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# The Galician Works of Ramón del Valle-Inclán



Patterns of Repetition and Continuity

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## Introduction

Valle-Inclán's reputation as a writer rests heavily on his *esperpentos*, and increasingly on his late fiction, *Tirano Banderas* and *El ruedo ibérico*. These have largely eclipsed his pre-1920 work, which has received noticeably less attention. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that when in 1920, with the publication of the first version of *Luces de Bohemia*,<sup>1</sup> Valle gave the term *esperpento* his personal connotation, he had by then been writing for over thirty years. To regard anything that preceded this date as what he himself dismissed as 'musiquilla de violín',<sup>2</sup> would be to undervalue the first three decades of his work, and to misread the whole picture.

Apart from a few lines of poetry, and the inclusion of the odd verse of Galician in his plays, Valle wrote almost entirely in Castilian. This, however, should not be taken as a rejection of his native Galicia, for the language, folklore, literature and atmosphere of Galicia pervade his work and shape his style. Born in 1866 in Villanueva de Arosa, near Pontevedra, he was brought up in a region of Spain where superstition, mystery and witchcraft underlie rural life, and where pagan ritual is often inseparable from religious doctrine. From childhood he was fascinated by local tales and legends, many of which he heard from the family servants, in particular, one Micaela, an old maid of his grandmother, whom he acknowledges in the introduction to *Jardín umbrío* (1903) as the source of several of his stories, and who figures in more than one of his narratives. Galician elements fill his early narratives and continue to appear throughout his work.

1 *Luces de Bohemia* was initially published in instalments in *España* (Madrid), VI, 274–86 (1920). The longer, definitive version of *Luces de Bohemia* was not published in book form until 1924.

2 According to Francisco Madrid, in *La vida activa de Valle-Inclán* (Buenos Aires: Poseidon, 1943), Valle-Inclán stated: 'Lo que he escrito antes de *Tirano Banderas* es musiquilla de violín' (p. 113).

Although Ricardo Carballo Calero, who divides Valle's work into two periods, maintains that Galician themes only dominate the first of these, the Galician influence remained strong throughout Valle's life and was a prominent element of his writing.<sup>3</sup>

Valle's decision to write in Castilian, like that of his fellow country-woman Emilia Pardo Bazán, was based primarily on the need for his work to reach a wider public, though he himself cites it as a challenge:

Cuando el joven gallego, catalán o vasco siente la aspiración de escribir, aparece una sirena que le dice: 'Si hablas en tu lengua regional serás un genio. En la lengua regional no hay que luchar con veinte naciones, basta luchar, simplemente, con cuatro provincias.' Ser genio en el dialecto es demasiado fácil. Yo me negué a ser genio en mi dialecto y quise competir con cien millones de hombres, y lo que es más, con cinco siglos de heroísmo de lengua castellana.<sup>4</sup>

Miguel de Unamuno pointed out, moreover, that although written in Castilian, 'En la prosa castellana de Valle-Inclán hay más espíritu gallego que en la de los que escriben en dialecto diferencial'.<sup>5</sup>

In 1895 the publication of *Femeninas*, a collection of six short stories, brought Valle some recognition. His first significant success, however, was in 1902, with the appearance of *Sonata de otoño*. This was followed by *Sonata de estío* (1903), *Sonata de primavera* (1904), and *Sonata de invierno* (1905). These four stories, subtitled *Memorias del Marqués de Bradomín*, established Valle firmly as a *modernista* writer. The radical difference between this early style and his post-1920 aesthetic has led the majority of critics to divide his work chronologically into two main periods: José de Montesinos labels them *modernismo* and *esperpentismo*;<sup>6</sup> Francisco Ruiz Ramón sees the same

3 Ricardo Carballo Calero, 'Algunos testimonios gallegos sobre el galleguismo de Valle-Inclán', *Cuadernos de Estudios Gallegos*, 21 (1966) 304–25 (p. 315).

4 Quoted in Madrid, pp. 101–3.

5 See José Rubia Barcia, *Mascarón de proa* (A Coruña: Edición de Castro, 1983) p. 53. The author recalls a remark made by Unamuno at a banquet given for Valle-Inclán at the Hotel Palace, Madrid, on 7 June 1932.

6 José de Montesinos, 'Modernismo, esperpentismo o las dos evasiones', *Revista de Occidente*, nos 44–5 (November–December 1966), 146–65 (pp. 147, 157). Henceforth this journal will be referred to as *RO*.

periods as dominated by myth and farce;<sup>7</sup> Ramón Sender refers to them as periods of 'lirismo' and 'realismo escarnizado'.<sup>8</sup> Such divisions, however, can give a mistakenly simplistic overview, since there is abundant evidence of *esperpentismo*, farce and 'realismo escarnizado' in Valle's early writing, whilst elements of *modernismo*, myth and 'lirismo' never completely disappear from his work.<sup>9</sup> Nor is the change in his aesthetic as abrupt as these divisions would lead us to believe. It would, in addition, be a mistake to assign all Valle's pre-1920 work to a single category; there is a substantial variety of theme, subject matter and style in his early writing, as well as discernible changes in perspective.

Any attempt at division runs a risk. Valle's total output was so varied that it is difficult, if not impossible, to compartmentalise satisfactorily. It is, moreover, misleading to try to isolate any one section of his work from the others: one of the fundamental elements of his writing is that each stage is connected, not just to those that precede and follow it, but to his work as a whole. There is an interrelationship between texts that gives us essential clues for an overall understanding of his work. Many of his apparently unrelated pieces are part of a larger scheme. José Rubia Barcia emphasises that what looks at first sight disconnected and even contradictory has, in fact an overall unity.<sup>10</sup> Valle's writing cannot be fully appreciated unless it is viewed as an entity.

One of the unifying links that becomes a characteristic of Valle's style establishes itself very early in his work, in the use of repetition: of characters, of theme, of subject matter. Many of his characters reappear, sometimes

7 Francisco Ruiz Ramón, *Historia del teatro español, siglo XX* (Madrid: Alianza, 1971), p. 100.

8 Ramón Sender, *Valle-Inclán y la dificultad de la tragedia* (Madrid: Gredos, 1965), p. 68.

9 In his article 'Lecciones de las *Sonatas* o cuando el "esperpento" no tenía nombre', Manuel Bermejo Marcos maintains that Valle's approach in the *esperpentos* of the last decade of his writing career 'está ya señalado, aunque de manera más sibilina en las *Sonatas*, *Flor de Santidad*, las novelas de la *Guerra carlista*, las *Comedias bárbaras*, etc. etc.' *A Face Not Turned to the Wall* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1987), 193–216 (p. 194).

10 Rubia Barcia, *Mascarón de proa*, p. 274.

with a different name or in another context; themes that emerge at the beginning of his writing persist throughout his work, and at times Valle transfers whole sections of prose into a new text, or rewrites a complete story, either giving it another title or incorporating it in its entirety into a longer narrative. His early work, especially, as Rubia Barcia points out, is marked by this element of repetition: ‘Siempre que da Valle-Inclán con una descripción, escenario, una frase e incluso una sola palabra de su gusto, no tendrá el menor reparo en utilizarla todas cuantas veces se le ocurra, siempre que entre en el contexto sin violencia. Es secundario que sea original o aprendida’ (p. 99). The constant rearrangement of his work makes for a kind of continuity, a connecting thread that is traceable throughout his literary life. Indeed, even in the very early stages of his writing there are the seeds of later ideas.

Such recycling of material, however, came under criticism from Julio Casares in 1916. He speculated on whether Valle’s repetition of the same stories under different titles, which resulted in a ‘sistema de aprovechamiento y transformación de materiales’, whereby ‘nada se pierde, nada se destruye’, was a joke at the public’s expense. He subsequently tempered his attack by conceding that this repetition of texts and subject matter, and the ‘subsistencia o modificación de voces, giros, frases y conceptos a través de sucesivas redacciones’ served to illustrate the technical and ideological evolution of Valle’s work.<sup>11</sup>

This kind of repetition was especially true of Valle’s early short stories, written mostly between 1892 and 1907, which evidence the greatest complexity and re-elaboration. ‘El miedo’ (1902), ostensibly a tale of mystery and fear, has at its core a derision for the military that was to emerge more strongly in Valle’s later works, as well as elements of anticlericalism that also become more marked as Valle’s work evolved. In addition, the story involves characters who will reappear in *Sonata de otoño* and *El Marqués de Bradomín* (1907), and it introduces the motif of roses that becomes associated with both Octavia, in *Cenizas* (1899), and Concha, in *Sonata de otoño*. ‘El miedo’ would appear in no fewer than twenty different versions. ‘A media noche’ (1889), again an apparently simple story of mystery and

11 Julio Casares, *Crítica profana* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1964), pp. 16–17.

fear, introduces several of the elements of superstition that were to permeate Valle's literature: a crossroads, moonlight, reference to the howling of a dog, the sinister connotations of a mill. The unidentified horseman, moreover, has elements that will relate him to Don Juan Manuel Montenegro in a later story, 'Rosarito' (1895), and 'la señora, mi ama', to whom the miller pays a *foro*, may well be Concha of *Sonata de otoño*. This story would have thirteen versions. Even more complex, 'El rey de la máscara' (1892) would have a total of eleven. This story contains rich source material for works that follow and introduces an additional element of horror that characterises much of Valle's work. The anticlericalism in the presentation of a priest who is not only politically involved, but sexually inclined and partial to good food and wine, is further underlined by the suspicion that the dead 'rey', the Abbot of Bradomín, has been murdered for his wealth. Elements of mystery are repeated in the moonlight, the proximity of a mill, the growling of a dog as it senses death, and the satanic connotations of a cat. The six men involved in the *mascarada* will be the inspiration behind the masked men who attack Montenegro in *Aguila de blasón* (1907), and a grotesque, macabre note, introduced by the burning of the corpse, will have its echoes in the same play, in the boiling of a body from the cemetery.

While many examples of repetition in Valle's early writing may well be attempts to amend and improve, others simply reveal his attachment to certain characters, to favourite themes, to descriptive phrases, and sometimes to whole stories. Many of the longer narratives of this period and much of the theatre that follows, spring from the fusion of previous short texts or are the re-elaboration of earlier works. It is this commonality in Valle's texts that gives his work its own kind of syncretism.

This study will explore the variety of Valle's output in the first three decades of his literary career, and draw attention to the links that give unity to this period. It will suggest that the articles and short stories that are Valle's first attempts at writing merit more attention than they have hitherto been afforded, not only as valuable examples of the genre in themselves, but as the vehicles of substantial source material on which Valle subsequently draws. It will be seen that the longer narratives and the theatre that subsequently evolve, while presenting new material, incorporate a variety of elements from the earlier texts.