

Valle-Inclán and the Grotesque

The Esperpento in Valle-Inclán's *Lights of Bohemia*

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Till the early 70s Ramón del Valle-Inclán was one of the most strangely neglected modern dramatists. Until the publication of Anthony Zahareas's massive collections of criticism no extended treatment of Valle-Inclán had appeared in English. Even Spain has paid no much more attention to her most important dramatist of the first half of the twentieth century. *Luces de Bohemia* (*Lights of Bohemia* 1920) his most seminal play was absent from the Spanish stages till 1969, and when it was given its first production by Madrid University Theatre under a pseudonym, while *Lights of Bohemia* was still considered to be a „uncomfortable” play, and a masterpiece, which – being antitheatrical and unadaptable – would not be suggested to put on stage. *Lights of Bohemia* was condemned 40 years long to be highly qualified literature.

This is all the more distressing because Valle-Inclán is, with Cervantes, the most acute of all literary interpreters of the Spanish character. Despite the overt neglect to which he has been subjected, Valle-Inclán has been the acknowledged primary influence on the new wave Spanish dramatists, both because the innovations in dramatic form and because of his interpretation of the plight of the Spanish character. Despite of it and its importance in Spain, at least after his revival from the early 70s, the play has hardly reached the international theater scenery.

In Spain the tension and conflict that give the necessary vitality to all drama have always sprung from the situation created by a simultaneous devout belief in the Church and an instinctive enmity to subjugation by the State (which in Spain has always to a considerable extent been coeval with the Church), caused by the exaggerated and often grotesque anarchic individualism so characteristic of the Spanish temperament. The paradox of this clash between an uncompromising insistence on the validity and primacy of the subjective vision and a simultaneous untroubled surrender to the narcosis of the Trinitarian incense is nowhere so neatly summed up than in that most seminal of all Spanish figures, Don Quijote.

Valle-Inclán's contribution consists in perceiving the tension with Cervantes imbued Spanish literature and „esperpentoizing” it. The „esperpento” is an art and form invented by Valle-Inclán. It is a way of viewing the world as a grotesque parody of itself, like seeing „reality” as reflected in a concave mirror. The method has, of course, obvious affinity with expressionism, or even surrealism and has lots of common marks with some of the new and highly important theatre movements of the first half of the twentieth century (Craig, Artaud,

Witkiweicz, Brecht), and says: the essential tragedy of life can be endured only indirectly – through the medium of grotesque comedy.

In this method of writing the artist must rise above his subjects, must assume the position of a malicious puppeteer (heritage of the baroque literature: Quevedo, Cervantes, Calderón and his Big World Theatre). The author is no longer part of the conflict, describing it from within: he is commenting on it objectively, seeking a way to free his fellow men from the dilemma. The dramatic tension is no longer necessarily created by the conflict between individualism and religion, for in our world, whether in Spain or elsewhere, the conflict is as often between the individual and the state or between the individual and social tradition or psychological repressions. Valle-Inclán himself described the method of the „esperpento” in these words:

*...there are three ways of observing the world artistically and aesthetically: on one's knees, standing up, and raised on the air. When one looks at reality from one's knees – and this is the oldest position of literature – the characters, the heroes, are given a condition that is superior to the human condition. They are created, in a manner of speaking, beings superior to human nature: gods, demigods and heroes. There is a second way, and that is to look at the protagonists as if they were our brothers, as if they were ourselves. And there is a third way, and it is to look at the world from a superior plane and to consider the characters of the plot as being inferior to the author... with a point of irony... This is a manner which is very Spanish. And it is this that moved me to change my literature and to write the „esperpentos”, the literary genre that I baptize with the name, **Esperpentos**.*

Valle-Inclán reported in an interview during his visit to Mexico in 1921 that the play he had labelled as *esperpentos* (*Lights of Bohemia* and *Horns of Don Friolera*) were intended to be performed by puppets and their purpose was to bring out the comic aspects of tragic situations. (There is no evidence that any of the *esperpentos* were performed as puppet-plays. The issue was confused by Valle-Inclán himself when, in 1930, he declared that his *esperpentos* were not only performable by real actors, but were highly suited to the peculiar talents of the Spanish stage.) This was in part the result of Valle-Inclán's disenchantment with the commercial theatre, but there were other more important aesthetic reasons. In it's declared intention to show the comedy inherent in tragic situations, the *esperpento* required the elimination of empathy and identification. The puppet style responded to Valle-Inclán's need to create aesthetic distance. At the same time it afforded a whole new range of dramatic possibilities, visual and linguistic, to express what Valle-Inclán increasingly came to see as the manipulated condition of humanity, and the human being as a tragic puppet.