

# The *Esperpento* : A Theatre of Absurdity , Cruelty and Savagery

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**Abstract** The distinguished literary career of Ramón del Valle-Inclán (Spain, 1866 – 1936) , which began with the Modernist phase, eventually turned dark as the author beheld the upheavals at the turn-of-the century and its aftermath throughout Europe. Spain had lost most of its colonial empire, the Great War of 1914 – 18 erupted, and the Czarist regime in Russia was overthrown in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Valle-Inclán saw the necessity of reflecting the absurdity, cruelty and savagery then rampant in Europe by creating a new theatrical aesthetic. That mode of expression he termed *Esperpento*. And, indeed, the *Esperpento* held a mirror to the social, political, and religious aberrations that defined European society, and Spain in particular, during those turbulent times.

**Key words** Valle-Inclán; *Esperpento*; theatrical cruelty; *La lámpara maravillosa*; *Luces de bohemia*; *Divinas palabras*; *Los cuernos de Don Friolera*

The contemplation of the horrid or sordid or disgusting, by an artist, is the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse toward the pursuit of beauty.

T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (1920)

Eliot noted the positive and negative aspects of the artist's pursuit in the works of Dante, Shakespeare and Blake, among others; his observations were also pertinent in the context of his own time for writers and painters were distorting reality (Picasso's Cubism is an example) in order to portray life in all its dimensions.

In the early days of the Twentieth Century, the Spanish author Ramón del Valle-Inclán also saw the necessity of reflecting the absurdity, cruelty and savagery then rampant in Europe by creating a new theatrical aesthetic. That mode of expression he termed *Esperpento*. And, indeed, the *Esperpento* held a mirror to the social, political, and religious aberrations that defined European society, and Spain in particular, during the turn-of-the-century and the subsequent era.

The first quarter of the Twentieth Century saw unprecedented upheavals throughout Europe. Spain suffered the loss of much of its overseas empire in the so-called Spanish-American War (also known as the War of Cuban Independence), causing

nationwide demands for change in the nation's politics by the members of the "Generation of 1898," to which Valle-Inclán belonged. And change would follow elsewhere on the continent as the Great War of 1914-18 erupted, having been brought about by the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, at the hands of a Serbian anarchist in Sarajevo. A third impactful event was the overthrow of the Czarist regime in Russia through the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. These European events not only caused major political shifts and alignments, but brought about unparalleled suffering and death through purges and warfare. In the case of the Great War, brutal and sadistic measures made possible by such new techniques for mass annihilation as aerial bombardment and the use of lethal or debilitating gases proved the most horrid example of man's inhumanity to man.<sup>1</sup>

As the tide of war spread across Europe, Spain remained neutral while seeking the reintegration of its national spirit. But for many writers, composers, painters, playwrights, and other creative individuals scattered throughout the warring areas, it became necessary to flee the carnage and destruction; while Pablo Picasso was content away from his native Spain in his various French haunts, others chose to sit out the war in Zurich. Taking advantage of Swiss neutrality yet attuned to the ravages of war and revolution alike, they created a new art to depict the irrational and outrageous outcomes of modern technology as manifested in the absurdity of life and the cruelty of warfare; they called their movement Dada, a nonsensical term meant to describe the world that human pretentiousness had created. Tristan Tzara led the charge against modern inanity in culture and painters such as Marcel Duchamp described the dehumanization of the times in "*Nude Descending A Staircase*" and "*Fountain*" (a urinal) while others pastiched together on canvas or on board objects that were totally unrelated via the technique they termed collage, and composers of the ilk of Kurt Schwitters proposed a new, discordant musical expression in "*Non-syllabic Sonata*." The Dadaists who met at the Cabaret Voltaire sought to demolish contemporary culture, leaving only a *tabula rasa*.

Valle-Inclán, who had been to the front lines in France and reported on the bombardment of troops from the air (Lima 243 – 50), who had seen a succession of inept and corrupt governments that could neither better the miserable state of the peasant in the countryside and the worker in the city, nor rectify the many inequities of daily life in a nation that had not learned the hard lessons that led to the debacle of 1898,<sup>2</sup> and who had experienced Madrid's artistic life in all its absurdity, could not help but be concerned over the plight of modern Spain. He perceived his life and times as too absurd, grotesque even, to join in the mindless games of the Dadaists.

Then in 1924 many of the same writers, painters and composers who had created Dada sought a more meaningful evasion of the torpid post-War reality around them and, following the lead of André Breton, formed a new movement that they called Surrealism, whose concerns were emanations out of the subconscious mind, the interpretation of dreams, and such creative techniques as automatic writing and stream of consciousness (à la James Joyce). These ideas were published in several Manifestos, journals, posters and other printed matter.

Just as he had avoided the frivolities of Dada, Valle-Inclán felt the need to forgo

the evasions of reality promoted by Surrealism. In the 1920s, therefore, the playwright could not have his writings present only a lighthearted facet of society, as in the satirical play *Farsa italiana de la enamorada del rey*, which, although published in 1920, was the product of an earlier mindset. The times had been too severe for reality to be relegated to a secondary role; consequently, he sought to depict anguish and frustration as well through a new aesthetic of the absurd and the grotesque which he devised and termed *Esperpento*. This new point of view, akin to the approach of the German Expressionism and Italian Futurism of the same period, was marked by a departure from strictly realistic models and the re-interpretation of the human figure as marionette, or as a two-dimensional cardboard image, as laughably exaggerated, ultimately grotesque in external form (a referent to the greater internal deformity). Essentially reactive, it was an aesthetic of objectified dissent and distortion, a radical departure from traditional models of both rationalism and idealism. It would prove to be a revolutionary form of theatre.

But this new premise did not spring into his consciousness full-blown. It had been nurtured in the first two of his *Comedias bárbaras* (*Barbaric Plays*) of the early 1900s and then furthered in the mystical and aesthetic tenets of *La lámpara maravillosa* (*The Lamp of Marvels*) of 1916, in whose section entitled “Trinitarian Exegesis” he commented:

The Platonic Ideas are intuitions of aesthetic quietism, to the extent that all-inmutables are eternally beautiful. But this understanding is more readily grasped in compliance with Gnostic doctrine and by seeking quietude within ourselves—beyond forms, with the will and desire extinguished, with the soul crucified to a single thought, with love for all the images of the world, fecund and sterile essences alike, with the infinite banishment of the generative reasoning of the Stoics. The monsters of Byzantine art, wherein primal forms degenerate into absurdity, teach us this comprehension of beauty in opposition to Hellenism, which perpetuates the eternal sense of life in the Ideas of Plato. Gargoyles, corbels, dragons, beasts of fantastic mien had this new intuitiveness ensconced in their perverse forms; their character, elaboration of uniqueness, was set against that archetype by which the ancient world had set its course. The spirit of the Gnostics uncovered an aesthetic emotion in the absurdity of forms, in the creation of monsters, in the termination of life. Possessors of a hallucinogenic creed, they deduced therefrom categories of beauty which are liberated from that intimate bond which tied the archaic art of the Greeks to the temperament of the species. To Gnostics, the beauty of images does not reside within them but in the act which created them, from which they are never separated; thus, all things are to be loved as one since they all issue from the same eternal source in the same eternal act—quiet, absolute, one. (73–74)<sup>3</sup>

Valle-Inclán often looked to the past, as did other members of the “Generation of 1898,” to learn its lessons in order that he could participate in the continuum by his own innovations. In this case, the Gnosticism which informed much of his thinking in

*La lámpara maravillosa* also provided the premise from which would evolve the new aesthetic. These ideas pre-dated the commentary by T. S. Eliot.<sup>4</sup>

The poet, too, made his statement on the absurdity and grotesqueness of the period in 1919 when he published *La pipa de kif* (*The Pipe of Kiff*),<sup>5</sup> presenting the emerging aesthetic in such poems as “¡Aleluya!,” where he tersely discloses his new mode: “Through divine Spring inspired, / My mind has become riled / Writing teetering verses today — / Grotesque, a purist would say” (OC 2: 1924). and “Vista madrileña” (“Madrid View”), wherein he focuses on one of many grotesques in the Spanish capital:

An ugly girl —  
Whom typhoid left  
Devoid of hair —  
In the garret dances,  
Dragging a chair,  
And playing the man.  
She peers from the window  
And looks like the cuckoo  
That peeps from the clock. (OC 2: 1957)

Valle-Inclán found it necessary to depict the absurdity and grotesqueness of the period in his dramatic works as well. As he declared in an interview:

There are three ways of seeing the world artistically or aesthetically: from the knees, standing, or from the air. When one adopts the kneeling position—and that’s the oldest stance in literature—the characters, the heroes, are given a condition superior to that of human beings or, at least, to that of the narrator or poet. Thus, Homer attributes to his heroes qualities that humans only have in limited form. In other words, it is a way of creating beings superior to human nature: gods, demigods, and heroes. There is a second way, which is to consider fictional protagonists as if they were of our own nature, as if they were our brothers, as if they were us, as if the character duplicated our essence, with its very virtues and defects. This is, undoubtedly, the most successful approach. This is Shakespeare, all of Shakespeare. . . . And there is a third way, which is to see the world from a superior plane and to consider the characters of the plot as beings inferior to the author, with a touch of irony. The gods become characters in a skit. This is a very Spanish manner, the manner of a demiurge who cannot conceive of himself as made of the same stuff as his figurines. This is the manner of Quevedo. . . . This manner is definitive in Goya. And it was this consideration that moved me to take a new course in my literature and write the *Esperpentos*, the literary genre that I baptize with the name of *Esperpento*.<sup>6</sup>

This was the identity of the new aesthetic of the absurd and the grotesque, a perspective that sought to point to the great gulf (Kant’s *grosse Kluft*) that existed between

the intuited or noumenal world and the sensate or phenomenal world. It is interesting to note later statements that rework Valle-Inclán's original statement on the *Esperpento*:

Authors must be studied according to their three manners. First, the character is superior to the author. The manner of the hero. Homer, who doesn't have the blood of the gods. Second, the author who duplicates himself: Shakespeare. His characters are nothing other than duplications of his personality. Third, the author is superior to his characters and contemplates them as God does his creatures. Goya painted his subjects as inferior to him. As did Quevedo. This is bred in picaresque literature. The authors of such novels did not wish to be confused with their characters, whom they considered very inferior to themselves, and this spirit still persists, naturally, in Spanish literature. I too consider my characters as my inferiors. My work is an attempt at what I tried to accomplish. (Madrid 104) <sup>7</sup>

The natural procedure would be to apply these ideas beyond the limited scope of individual perspectives. Valle-Inclán did not omit this process; he chose to make a comparative study of three closely interrelated literatures:

French authors always stand ecstatically before the events in their plays and the voices of their characters. They deify their heroes. They engender gods. In France, the author is the first vassal of his offspring. He exalts the protagonist and his drama well beyond human limitations. He serves his heroes in good times and in bad as he would extraordinary divinities. The English, workmen full of decorum and sociability, exercise club literature. Their characters move within a circle of friends, subject to the rights and duties of men-of-the-world. An author places his hero in a circle, gives him the proper credentials, and grants him the right to vote in its deliberations. When the time comes for rewards, respectful of class interests, he grants him the title of peer. The author and his character experience the same human protocol. The play is a purely social event, one hardly worthy of mention in *The Times*. Othello is a family member who commits the impropriety of showing exaggerated jealousy. We Spaniards always place ourselves above the drama and its interpreters. We are always aware of our capricious manipulation of the strings of the farce. Cervantes feels superior to Don Quixote. He mocks him a bit, sometimes shows pity over his sorrows and follies, forgives him his fits, and even grants him the boon of a final moment of lucidity before leading him, quite generously, to the gates of Heaven. We Spanish authors, haughty from our youth, like to sprinkle the life that we create with a touch of sorrow. Ours is a harsh paternity. By dint of caprice and blood. Because we are ever accompanied by indignation at what we see taking place around us fatally. Spain is a vast stage selected by tragedy. There's always a dramatic moment in Spain; a drama well beyond the capabilities of the participants. These, cardboard figurines, lacking ideality and courage, seem ridiculous to us in their heroic trappings. Like strolling players, they interpret the

most sublime tragic situations clumsily. Don Quijote is represented as just another Quijote. Doctors diagnose Don Juan's dramatic escapades as ambiguous physiology. Our whole populace is seen to be worth less than a gang of trivial players set on staging the genial drama of Spanish life. The result, of course, is an *Esperpento*.<sup>8</sup> (Madrid 344 – 46)

As Valle-Inclán had stated earlier, aberrations of social, political and religious traditions had been experienced and depicted in their respective eras by Francisco de Quevedo (1580 – 1645) and Francisco Goya (1746 – 1828). Theirs, too, were times of rapacity and inequities, each with its own peculiarities. Quevedo's sardonic view of life in Spain at the height of its power in the Siglo de Oro (the Golden Age, 1492 – 1680) can be seen in *Historia de la vida del buscón llamado don Pablos* (*The Life of Pablos the Rogue*, 1626) and *Sueños y discursos de verdades descubridoras de abusos, vicios, y engaños en todos los oficios y estados*, collectively known as *Sueños* (*Dreams*, 1606 and thereafter).<sup>9</sup> Goya's embittered vision of Spanish society-at-large was depicted in such collections of etchings as *Los caprichos* (*Caprices*, 1797), *Disparates* (*Absurdities*), and *Los desastres de la guerra* (*The Disasters of War*, pre-1820), along with paintings of other grotesque subjects, most notably those referred to as the "Black Paintings" in *La Quinta del Sordo* (*The Villa of the Deaf Man*); together they provided unequivocal evidence of the long and continuous history of the nation's social, political and religious grotesqueness.

A similar attention to social incongruity, deformity and absurdity are present in all of Valle-Inclán's *Esperpentos*, in whose extended format he could amply assess both the physical grotesqueness and the spiritual decadence he observed in society. As with Quevedo and Goya<sup>10</sup>, his concern was to depict the inhumanity of people toward one another, whatever the ambient, whatever the period. Often, as in the works of Quevedo and Goya, that inhumanity has a savage aspect. *Luces de bohemia* (*Bohemian Lights*)<sup>11</sup> is at the beginning of a cycle of plays that study the variety of social savagery in Spain but that are, in point of fact, universal in their assessment of the human condition. And he is able to interpret it through external and internal diagnostics that produce deep insights into human nature and the social experience.

*Luces de bohemia*, the first *Esperpento*, is a drama in fifteen scenes tracing the final moments in the bitter life of Máximo Estrella, a poet blinded by syphilis, who has struggled for recognition only to witness the deterioration of hope. His life moves steadily toward its tragic denouement while the grotesqueries of human existence become increasingly visible in the incidence of irony, cynicism, dissonance, satire, baseness, lewdness, opportunism, mockery, and alienation. The absurd caricature of life becomes the context of Máximo Estrella's distorted existence.

But there is another level in the play. *Luces de bohemia* is the fictionalized biography of the flamboyant bohemian Alejandro Sawa, who was born in Málaga in 1862 and died early in August 1909 under conditions not unlike those described by Valle-Inclán in the play. In a letter to the poet Rubén Darío, Valle-Inclán communicated the news of Sawa's tragic end:

Dear Darío: I've come to see you having first been to the house of our poor Alejandro Sawa. I cried in front of the dead man, for him, for myself, and for all the poor poets. I can't do anything; neither can you, but if some of us got together, we could do something. Alejandro left an unpublished book. The best thing that he's written. A diary of hopes and tribulations. The failure of all attempts at publishing it, along with a letter from El Liberal reneging on a piece that would have brought sixty pesetas, drove him mad in his last days. A hopeless madness. He wanted to kill himself. He died like a king in a tragedy; mad, blind, and raving. (Álvarez Hernández 70 – 71)<sup>12</sup>

All the tragic elements depicted in the play are present in the description of Sawa's last days.<sup>13</sup> Present, too, are Valle-Inclán's sympathy and sorrow, as well as his identification with Sawa. The life that the dead writer led had been Valle-Inclán's before his marriage; he could have ended as did his friend and that recognition was disturbing. The life and death of Sawa verified the absurdity of human existence for Valle-Inclán, and he created *Luces de bohemia* in that cast. He classified the play as an *Esperpento* and even had Máximo Estrella define and discuss the new aesthetic with Don Latino de Híspalis as they walked the streets of old Madrid:

Our tragedy is not tragedy . . . The *Esperpento* . . . Goya was the inventor of *Esperpentism*. Classical heroes have taken a stroll along Gato alley. . . . Classical heroes reflected in those concave mirrors manifest the *Esperpento*. The tragic sense of Spanish life can only be rendered through an aesthetic that is systematically deformed . . . Spain is a grotesque deformation of European civilization. . . . In a concave mirror, the most beautiful images are absurd. . . . Deformity ceases to be that when it is subject to a perfect mathematical system. My present aesthetic is to transform classical norms through the mathematics of the concave mirror . . . Let us deform expression in the same mirror that deforms our faces, and the whole miserable life of Spain. (OC 2: 1597 – 99)<sup>14</sup>

The Callejón de Alvaro Gato in Madrid's old quarter, an alley in the area between Puerta del Sol and Plaza Santa Ana, presented a series of fun-house mirrors that distorted the images of passersby in Valle-Inclán's day. Looking into those mirrors results in the unmasking of the reality of the viewer, who is reflected in a grotesque distension that Valle-Inclán uses as the symbol of society's true aspect. As individuals confront their reflections in the concave mirrors, they behold the depersonalization and dehumanization to which modern society has brought them.<sup>15</sup> While those street mirrors have lost much of their reflective properties over the years, the brilliance of Valle-Inclán's figurative concave mirrors has increased as his aesthetic of the grotesque has been more widely accepted and his *Esperpentos* read and performed with growing frequency in Spain and abroad.

In the expression of this and other tenets Valle-Inclán united his ideas to the life of Sawa and the resultant was Máximo Estrella, the protagonist who not only embodies one example of life's absurdity but is also the representative of all men whose exist-

ence enfolds the struggle between practicality (life in the sensate world) and ideality (life as perceived by the mind): the great gulf that Kant has posited in his dualism. Because the artist cannot achieve complete separation from the world and yet must, as he senses, the struggle is absurd and the absurdity is underscored by the inevitability of the outcome. The prison of the body and the prisons man creates for himself keep his spirit from full flight, as in the experience of such mystics as Saint Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. And, ironically, as in the case of Sawa-Estrella, a point is reached where the artist must look to these same hindrances for salvation. The body must be cared for and society must be caressed. In the end, however, these attentions come too late. Sawa, who had penned attacks on the press and the government, found himself without assistance when he needed it; Max died in the same abandonment.

*Luces de bohemia* takes as its central concern the suffering and death of the protagonist at the hands of society. That suffering and that death are as chargeable to the people with whom Máximo Estrella comes in contact as if they had actually executed him with their own hands. Further, even those who express concern for Max's situation cannot be trusted. For one, his avowed friend Don Latino takes the lottery ticket from a drunken Max and pockets the winnings after his death, never even thinking of sharing the money with the writer's destitute widow and daughter. In the depths of despair, the two women commit the act of suicide which they and Max discussed early in the play.<sup>16</sup> Frequently, the inhumanity of man to man manifests itself in tacit but no less savage ways than direct aggression.

The impact of this *Esperpento* is even greater when its basis in the life of Alejandro Sawa is recognized. In portraying Sawa through Max Estrella, Valle-Inclán made his bitterest dramatic statement on the savagery of society, in this case directed towards the artist. Both middle and lower classes here are guilty of savage indifference to his plight as artist and man; it is that lack of recognition of his writings and the cutting off of his meager source of income that lead to Max's unconquerable despair—the death of his spirit—to be followed inexorably by the death of his body, a dual death reminiscent of the fate decreed for the protagonists of Greek tragedy, as viewed in *La lámpara maravillosa*:

Those who were loved by the gods in Greek antiquity were born under the star of a lamentable destiny. Fate dragged them along like a sacred wind, disheveling their souls, their garments, and their hair. Because lives convulsed with pain are the object of love, misfortune was a celestial gift. If tragic heroes are perpetuated in our minds with an almost divine aspect, it is due to the compassionate shudder with which we contemplate them. (LM 65)

Yet, despite such touchstones to the ancestral theatre in *Luces de bohemia*, tragedy in the manner of ancient Greece is held to be anachronistic. The speculum, the polished metal plate used as a reflector of reality in antiquity, just won't do today. Only the aesthetic of the *Esperpento* is seen as applicable to modern life, wherein the absurd and the grotesque prevail. In such circumstances ancient heroes are transmogrified in-



to the anti-heroes that the *Esperpento* mirrors. In other *Esperpentos* Valle-Inclán attacked different segments of society and the culture that has given rise to its long-established institutions and hallowed traditions, along with the debasement of the heroic.

One such is *Divinas palabras: Tragicomedia de aldea* (*Divine Words: A Rural Tragicomedy*), an *Esperpento* in point of fact, although it does not have that label in its title. First, Lucero's verbal and physical abusiveness of Poca Pena, his mate, is seen in the opening moments of the play. Then, two deaths mark the indifference of society: that of Juana la Reina, is mourned ritually rather than emotionally by family and friends, while that of her idiot son Laureano goes unmourned. Indeed, the first death is seen as beneficial to the living relatives, who fight for possession of the trophy, the hydrocephalic dwarf; the second death is seen as oppressive in that the income produced from displaying the idiot's genitals disappears with his demise. The social savagery is pointedly underscored by pigs eating Laureano's cadaver. Yet another instance is Pedro Gailo's attempt to seduce his daughter, who fights off his drunken savagery and deftly avoids the incestuous liaison. In the same pattern of amorality and sanctimoniousness, townspeople are about to stone the naked Mari Gaila to death for fornication, only to be halted by her foolish husband's last-minute mouthing of Christ's words which had saved the Gospel prostitute. Recovering from the momentary hesitation, everyone again stands ready to throw stones at the prostrate woman until, astutely, the same words are spoken in Latin. Only upon hearing the Church's language, whose meaning, though lost to them, has attained an aura of magic, is the savagery of the populace quelled. The words uttered in Latin have become the Divine Words of the title. Thus, it has taken a near-miracle to subdue the savage beast of a mob bent on mayhem and murder in the name of Christian morality. After the ritual with bell (ringing from the steeple), book (from which the Gospel words are read), and candle (held by Pedro Gailo) which has saved her from the imminent stoning, Mari-Gaila is raised from her crouching position and is led through the cemetery into the church by her husband in a symbolic rite of passage from death to rebirth. The natural in her has been diluted in the process and, after her near-death experience before a sanctimonious mob ready to stone her, Mari-Gaila, in an absurd manner reborn to the Church, will thereafter behave properly, as wife and Christian, following the accepted secular and religious dictates of society, or so it is made to appear at the end of the play.

*Divinas palabras* is the culmination of a series of rural tragedies begun with *Águila de blasón* and *Romance de lobos* and continued with *El Embujado* and an impressive work of prose fiction, *Flor de santidad* (1904; *Flower of Sanctity*), and an occasional story. The setting of these works is also Galicia, and the characters are founded on regional types. But it is in *Divinas palabras*, one of the masterworks of Valle-Inclán's literature, that the traditions depicted earlier find their most perfect delineation through the heightened sensitivity and mastery of style that define his innovative dramatic technique.

There are also other sectors of society whose perspectives are satirized. In *Los cuernos de don Friolera* (*The Horns of Don Friolera*), the dramatist expanded on his theory of the grotesque through words at the beginning of the prologue spoken by Don

Estrafalarío, an intellectual whose name reinforces his eccentricity and slovenly dress:

I've also been concerned with the Devil's grimace before the Sinner. The truth is that I had a very different idea of infernal laughter; I'd always thought of it as mocking, supremely mocking, but no . . . Don't for a moment believe in the reality of a Devil who takes an interest in the human charade, enjoying himself like a shopkeeper. Tears and laughter are born out of the contemplation of things akin to ourselves, and the Devil has an angelic nature. . . . Those sentimentalists who express sorrow over the agony of horses in the bullring are incapable of feeling the aesthetic emotion of the bullfight; Their sensibility is manifestly parallel to equine sensibility and, through some subconscious process, they've come to believe that their fate will be akin to that of those disemboweled horses. . . . That's how it is. And there's a similar parallel with whatever makes us laugh; We reserve our jeers for whatever relates to us. . . . My aesthetic transcends pain and laughter, as must the conversations of the dead when they tell stories of the living. . . . All our art is born out of the knowledge that we will pass away some day. That knowledge makes men equal, more so than the French Revolution. . . . I would like to view this world with the perspective of the other shore. I'm like that relative of mine who, when asked by his overseer what he would like to be, replied: "A corpse." (OC 2: 1697–99)

Don Estrafalarío, like Max Estrella before him, reveals the intent and point of view of the dramatist. These, however, are not presented in a thesis play. Instead, Valle-Inclán employs the traditional theme of the cuckold (*Commedia dell'Arte*, Molière, *Siglo de Oro*, Restoration Comedy) in union with a strong anti-militarism to depict the grotesqueries of contemporary life. The dramatist avoids the cliché and proceeds to demolish satirically the "sacred cows" before him. And in the process he succeeds in making *Los cuernos de don Friolera* both a social and a theatrical document, the first through the exposure of social conventions as ridiculous, and the second through the satirization of the type of drama that thrived on thematics that he felt were unworthy of the stage. The prologue and epilogue that frame the twelve scenes of the *Esperpento* make clear Valle-Inclán's attitude on the second point; the play proper discloses his social commentary.

The prologue commences with the peripatetic intellectuals Don Estrafalarío and Don Manolito conversing against the active background of a folk fair.<sup>17</sup> The aesthetic pronouncements of the former stand out in the popular setting, appearing as eccentric as his name. But his views are shortly reinforced through the fantasy created by a puppeteer and his creatures. Reality is eclipsed temporarily while the tale of the cuckold Friolera unfolds before an expectant crowd, prominent among whom are Don Estrafalarío and Don Manolito. Friolera, the deceived lieutenant, is talked into killing his mistress as a point of honor despite his indifference to her affair. The prodding of the puppeteer brings on the indignation that leads to the act. But before Friolera can be imprisoned by society, he learns how to revive the fallen woman, an act com-

pleted as the playlet ends. This plot will be paralleled within the play proper; but the second version of the events will have its own variations, as will a third one narrated in the epilogue. Fantasy, reality, legend. Society will be served. But which of the three venues will prevail? In the puppeteer's version both society and the individual are equally served; society (the insistence of the puppeteer) demands that the honor of the cuckold be avenged in the blood of the deceiver, and it is; the individual benefits from this purgation and is freed from legal consequences (also imposed by society) through the absurd resurrection of the victim. This is the world of fantasy and its absurd operations have an intrinsic logic. It is this veracity that prompts the comments of Don Estrafalarío on the status of the Spanish drama.

There's no doubt that the comprehension of such humor and morality does not come from Castilian tradition. It is Portuguese and Cantabrian, perhaps from the mountains of Catalonia as well. The other regions literally know nothing of such jests about cuckolds, of such witty good sense, so contrary to Castile's theatrical and African concept of honor. That puppet stage on the back of an old itinerant storyteller is more suggestive than the entire rhetorical Spanish theatre. (OC 2; 1704)

Further, despite the qualifications to this statement suggested by Don Manolito, Don Estrafalarío adds:

The cruelty and dogmatism of Spanish drama are found only in the language. Shakespearean cruelty is magnificent because it is blind, possessed of the greatness of natural forces. Shakespeare is violent but not dogmatic. Spanish cruelty has the entire savage liturgy of the auto-de-fe. It is cold and disagreeable. Nothing is more removed from the blind fury of the elements than Torquemada; His is a scholastic fury. If our theatre had the quaking of bullfights, it would be magnificent; Had it known how to convey that aesthetic violence, it would be a theatre as heroic as the Iliad. Lacking that, it has all the antipathy of codices, from the Constitution back to the Grammar<sup>18</sup>. (OC2; 1705)

The opportunity to vent his views through one of his characters is not used in vain by Valle-Inclán. Don Estrafalarío is made to express other expository ideas on the theatre:

Shakespeare rhymes to the beat of his heart, the heart of Othello; He is as one with the jealousy of the Moor; Creator and creature are of the same human stuff. As for that puppeteer, not for a second does he stop considering himself superior by nature to the puppets on his stage. He has a demiurgic dignity<sup>19</sup>. (OC 2; 1706)

It is this superior attitude, which obliterates sentiment and the melodramatic, that makes possible the *Esperpento*. As Don Estrafalarío has pointed out, laughter and

tears exist only where there is an identification with the subject. But such is not possible where puppets are concerned. Likewise, the *Esperpento* makes the characters like marionettes so that there can be no semblance of attachment. The dramatist achieves this end, just as the puppeteer does, by being superior to his creations. Valle-Inclán considers them grotesque because their frame of reference is an absurd existence, as he expressed it in an interview in which he made an important addition to the premises that informed his vision:

Life—its events, sorrows, loves—is always the same, fatally so. What changes are the characters, the protagonists of life. Those roles were previously played by gods and heroes. Today. . . well, what's the use of speaking? In the past, destiny fell on the shoulders—haughtiness and sorrow—of Oedipus or Medea. Today, destiny is the same, fate is the same, greatness is the same, pain is the same. . . . But the shoulders that bear them have changed. Actions, concerns, recognition are the same as yesterday and forever. The shoulders are different, too minuscule to support that weight. Out of that are born contrast, disproportion, and the ridiculous. In *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, the sorrow of the protagonist is the same as Othello's and yet it lacks its greatness. Blindness is beautiful and noble in Homer. But in *Luces de bohemia* that same blindness is sad and lamentable because it concerns a bohemian poet, Máximo Estrella. (qtd. in Madrid 114)

Valle-Inclán has explained adroitly the distinction between Greek tragedy and his *Esperpento* and the necessity for the latter in a society that has eschewed its gods, its heroes and its ethical sense of being. Society as a whole is really no different at the end of these plays. Those people who have died have left behind an unchanging scheme of life in which some will continue to suffer greatly, some will show no pity, being moved only by fear, some will continue as they were, perhaps to again manifest their fallen nature through outright evil or extreme selfishness.

Society is savaged by Valle-Inclán in *Luces de bohemia*, *Divinas palabras*, and *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, as well as in the other *Esperpentos*, because the dramatist views society as hypocritical, self-serving, and abusive of power. Because this society, potentially a dystopia akin to that of Huxley's *Brave New World* for one, perpetrates and condones savage acts that not only mock the Christian charity it purportedly espouses but also the protective parameters of ethical behavior, it is deservedly savaged by the acidic attack it receives in each *Esperpento*, be it set in rural Galicia or urban Madrid, be it concerned with naive primitive traditions or sophisticated modern protocols. It is Valle-Inclán's sense that an absurd, depraved, corrosive society deserves to be depicted as absurd and grotesque, and he achieves this through his ability to create memorable characters and social types, placing them in situations that highlight society's deformity and savagery.

Much of Spanish post-Civil War drama has been influenced by Valle-Inclán's innovative ideas in writing and staging plays, as has been acknowledged by Antonio Buero Vallejo, Alfonso Sastre, José Martín Recuerda, Antonio Gala, Domingo Mir-

as, Carlos Muñiz, and Francisco Nieva, among other prominent contemporary playwrights. Buero, for one, has said of Valle-Inclán's most immediate influence that:

He fecundates the greatest dramatist that follows: Lorca. And today he manifests himself as a unique author, a formidable revealer of his land and of the sullen or ludicrous face that speaks the truth about man; that truth, among others, that shows man as a marionette subject to his conditioned reflexes.<sup>20</sup>

Buero, too, was a product of the social consciousness that characterized Valle-Inclán's *Esperpento*. And Sastre has placed him at the center of the modern European theatre:

Valle-Inclán is one of the great masters of the European theatre of this century. . . . His theatre represents the autonomous Spanish discovery of theatrical expressionism; the anticipation of the antipsychologicalism of the subsequent "social" theatre, and the deliberate use of the technique of "distancing" (which Brecht would come to use and explicate theoretically).<sup>21</sup>

But beyond his innovative experimentation with what would come to be called "the alienation effect," with the *Esperpento* Valle-Inclán established the tenets and techniques that mark his plays as precursors of the later and much-touted "Theatre of the Absurd" and "Theatre of Cruelty." If Samuel Beckett (1906 – 1989) in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, for two, stripped the stage and its personages down to bare essentials for the presentation of absurdist premises, the *Esperpento* had already shown the way; if Eugène Ionescu (1909 – 1994) portrayed human gullibility through its physical transformation into beasts in *Rhinoceros*, the *Esperpento* had preceded it through its portrayal of numerous physical and moral transmogrifications; and if Jean Genet (1910 – 1986) portrayed the cruelty and inhuman acts he had experienced in prison in such as his *Deathwatch* and *The Blacks*, the *Esperpento* had set the stage long before. Ramón del Valle-Inclán was in place before them and preceded them as well through the writing and staging of his *Esperpentos*.

Although the Irishman Beckett, the Rumanian Ionescu, the Frenchman Genet, and the Spaniard Arrabal, among other purveyors of the absurd, have received greater praise and renown, as did the Frenchman Artaud for his theories on the place of cruelty on the modern stage, Valle-Inclán's creative contributions to world drama have come to be acknowledged as his plays have found their way into the international repertory, having been translated into all the major Western languages.<sup>22</sup> More so than ever before, Valle-Inclán's importance as an innovative dramatist in his own right and as the Spanish precursor of the alienatory, absurdist and cruel modes in theatre has come to be recognized worldwide in the present period by critics and directors, as well as by audiences.

## Notes

1. Valle-Inclán, who had made an official visit in 1916 to the French front with journalistic creden-

tials, wrote his impressions of the war's savagery in a series of newspaper articles later published in book form as *La media noche. Visión estelar de un momento de guerra* (Madrid: Imprenta Clásica Española, 1917). For details on his trip, see Lima, *Valle-Inclán: The Theatre of His Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988) or *Valle-Inclán: El teatro de su vida* (Santiago de Compostela, Spain: Editorial Nigra - Consorcio de Santiago de Compostela, 1995), chapter 8.

2. See Lima, "Crisis and Response: The Dynamics of Spain's 'Generation of 1898.'" In John Crispin, et. al. (Eds.), *Los hallazgos de la lectura. Estudio dedicado a Miguel Enguitanos*. Madrid: José Porrúa Turanzas, 1989.

3. Hereafter cited in the text as LM.

4. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*.

5. The two poems from this collection cited below are in my translation. They can be found in *Obras completas de don Ramón del Valle-Inclán*, hereafter given in the text as OC.

6. Interview with Martínez Sierra. See Martínez Sierra's "Hablando con Valle-Inclán. De él y de su obra." ABC (Madrid), December 7, 1928, p. 1. The translation is mine. Lope de Vega's *Pedro Carbonero* mentions three ways in which an author can observe his creations; it is possible that Valle-Inclán derived his theory in part from this source.

7. The translation is mine. So is the translation of the other quotations from this book.

8. See also Gómez de la Serna, *Don Ramón María del Valle-Inclán* (Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe Argentina, 1944 (Col. Austral): 138) for other statements on the subject. Toward the end of *Niebla*, the author Unamuno and the character Augusto Pérez discuss the relationship of author and character in a similar manner.

9. The five dreams or visions were written over a period of years: *El sueño del juicio final* (*Dream of the Last Judgment*, 1606), *El alguacil endemoniado* (*The Bewitched Constable*, 1607), *El sueño del infierno*, also known as *Las zahurdas de Plutón* (*The Dream of Hell/The Pigsties of Pluto*, 1608), *El mundo por dentro* (*The World from Within*, 1612), and *El sueño de la muerte* (*The Dream of Death*, 1621–22). Sometimes editions have included an additional piece: *La hora de todos y la fortuna con seso* (*Everyone's Time and Fortune with Judgement*, 1635).

10. See Lorenzo-Rivero's *Goya en el esperpento de Valle-Inclán* (Sada (A Coruña): Edición do Castro, 1998) for a study, with illustrations, of the relationship of Goya's etchings, drawings and paintings to Valle-Inclán's *esperpentos*.

11. The title refers not to the country of Bohemia but to the bohemian lifestyle. Thus, it is wrong to capitalize it in Spanish, as is sometimes done. The protagonist and his cronies are the "lights," that is, the luminaries of the bohemian world of Madrid in the early years of the twentieth century.

12. The translation is mine. The note is unsigned but bears a cross drawn by Valle-Inclán. Darío wrote the prologue to the posthumous book, *Iluminaciones en la sombra* (1910). In this context it is important to note Sawa's letter to Darío, dated 31 May 1908 from Madrid, as reproduced in Ghirardo (*El archivo de Rubén Darío*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1943: 214–15): "The only thing that you know of this latter part of my mortal life is that I've become blind. That would seem to be sufficient, but it isn't; besides being blind, I have also been so ill for nearly two years that the Trappist phrase of our great Villiers—"My body is already ripe for the grave"—has become one of the most frequent litanies in which my soul is diluted. And so, in my condition, in my being, I live in the middle of Madrid more forsaken yet and with less assistance than it I had set up my tent in the middle of barren lands away from all roads. Relying on my literary prestige, I've knocked on the doors of newspapers and publishing houses to no avail; relying on social contacts—I'm not an ogre or a wild beast—I've called on friends, insistently, again to no avail. Is it possible that someone like me can die this way, dismally, assassinated bit by bit by everyone, so that his death, like his life, has no more significance than that of a mere anecdote about solitude and rebellion in contemporary society?" The translation is mine.

13. Pío Baroja also employed Sawa's last days in an episode in *El árbol de la ciencia* (Madrid:

Alianza Editorial, 1981) dealing with the character Rafael Villasús.

14. The translation is mine. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from this work are my translation. Valle-Inclán's consistent identification of the *Esperpento* with Goya underlines the relationship of influences flowing from the painter to the writer. In 1928, Ramón Sender suggested emphasizing this relationship by publishing in *El Sol* one of the *Esperpentos* in honor of Goya's centennial. See Sender, *Valle-Inclán y la dificultad de la tragedia*, 42 (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1965).

15. An interesting aspect of *Luces de bohemia* in this context can be seen in the animal names and nicknames the dramatist gives his characters, as well as referring to some as animals; the list of characters ends with El Pollo (chicken) de Pay-Pay, dogs, cats and a parrot; Don Latino is often called a dog by Max; Zaratustra is *abichado* (insect-like) and *zorro* (fox); Pica Lagartos is associated with lizards; La Pisa Bien is described as having *zarpas* (claws); the animalistic is also implied when Max, Don Latino, La Pisa Bien and Zaratustra are referred to as *trogloditas*. Goya's use of animal imagery can perhaps be seen as operative here.

16. Or so it would appear for their names are not given in a newspaper report on the suicides. There is only conjecture about their identities. Thus, Valle-Inclán ends the work with ambiguity.

17. These characters represent the "Generation of 1898," as is obvious in their conversation. Further, Don Estrafalario has certain traits that make him resemble Unamuno, as his companion asserts: "You're not a philosopher and, consequently, have no right to reply with pedantries. You're nothing more than a heretic, like Don Miguel de Unamuno" (OC 2; 1706).

18. *Grammar* refers to Nebrija's work, the first grammar of any European language since the Roman era.

19. The concept of the Demiurge is found in Plato and in the Gnostic speculation, for which see *La lámpara maravillosa* or *The Lamp of Marvels*.

20. "Encuesta sobre el teatro de Valle-Inclán," *Insula*, 4. The translation is mine.

21. "Encuesta sobre el teatro de Valle-Inclán," *Insula*, 4. The translation is mine. I have used "distancing" to convey the Spanish "distanciamiento." Brecht's technique is better known as the alienatory effect or alienation.

22. See my *Ramón del Valle-Inclán. An Annotated Bibliography*, Vol. I: Works. London: Grant & Cutler, Ltd, 1999. (Coll. Research Bibliographies & Checklists 53.1).

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