imagined a glorious and luminous war filled with the thunder of drums and the bright song of bugles. [...] She yearned to reach the bonfire and be consumed in it. But she didn't know where to find it. (*Resplandor* 784, 785)¹⁴

This disillusion is soon countered by an unlikely example found in Julepa la de Arguiña, a beggar who roams the roads as a spy for the Carlists. In Julepa the nun contemplates the longed-for sacred experience she lacks: the beggar is “entirely inflamed with the religious fervor of the common people, in whom the thirst for justice was paired with resplendent hope to find at war’s end a merciful father in her King” (*Resplandor* 787).

Both the nun’s spiritual expectations and Julepa’s “inflamed” ardor correspond to what Sarah Cole has aptly termed the poetics of “enchantment” that celebrates violence as a route to spiritual illumination:

Enchantment refers to the tendency to see in [war’s] violence some kind of transformative power. On the one hand, there is a strong impulse in literary accounts of violence to insist on resonant, elemental, often painful bodily experience: disenchantment. On the other hand, when the desire for spiritual plenitude meets the facts of historical violence, there is an equal and opposite tendency to see violence as the germinating core of rich, symbolic structures. (1633)¹⁵

One such symbolic structure is the sacred flame that would work the transformation in the nun’s soul — an expectation that never materializes. Instead, her direct experience gives the lie to the belief that war is an agent of “spiritual plenitude.”¹⁶ Which of the nun’s visions are we to accept as war’s truth: death’s grotesque grimace that she finds in Navarre, or the sublime spiritual experience witnessed in Julepa la de Arguiña? It is useless to look to Valle-Inclán’s narrator for a definite answer.

A noticeably “disenchanted” character in *Resplandor* is the Duke of Ordax, a cavalry officer in the Republic’s army, whose “smiling cynicism” (760) strips his profession, and the civil war, of any transformative value. “We will attack the Carlists,” he asserts, “not to defeat them but to merit a promotion in rank and salary” (760). The Duke’s crass cynicism provokes a principled retort from a seasoned Captain of the Republic: “Like any soldier, I fight for the honor of my flag.” And for “the ideas of freedom and progress” he later adds. The Captain’s idealistic statement prompts in turn a down-to-earth observation from a second Lieutenant in the Republic’s army: “if they could, our troops would throw down their rifles and go home” (763-64). Both officers ironically undermine the Captain’s appeal to military honor. The Duke’s perspective in particular, as the narrative continues, recalls Clausewitz’s theory that although combat arouses intense feelings —“Even the most civilized of peoples, in short, can be fired with passionate hatred of each other” (76)—, war is but the continuation of political machinations by other means: “war is

not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means" (87). Valle-Inclán's narrator thus continues to counterposition views on war in the second novel of the series. Pragmatic and self-serving attitudes challenge visionary and idealist motivations expressed by the belligerents.

The final novel in the trilogy, *Gerifaltes de antaño* (Gerfalcons of Yore, 1909), shows what happens when war's enchantment fuses with religious fanaticism. The novel's title alludes to falcons (*gerifaltes*) that in medieval times were trained to kill other birds. The suggestion of predation on one's own kind is in keeping with the novel's protagonist, Manuel Santa Cruz, a warrior priest who organized and led a guerrilla band, engorging its files with volunteers from bands whose leaders he attracted and then murdered. The famous *cabecilla* (guerrilla-leader) embodies the messianic spirit that roused the common people to serve the Christian cause of Carlism, a cause he betrays by becoming a Cain figure to his fellow insurgents. Valle-Inclán's readers were familiar with the priest's fame for being mutinous and for the pitiless atrocities he committed against civilians who sympathized with the Republic. In *Resplandor* even the Carlist partisans criticize him for defying the Carlist High Command: "Just today a courier told us that Santa Cruz disobeyed orders from King Don Carlos"; "Santa Cruz wants to be in command, all alone, by himself"; "Envy is a bad trait; and because of it, the men are calling him a traitor" (*Gerifaltes* 773-74).¹⁷

In the third novel we hear what the Republicans think of the Priest. Once again, the Duke of Ordax supplies a sardonic but acute view: "The Republic needs another atrocity by Santa Cruz. The Carlists are lobbying the European courts to give them belligerent rights." A fellow officer explains that if recognized by foreign powers, the Carlists would be able to purchase arms from them. The Duke of Ordax concludes: "At present, the [Republic's] most urgent diplomacy is to do all we can to help the Priest [persist in his savagery]" (*Gerifaltes* 831). Santa Cruz thus becomes a wedge between the Carlist High Command and the guerrilla bands operating in Navarre, playing into the hands of Republican politicians and generals (Holt 237-39). Verity Smith notes that his cruelty "became so notorious that after a time there arose a paradoxical and ironic situation. This involved both Liberals and Carlists pursuing Santa Cruz so as to put an end to his atrocities and anarchical behavior" (125). In short, the priest's ambition and bloodlust allow others to turn him into a political pawn — yet another ironic device that distances the reader's sympathies from the Carlist cause. War is not a holy cause after all; it is a game of political chess.¹⁸

In Santa Cruz's mind, messianism becomes mania as illustrated when he orders the murder of Miquelo Egoscué in order to swell his own band with the popular guerrilla leader's volunteers.¹⁹ This internecine assassination sets the stage

for Roquito, a blind, seer-like beggar, to issue a biblical warning to Santa Cruz that underscores his violation of scripture: “The soldiers of the King must not battle among themselves! Do not fight like Cain and give a bad example to Christianity!” (*Gerifaltes* 898). The warning prepares the reader for the novel’s climax while it poses the ethical question at the heart of the trilogy: do any ideals, however holy, justify the dreadful violence of war?

As predicted by the Duke of Ordax, the action depicted in *Gerifaltes* ends with a cynical reversal when the Republic’s High Command purposefully calls back its troops that have encircled Santa Cruz’s band, in order to allow the priest to escape and continue his butchery. When news of the retreat reaches Santa Cruz, he falls to his knees and thanks God for saving him, a gesture immediately undercut by the blind beggar who cries, “It’s Satan who is saving you!” (900). To the very end the narrative voice withholds a definitive point of view, foregrounding war’s enchantment only to close with the warrior priest’s betrayal of its promise. Like Cain, Santa Cruz kills his own kind to further his ambition, weakening thereby the heroic narrative of the Carlist cause. Readers are left to ponder the biblical story that places the origin of war in fratricide. If one takes the Carlist war as a metonymy for all wars, Valle-Inclán’s literary message would seem to be that only nationalism, and modern nation building, occlude the truth that all wars are civil wars.²⁰

The ever shifting perspectives on war posed by the Carlist novels forestall a single, reassuring point of view. In search of an interpretive standpoint readers are forced to attend to other signifying means deployed by the novelist: for example, the archaic frames given to war —medieval, epic, a holy crusade— in *Cruzados*; the sacred fire imagery that appears throughout *Resplandor*; and the symbolic pairing of Santa Cruz with Cain and the Devil in *Gerifaltes*. Situational irony thus allows the highly poetic and allusive language in the novels to work its magic and alert readers to the horror of war, especially the kind fueled by fanatical beliefs. Bermejo Marcos was perceptive in drawing attention to the “antimilitarist and pacifist denunciation that exposes the senselessness of all wars” in the Carlist novels (158). However, absurdity may not be war’s worst evil. As we shall see in the next section, deluding oneself and one’s people about the heroics of futile combat opens the way to casting war as a tragedy in Valle-Inclán’s Carlist tragedy.

Farewell Pastoral Dream!

When the curtain rose on Valle-Inclán’s *Voces de gesta* (Epic Voices, 1911) in Barcelona,²¹ the audience learned that once again two sovereigns were disputing the kingdom of Spain, “[a king] from another land is warring against King Carlino” (*Voces* 217). A Valle-Arce explains that Carlino is a diminutive form of both

Charlemagne and Carlos, our first indication that the Carlist sovereign has suffered a degrading diminishment (363). Indeed, Carlino has been reduced to a fugitive who “pursued by his dire destiny / lives in the mountains like a goatherd” (*Voces* 212). In Act I of this “pastoral tragedy” we quickly see that King Carlino's kingdom, once as bucolic as Virgil's *Georgicas*, has been overrun by an invading army of vague origins and that his people are unable to save themselves. Indeed, as González del Valle reasons, the inhabitants of this peaceful country —shepherds and farmers— would betray their *pastoral* nature, “defeat themselves,” if they fully imitated their aggressive enemy (290).

The scene is thus set for an advanced army to conquer a peace-loving community and obliterate its way of life as in the Carlist novels. Against this legendary, pre-modern backdrop (allusions are made to the Moorish invasion of Iberia in the year 711), Valle-Inclán wrote a tragedy of ethnographic trauma wrought by a ruthless, militarized empire. As J. L. Brooks put it, “a modern military action is superimposed on an idealized, pastoral setting” (193).

The protagonist of the tragedy, Ginebra, is introduced as the “naïve shepherdess of legend” (*Voces* 224), a sign that, in Valle-Inclán's hands, Carlism was losing its political specificity and acquiring a timeless, legendary semblance.²² Cabañas Vacas discerns in the play a movement toward myth in this depiction of the Carlist wars, a shift from the historical frame of the earlier novels to “an allegorical level designed to emphasize the glory of the defeated, an heroic defense of their unconditional loyalty to King Carlino” (181). Rubio Jiménez adds that Valle-Inclán's essentialist poetics were at work in the play, which is best read, he thinks, as a “symbolist tragedy” akin to Wagner's operas (468). Like Cabañas Vacas, he claims that the rout of Carlino's band of defenders is really a “triumph in defeat” (472). However, instead of attributing it to the peasants' heroic stand, he discerns the triumph in the King's sacrifice to free his people from war. As with Moses and Jesus, “death brings salvation to him and to his people” (472), a classic statement of war's enchantment, that glorifies and renders it symbolic (Cole 1639).

It is true that in *Voces* legend and myth diffuse the mimetic referentiality of the earlier novels, but it is hard to believe that the play's audience, and later readers, could erase from their consciousness the historical reality of Carlism's political and military defeat, a fact graphically mirrored by Valle-Inclán's tragedy. In the context of this essay, what stands out in *Voces* is the depiction of war as protracted, merciless violence, a return to the state of nature described by Hobbes in his *Leviathan*: the “continual fear and danger of violent death” (95-97). Over a twenty-year period, the populous is subjected to the invaders' brutalities —kidnapping, rape, mutilation, murder of the defenseless civilian population. War's spiritual enchantment disappears

and is replaced by the desire for revenge, which transforms Ginebra from a simple shepherdess who would marry and raise a family into a victim bent on avenging the savage atrocities done to her and to her bastard son. Where, one must ask, can victory and glory be found in the tragic heroine's doctrine of an eye for an eye?

Situational irony is introduced in the play by the author's pairing of tragedy with pastoral in its subtitle, "a pastoral tragedy." Whereas in tragedy a good man's actions occasion an *hamartia* that destroys him, in pastoral what little change allowed is synonymous with renewal, symbolized by the cycle of nature, often embodied in a sacred oak. Tragedy is a genre of rupture and discontinuity, the opposite of pastoral's reiterative harmony. Defying tradition, Valle-Inclán injected war into the domain of pastoral while simultaneously withdrawing heroism from the space of tragedy. The result is an anti-heroic tragedy in which brute force desecrates a vulnerable, consecrated realm. Most chilling is the fact that war's violence continues unabated at the play's close instead of leading to cathartic closure. Myth and history, the pastoral and the tragic are thus paired in irreconcilable tension reminiscent of the ironic structure found in the earlier novels.

In Act III of *Voces* a singer of tales (Versolari) states that "Life is mortal, its hinge is change; / as the walls crumble, the trash heap grows" (*Voces* 253). One way of understanding these words is as a reminder that our lives belong to the realm of history's flux, a condition overcome only in art. To the possible question "What forces move history's hinge?" Valle-Inclán's tragedy supplies a dismaying answer: all-out war. The character who most embodies history's flux is the naïve shepherdess whose destiny is altered forever when King Carlino arrives at her door begging for food. His pitiful condition touches Ginebra's heart so profoundly that when enemy soldiers arrive at her hut, pursuing the King, she refuses to tell them which path he has taken in flight. This brave decision has dreadful consequences that determine the play's action, which is centered on torture and fruitless vengeance.

For her loyalty Ginebra is held captive, raped and blinded at the end of Act I.²³ Ten years later, in Act II, the shepherdess is accosted by the same warrior, now a Captain, who fathered her bastard child. When Ginebra's son (Garín) attempts to defend her, he is murdered by his father. The barbarous warrior kills his own kind, squeezing the breath out of Garín in a grotesque parody of a patriarchal embrace: the stage note reads "With his prey in his claws, he hugs the youth like a bear bellowing in his face." The child falls to the ground "like a broken lily" (*Voces* 244). To avenge her son's murder, and her own adversity, Ginebra reenacts the myth of Judith and Holofernes: after submitting to the Captain's drunken advances, she severs his head, determined to present it to King Carlino as a sign of her fealty.

Between Acts II and III another decade passes, and history's downward spiral

continues unabated for Carlino's kingdom. After twenty years of devastating occupation it has become a wasteland. A choral intervention by the Versolari laments the desolate conditions of the pastoral community:

Ay, atrocious war, ignorant of pity,
 blood and pestilence are your ways!
 The vines are withered, the fences are down,
 twenty years without sowing
 wheat in my inheritance.
 Ay, atrocious war, ignorant of pity! (*Voces* 250)

While the evocation of war's devastation still echoes in the theater, King Carlino is carried on stage on his shield, wounded like the legendary Fisher King in Eliot's *Wasteland*. The peasant women begin their mourning chants while the wound is cauterized with a heated lance. Nearby a gravedigger opens the earth beside the kingdom's sacred oak. The end is near. How will it be met?

The King is taken off stage only to return transformed into a "beggar" who laments the annihilation of his people. Ginebra appears and presents her baleful offering. The severed head is now a naked skull whose gaping eyes open onto the open grave, prophetically figured as "the tomb of races and religions" (*Voces* 265). Evoking the cemetery scene in *Hamlet*, the King contemplates the skull, recognizing in it an emblem of defeat, his own and that of his people.²⁴ However, Ginebra urges the King to continue the fight, saying that the enemy's skull "should give voice to vengeance." His response is to renounce the hatred that feeds her plea: "Let hatred's offering be buried in that grave / next to the ancient oak of tradition" (*Voces* 266-67). To end the war, the King must guide his people, embodied by the blind shepherdess, away from vengeance, but he cannot do so as long as he remains King. Hence his decision to renounce that station and continue on as a simple man (the refugee and beggar we have seen throughout the play), serving as Ginebra's guide: "Let my name be forgotten, / and if I die a King, may I be reborn a man. / I will give you my hand as we make our way, / wandering side by side /... It was my destiny to guide, / and by taking your hand I fulfill my role" (*Voces* 266).

The final scene has ambiguities —the King vacillates about continuing to recruit partisans— but, as Olstad observes, "Act III traces the decline and ultimate destruction of myth as the weight of history becomes unbearable" (161). The simple pilgrim who will lead the blind away from vengeance, one of war's most insidious enchantments, emerges clearly at the end. The alternative is to remain in the circle of war's promise of glory in the service of a lost cause. To drive home history's response

to such dreams, the final stage direction calls for an arrow to pierce the shoulder of one of the King's faithful followers, who is left of stage, alone, howling in pain like a wounded animal.

Disenchantment

Voces de gesta thus registers an intensification of Valle-Inclán's skepticism regarding the heroic values attributed to war. In his tragedy he questioned the tradition of glorifying combat, laying bare its savagery and dramatizing the pitiful defeat of a people still enraptured by war's promise of vengeful deliverance. Common to the Carlist trilogy and *Voces* is an ethical principle —Thou shalt not kill — that supplies a reason for the author's growing disenchantment with traditional exaltations of combat. In *Gerifaltes* and in *Voces* that reason takes the shape of an injunction to not wage war against one's brother. War as fratricide, as *cainismo*, as it is also known, is denounced in both works. In *Voces* the murder of his own son foregrounds the paradigm, prompting Ginebra to compare the Captain's crime to Cain's legendary murder: "Garín!... My son!... Ay, you killed him! / Your cursed hands drip with innocent blood! / May you never wash away the stain of your sword, Cain!" (*Voces* 245). In *Gerifaltes* (898) it is Roquito who implores Santa Cruz not to kill Miquelo Egoscué, his fellow *cabecilla* in Carlism's Christian cause, by evoking the story of Cain and Abel: "Do not fight like Cain and give a bad example to Christianity!"

The two allusions to the biblical parable convey an ethical indictment of war grounded in the Christian values that Carlism defended but that were betrayed in the works studied here. In that regard, if there is a sin to be atoned for in *Voces*, as Rubio Jiménez suggests (472), it isn't the King's weakness but Ginebra's thirst for vengeance, which symbolically prolongs the slaughter of war for twenty long years. Similarly, the priest's order that Miquelo be murdered discredits the bucolic order dreamed by Santa Cruz in his pastoral mountain parish. What Santa Cruz embodies in *Gerifaltes* and Ginebra succumbs to in *Voces* is found in the old adage attributed to Plautus, that man's worst predator in man. In Valle-Inclán's Carlist series, war exposes the terrible truth that *Homo homini lupus*.

That truth opened the way for Valle-Inclán to imagine Spain and its bellicose history devoid of heroism and glory. What, he began to ask, was left of his nation after the false heroes of history were retired from its stage? We know one of his answers from reading *Luces de bohemia* (Bohemian Lights, 1920), in which the blind poet Máximo Estrella states that "The classic heroes have taken a stroll down Gato Alley," a street in Madrid where his contemporaries could view their true reflections —grotesque and deformed— in a set of concave and convex mirrors (*Luces* 933). The "classic heroes" alluded to in that play have generally been identified as those

of antiquity.²⁵ But in the light of the Carlist series other “heroes” closer to home and more recent in history may now be included in the crowd of fallen icons: the kings, generals, politicians, priests and guerrilla leaders whose grandiose visions of restoring Spain’s heroic tradition led thousands to their death in two nineteenth-century civil wars.

Notes

1. Warfare is central to many of Valle’s major works, including the fourth *Sonata* (Winter Sonata, 1905), the three Carlist War novels (1908-1909), *Voces de gesta* (Epic Voices, 1911), *La media noche* (Night on the Western Front), *Tirano Banderas* (The Tyrant, 1926) and the three Iberian Ring novels (1927-1932). In addition, the protagonist of *Las galas del difunto* (The Dead Man’s Duds, 1926), one of Valle-Inclán’s *esperpentos*, is a soldier just returned from the 1898 war in Cuba.
2. For reasons of space I omit *Sonata de invierno* (Winter Sonata, 1905) and “La Corte de Estella” (The Carlist Court, 1910) from this essay. However, the studies of Madeleine de Gogorza Fletcher and Jacques Fressard shed light on the links between those works and the Carlist series analyzed here.
3. For Valle’s impressions of the Great War, see Dougherty, “Corresponsal” and Rueda, “La ‘visión suprema’.”
4. For a discussion of the socio-political background of the Carlist trilogy, see Gogorza Fletcher 85-93. Emblematic of the modern advances that disrupted rural traditions were the telegraph and the locomotive, which Leopoldo Alas figured as “symbols of an enemy world” when viewed by peasants in his short story “¡Goodbye, ‘Cordera’!” (1892). In the story that “enemy world” carries one of the characters off to the Carlist war “to die in the fratricidal battles of the vast country, in the service of a king whose ideas he did not understand.” The lad is “cannon fodder for the distant world’s madness, for the ambitions of others” (Alas 18-19). My thanks to Michael Iarocci for recommending Alas’s story.
5. Translations in this essay are my own with the exception of a few titles of Valle-Inclán’s works that appear in Verity Smith’s and Madeleine de Gogorza Fletcher’s studies. Citations of the Carlist novels are from Vol. 1 of Valle’s *Obra Completa*. Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 2002. *Voces de gesta* and *Luces de bohemia* are found in Vol. II.
6. These dates place the action of *Cruzados* between May 1872, when the second Carlist war began, and the declaration of the First Spanish Republic in Feb 1873. The second and third volumes of the series continue the action during the shortlived Republic, which lasted only until January 1874. The war ended in 1876. Santos Zas places the action of *Cruzados* during the winter of 1872-1873 (*Los cruzados* 21).
7. Early in *Cruzados*, the Marquis of Bradomín, a representative of the decadent nobility, “felt his feudal soul awaken” and proceeded to advance his traditionalist view of Spain’s imperial “military

morality”: “We have lost the military tradition that defines Spain. [...] In war, today’s cruelty is tomorrow’s clemency. Spain was mighty when we imposed our military morality on society’s compassion for women and children. Centuries ago we had Captains and Saints and Executioners — all a race needs to dominate the world” (*Cruzados* 679-80).

8. See Díaz Plaja 65, Hernández Serna 19, Durán Valdés 43, Elizalde 80, Alonso Seoane LX, and Avalle-Arce.

9. Cf. Lado: “the Carlist War was neither heroic nor grandiose; it was a sad civil war that bled the nation for half a century and whose results (almost always indefinite) were owed more to political intrigue than military encounters” (33). López de Martínez agrees, arguing that the Carlist trilogy “forges an image of war as a force that dehumanizes men, impelling them to hate one another anonymously and to consider killing their primordial objective” (75).

10. Santos Zas reminds us that Valle-Inclán was well aware that Carlist ideals had no practical future: “it would have meant nothing less than reversing the course of history” (*Tradicionalismo* 366). Verity Smith agrees: “despite all his protestations of loyalty, his Carlism was tempered by the knowledge that there was no place for such an ideology in the modern world” (126). One may conclude that Valle’s use of Carlist ideals was instrumental: to draw attention to the disproportion between claims by politicians and intellectuals that Spain remained a bellicose and heroic nation, on one hand, and the historical reality of its decline on the other. One should keep in mind that the immediate backdrop of war, when the Carlist series appeared, was the humiliating defeat of Spain by the United States in Cuba (1898), the final chapter in the loss of the Spanish empire.

11. Cf. Gómez de Baquero: “Guerrilla warfare doesn’t have a plot either” (237).

12. This critic is especially insightful when observing how Valle-Inclán compares war to a card game in which one can win only by cheating. “With this all possibility of heroism is proscribed” (Ciplijauskaitė 195). The comparison also occurs in Carl von Clausewitz’s treatise *On War*: “In the whole range of human activities, war most closely resembles a game of cards” (86).

13. Following Lukács, José Carlos Mainer positions Valle-Inclán in the wake of Balzac, Stendhal and Tolstoy whose novels chart the resolution of social forces guided by “historical necessity” (312). Mainer recognizes, however, that the Spanish writer “looked with less optimism [than his predecessors] on the compliance of the historical law of harmonization,” because he shared Friedrich Schlegel’s vision of the novel as “the domain of ironic dialectics” (311).

14. In this respect the Abbess is a sister to characters like Fabrice in Stendhal’s *Charterhouse of Parma* and Pierre Bezukhov in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, who naively expect to discover the essence of war by visiting an active battlefield. In Unamuno’s *Paz en la guerra* Ignacio also seeks a transformative experience in battle that eludes him: “Was that war? Marches and counter-marches, more marches and counter-marches without ever getting to the big battle” (156). For a discussion of the gap between experiencing war and narrating it, see Jan Mieszkowski, “Watching War.”

15. “Historically, it has been war that most powerfully calls forth these dichotomized understandings of death: violent death as a sign and precipitator of sublimity (in a person, community, or nation) or,

conversely, violent death as a sign and precipitator of total degeneration and waste" (Cole 1632). For an "enchanted" reading of the Carlist trilogy, see Alonso Seoane who argues that in the novels "war is rendered beautiful in its cruelty" (CI). The classic denial of war's enchantment is Goya's depiction of the Spanish War of Independence, *Los desastres de la guerra*.

16. The sacred flame is finally subverted in *Resplandor* when the Abbess figures it as a forge that drives all reason out of the soul, a memorable image of religious fanaticism: "Was war really like this? Life and its purpose forgotten, all thought incinerated in its resplendent conflagration! A panting and pounding of the forge that brings the soul to red-hot and beats it like iron on an anvil!" (799).

17. "He wanted to gather all the Basque guerrilla bands under his command and realize the dream he had one winter's morning [...]. He was going to be in command, alone, and would wage a war of blood and fire with the beautiful sentiment of his vision and hatred of the enemy. His was the war fought by common folk, when peasants leave their fields and shepherds their flocks. His was holy war, superior to the ambition of kings, military arts, and famed captains. The Priest felt this truth stir his soul, the truth he had been granted in the quiet of his church while reading Greek and Roman historians [...]. Now their truth—sacred and bloody—was his truth, filled with arcane prophecy, like the entrails of a beast sacrificed by a Druid seer" (*Gerifaltes* 843-44). Gómez de Baquero's comment was: "hallucinations of a mystical bandit" (240). For a more probing view, see Lado, 20-26.

18. In Unamuno's *Paz en la guerra*, Ignacio dreams of charging against the enemy in a "grand battle" that will turn the tide in the Carlists' favor. When the chance arises but is promptly cut short by the Generals, he reflects: "That wasn't his dream; they weren't being allowed to wage war; their officers moved them in battle, playing chess with their soldiers" (163).

19. Santa Cruz's war ethic is summarized by the narrator in the following: "His cruelty was like that of the keeper of the vineyard who burns the withered fruit on the vines. He watched the smoke rise as in a sacrifice, with the serene hope of a bountiful harvest in the day of the Lord, beneath a golden sun with the voices of the ancient copper bells ringing overhead" (*Gerifaltes* 841-42)

20. Pérez Galdós suggested as much in *Trafalgar* (1873), when the first-person narrator perceives how the English and Spanish sailors help each other in a lifeboat: "My God, what are wars for? Why aren't these men always friends as they are here, in the midst of danger? Doesn't what I'm seeing prove that all men are brothers? But then the notion of nationality suddenly cut my train of thought..." (187).

21. The premier was held in Barcelona on June 18, 1911 to high acclaim by critics.

22. Ginebra's ingenuousness as well as the "visionary glow" in her eyes (*Voces* 218) render her kin to the Abbess Isabel in *Cruzados*. The fact that she is blinded because of her loyalty to King Carlino is also reminiscent of Roquito's fate in *Resplandor*. Blindness to the hopeless Carlist cause is accentuated in the passage from the Carlist novels to *Voces de gesta*, reflecting Valle-Inclán's increasingly critical view of the "heroic" mystification of war. On this subject see Charles Olstad's

fine essay, “History and Myth in *Voces de gesta*.”

23. The act ends with the following stage direction that underscores the ironic disparity between the pastoral topos and war’s violence: “As the echo of [Ginebra’s] pain dies out, / beneath the ancient shadow of the beech grove / the happy flight of honey bees / and the notes of a youthful shepherd’s panpipe could be heard” (*Voces* 227).

24. “Cold skull, shadow of death, / you laugh in my hands as I tremble! / Ark of miseries, hollow nothing, / your unlit eyes have in their depths / the somber mystery of human life, / the funereal fright of the grave. /... In my defeat you’ll be my companion, / in my misfortune you’ll comfort me, / and belonging to an enemy, mute skull, / you’ll speak the language of terror to my soul” (*Voces* 265).

25. In 1930 Valle explained his jaded view of contemporary Spain as follows: “Life —its deeds, sorrows, great loves— is fated to be always the same. What changes are its actors, the characters in the drama. In past ages, leading roles were played by gods and heroes.... Destiny rode on the shoulders of Oedipus and Medea —all pride and pain! In our time, Destiny is the same... but the shoulders of those who bear it have changed.... Today’s men are minute for such a heavy burden. From that contrast and disproportion comes a special sense of the ridiculous... Blindness is beautiful and noble in Homer. But in *Luces de bohemia* the same blindness is sad and lamentable, because it’s borne by a bohemian poet, Máximo Estrella” (Dougherty, *Un Valle-Inclán olvidado...* 192). Antonio Risco commented in 1966 that Valle’s turn toward the grotesque sprang “from the impossibility of creating true heroes and, therefore, authentic tragedies” (77). See also Gil 102, Ciplijauskaitė 196-97, and Avalor-Arce 364.

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