

DRAMATURGICAL DISTANCE IN VALLE-INCLAN'S ESPERPENTO DE LOS CUERNOS DE DON FRIOLERA

El morbo melodramático es vacuna
cierta contra la elevada fiebre de la
tragedia. (Enrique de Mesa,
Apostillas a la escena.)

Imagine for a moment the following stage setting. The decor represents a small Andalusian town near the sea. The houses are white, flowers blaze in the patio, Moorish gratings cover the windows. Wearing a bullfighter's cape, a *galán* strums a guitar and sings *coplas* to his beloved. She sits at her window, behind an iron lattice, and pins a carnation in her hair.

Contrary to what one might think, this is not a play by the Quintero brothers, nor one of García Alvarez' *sainetes*. Rather, it is the setting for scene two of Valle-Inclán's *Esperpento de los cuernos de don Friolera*. But the plastic evocations of the playwrights just mentioned—among the most popular authors who wrote for the Spanish stage in the 1920's—are not accidental. Were we unfamiliar with the code of the *género chico*, we would miss its deflation when the *galán* begins to sing:

A tus pies, gachona mía,
pongo todo mi caudal:
Una jaca terciopelo,
un tabuco y un puñal...

and is urged on—"¡Olé! ¡Viva tu madre!"—by a *parrot*.¹

It was such moments that led Corpus Barga to note that Valle-Inclán's genius consisted in turning the literary dross of his time into gold: "La literatura de Valle resultaría que es una literatura mala bien hecha."²

¹ *Esperpento de los cuernos de don Friolera* originally appeared in *La Pluma* in 1921 (April-August), was published in book form in 1925 (Madrid: Renacimiento) and finally became the center piece of *Martes de carnaval. Esperpentos* (Madrid: Imp. Rivadeneyra) in 1930. For this study I have used the popular edition of *Martes de carnaval* published by Espasa-Calpe (Madrid: 1978).
² *Revista de Occidente*, 51 (1936), 90.

Applied to Valle's plays, this comment reminds us that the *esperpento* is theater that absorbs and reassembles a variety of theatrical codes. Like the *Quijote*, it turns trite conventions into a new form that many of the writer's contemporaries found distinctly modern.³

Zamora Vicente's study of *Luces de bohemia* leaves no doubt that a major source of Valle's plays was the living stage itself. As that essay shows, the first *esperpento* drew heavily from the "teatro arrabalero, localista y vulgar" that appealed to Madrid's lower classes.⁴ Likewise, *Las galas del difunto* openly proclaims its link with Zorrilla's ever popular *Don Juan Tenorio* and borrows from the vaudeville acts of the day. *La hija del capitán* owes a similar debt to the contemporary theater: its settings, slang and cast of *chulos* inevitably bring to mind the plays of Arniches, devoid, however, of their lightness and charm.

It is a commonplace that all literary and theatrical works appeal to tradition as the measure of their novelty. But in *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, the play's genesis from prior theater is foregrounded, its dependence on prevailing theatrical forms openly proclaimed. All the hackneyed conventions of the stage—settings, costumes, dialogue, gestures, situations—become grist for Valle-Inclán's mill. *Friolera* offers numerous instances in which these conventions, rather than the action or emotion they signal, attract to themselves the attention of the audience.⁵ My opening paragraph was meant to provide a typical example of this practice. The elements of the setting there described—the cape, carnation, guitar, etc.—lose their functional transparency and become conspicuous markers of a specific theatrical tradition, the *género chico*. In examining this aspect of the play, its generative self-consciousness, I wish first to identify the main device that is involved in the staging, and then to pose the question of finality; to ask, in other words, what effect dramaturgical distance has on us as spectators or readers of *Friolera*.

A common feature of the *esperpento* is the establishment of an internal viewing angle that the audience is invited to assume. When Max Estrella defines the *esperpento* in scene twelve of *Luces de bohemia*, he supplies a perspective from which we may watch the play's conclusion and reflect on the scenes already staged. In *Las galas del difunto*, the Don Juan myth sets

³ In *El Mono Azul*, 36 (1937), Luis Cernuda called Valle-Inclán "nuestro primer autor dramático moderno," a judgment that echoed Fernández Almagro's comment after seeing *Farsa y licencia de la Reina castiza* staged in 1931: "Valle-Inclán es el príncipe de nuestro teatro moderno. Que no le haya sido discernida por lo común esta preeminencia, y que las obras de su repertorio apenas hayan asomado a los escenarios —si es que asomaron alguna vez— son hechos que acusan violenta y justamente a la sociedad española de nuestro tiempo. O con mayor exactitud, a los dirigentes de nuestra vida teatral, poseídos en tantos casos por la incompreensión y la rutina" (*La Voz*, 4 June 1931, p. 4).

⁴ Alonso Zamora Vicente, *La realidad esperpéntica* (Madrid: Gredos, 1969), p. 24. See especially, "Literatización," pp. 62-76.

⁵ In *The Semiotics of the Theatre and Drama* (London: Methuen, 1980), Keir Elam relates theatrical foregrounding to the Russian formalist notion of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization), citing as an example Brecht's concept of the alienation effect (pp. 16-19).

an heroic viewing angle that contrasts with the farcical tone of the staging.⁶ As for *Friolera*, the prologue and epilogue become a frame within which a perspective of detachment is defined and transferred to the audience. Like many modern novels, whose discourse suggests the vantage point to be assumed by the reader, Valle-Inclán's play offers its audience advice on how its action may best be viewed.

The establishment of this internal viewing angle is the work of the play's prologue. There two intellectuals, don Monolito and don Estrafalarío, watch a puppet show in a primitive theater—"El corral de una posada"—duplicating on stage the situation of the audience in the house. With this simple procedure, Valle positions us to identify with his spectators of theater within the theater. Once the puppeteer has concluded his performance—a farcical "burla de cornudos"—its import for Spain's contemporary theater is discussed by the intellectuals on stage. That theater, according to don Estrafalarío, is cold and dogmatic, subject still to the rigid codes of Castilian honor and catholic morality. By contrast, the theater of Shakespeare transcends social norms with an appeal to natural forces: "La crueldad sespiriana es magnífica, porque es ciega, con la grandeza de las fuerzas naturales. Shakespeare es violento, pero no dogmático. La crueldad española tiene toda la bárbara liturgia de los Autos de Fe. Es fría y antipática. Nada más lejos de la furia ciega de los elementos que Torquemada" (p. 75).

The puppet show just seen likewise stands in opposition to Castilian dogmatism. Its humorous dramatization of cuckoldry, don Estrafalarío argues, derives from an acceptance of human nature—of "fuerzas naturales"—that is alien to all but a few northern regions of Spain: "Es portuguesa y cántabra, y tal vez de la montaña de Cataluña. Las otras regiones, literariamente, no saben nada de estas burlas de cornudos, y este donoso buen sentido, tan contrario al honor teatral y africano de Castilla" (p. 74).

In their common contrast to the "honor teatral y africano de Castilla," the puppeteer and Shakespeare are thus joined from the beginning of the play, an association that proves crucial to understanding the extraordinary presence of puppetry in the staging. In don Estrafalarío's mind, farce and tragedy converge in acknowledging natural forces, rather than tyrannical social codes, as the ground of human action. But he also draws an important distinction between the two theatrical forms: whereas Shakespeare "rima con el latido de su corazón, el corazón de Otelo: Se desdobra en los celos del Moro," the puppeteer "ni un solo momento deja de considerarse superior, por naturaleza, a los muñecos de su tabanque" (p. 76). Spectators of tragedy, in consequence, are more likely to identify with the characters on

⁶ See my essay, "The Tragicomic Don Juan: Valle-Inclán's *Esperpento de las galas del difunto* (*The Dead Man's Duds*)," *Modern Drama*, 23 (1980), 44-57.

stage than viewers of farce. For this reason, farce provides a welcome antidote to the bathos of the contemporary theater: "Ese tabanque de muñecos sobre la espalda de un viejo prosero, para mí, es más sugestivo que todo el retórico teatro español" (p. 74). With this celebration of puppetry, the prologue sets the perspective from which the subsequent scenes are to be viewed: we are advised to see a farce no matter what is staged.

What the next section of the play actually presents is melodrama, based on the age-old *comedia de honor*. The story is familiar to all. A husband (don Friolera) receives an anonymous note accusing his wife of infidelity. The charge is false, of course, but don Friolera must cleanse his honor with blood, as prescribed by the honor code (and Spain's classic theatrical code). And so he sets out to do, but, instead of killing his wife and her presumed lover, he shoots his daughter by mistake.

This *dramón* not only alters the plot of the puppet show, its performance also invokes a different theatrical code. Valle's stage notes indicate that the dramaturgy in this section corresponds mainly to the neoromantic theater of Echegaray, Cano and Sellés. The spectacle thus reinforces the usual viewing angle of a Spanish audience in the 1920's, still happily wedded to the conventions of melodrama. Yet, in gesture, pace and decor, the dramaturgy of puppetry, that don Estrafalario found so "suggestive," also colors the staging. The audience is therefore positioned to view this part of the performance from at least two perspectives: while melodrama invites us to sympathize with the characters, puppetry prompts us to laugh at their absurdity which is exposed as pure farce.

The epilogue introduces yet another histrionic form, the *romance de ciego*. Once more the tale of don Friolera is played to an audience on stage. Valle's intellectuals listen to the blind man's ballad that invites them, and us, to admire the jealous husband as a paragon of masculinity. The spectator-intellectuals again discuss the performance that they, and we, behold, concluding that "Toda la literatura es mala" and that only "los muñecos del Compadre Fidel" (the puppeteer) offer hope of revitalization (pp. 172-73). Hence the play closes as it began, with an internal performance and discussion that focus our view of the action.

The dramaturgy of *Friolera* thus fixes a vantage point from which the play seems to watch itself, a perspective that is transferred to the house by means of scenic duplications. As for the immediate effect of this theatrical structure, many have noted the similarity between Valle-Inclán and Bertolt Brecht.⁷ Guided by don Estrafalario (can we trust a guide so named?), the audience views the central scenes of the play from a distance, displaced from its usual attitude of "sympathetic understanding," as Brecht would say.

⁷ See Anthony N. Zahareas' introduction to the bilingual edition of *Luces de bohemia* prepared with Gerald Gillespie (Austin: University of Texas, 1976), pp. 30-32; and Basilio Losada, "Valle-Inclán entre Galicia y Brecht," *Estudios Escénicos: Cuadernos del Instituto del Teatro*, 13 (1969), 61-80.

But how does this distance empower us as spectators? Cardona and Zahareas suggest that it alert us to Valle's attack on Spain's institutions.⁸ To this I would add that the chief institution under attack in *Friolera* was the Spanish theater itself. The distance opened between stage and audience was designed, at least initially, to "defamiliarize" the prevailing theatrical forms that, according to Valle, had corrupted the public's taste.⁹ As he collapsed worn-out stage practices to hatch his spectacle, the house was invited to share the pleasure of theatrical decoding: to smile at the shadow of Calderón's Gutierre de Solís in poor don Friolera, to nod at the playwright's scorn for Echegaray's excess, his distrust of Arniches' *pintoresquismo*, his contempt for the Quintero brothers' sentimentalism. But most enjoyable for that audience, and still for us today, were the moments of intertextuality. Just as Lope's public waited to hear lines from long-familiar ballads, we are delighted when the would-be lover recites (not without error) the famous speech from Echegaray's *El gran Galeoto*: "¡El mundo me la da, pues yo la tomo!" (p. 103); and when don Friolera speaks with the voice of Pedro Crespo: "Tu padre, el que te dio el ser, no tiene honra, monina. ¡La prenda más estimada, más que la hacienda, más que la vida!... ¡Friolera!" (p. 138); or when he booms out don Alvaro's blasphemy: "¡Sepúltate, alma, en los infiernos!" (p. 167).

Watching and listening at a critical distance, the audience is thus alerted to the process by which Valle-Inclán squeezes blood from the many theatrical turnips at his disposal. But granting that distance, and that pleasure, are we not forgetting the other viewing angle that the audience carried to the theater from the melodramas of the day? Could that audience (can any audience) follow don Estrafalarío's advice and view the central scenes of *Friolera* with utter detachment, "con la perspectiva de la otra ribera" (p. 69)? That would probably be asking too much of anyone, given what actually happens in the play. Besides, are we not drawn into the theatrical fiction when, prompted by the scenic duplications, we take that advice seriously?

To answer that question, we need only reflect on the mechanics of this dramaturgy. Because Valle's intellectuals stand apart from the fictions they witness, and defend esthetic detachment in their discussions, the audience is led to assume that it too is removed from the spectacle on stage. We readily

⁸ Rodolfo Cardona and Anthony N. Zahareas, *Visión del esperpento de Valle-Inclán* (Madrid: Castalia, 1970).

⁹ Cf. his comment in *La Esfera*: "Un público inculto tiene la posibilidad de educarse, y ésa es la misión del artista. Pero un público corrompido con el melodrama y la comedia ñoña es cosa perdida" (6 March 1915). In 1922 Valle reversed his estimate and attributed the corruption of the theater to the public's vulgar taste: "El sentimiento de los espectadores crea la comedia, y aborta al autor dramático," he wrote to Rivas Cherif. "¿Quiénes son espectadores de las comedias? Padres honrados y tenderos, niñas idiotas, viejas con postizos, algún pollo majadero, y un forastero... Por eso los autores de comedias, —desde Moratín hasta Benavente—, parecen nacidos bajo una mesa-camilla... En sus comedias están todas las lágrimas de la baja y burguesa sensibilidad madrileña" (Leda Schiavo, "Cartas inéditas de Valle-Inclán," *Insula*, 398 [1980], 10).

accept this ruse, I submit, because it appeals to our modern distrust of emotion in art. Like Ortega in *La deshumanización del arte*, don Estrafalarío flatters us by implying that we can be counted among the few who understand art but do not get caught up in its messy, human emotions. But are we really detached if we accept uncritically the viewpoint—the viewing angle—of don Estrafalarío? Indeed, it seems to me that the very means of our detachment, our critical intellect, becomes the instrument of our involvement in the play. Valle knew what Octavio Paz argues so well, namely, that the modern temper is essentially critical, affirming only “la negación de todos los principios.”¹⁰ Given that spirit, the twentieth-century audience finds its truth dramatized most effectively, most realistically, when the stage drops its simulation of reality to expose its illusory nature and question its own conventions. Like Pirandello, Valle-Inclán was aware that self-consciousness in the theater had become, for the modern audience, a new verisimilitude.

The dramaturgy of *Los cuernos de don Friolera* therefore creates distance only to dissolve it. The immediate effect is to draw the audience away from the stage and allow it to witness the genesis of the play it beholds. But that very appeal to our intellect persuades us that the theater mirrors our own modern truth, our “pasión crítica,” as Paz terms it. Hence, self-consciousness, distance and decoding are means, not ends, that bind us, almost against our will, to the stage.

And what, finally, are we to see once we are so bound? We are then in a position to recognize the kinship between don Friolera and Othello. In fact, don Friolera is less a caricature of Othello than a parody of the sentimental heroes who trod the boards in Valle’s day and effectively displaced tragedy from the theater. The “dramático sempiterno” who is compelled by social dogma to cleanse his honor is far removed from the Moor whose jealousy is born of “la furia ciega de los elementos.” But he is very close indeed to the star roles that Valle was bound to encounter when he attended the theater. And that is what the playwright wanted his audience to realize; so that for once it would not be distracted by “el morbo melodramático,” but become reinvolved with “la alta fiebre de la tragedia.”

The kinship between don Friolera and Othello is insinuated by the former’s consistent proximity, in the staging, to the puppets seen in the prologue. The more don Friolera resembles, in gesture and expression, “un fantoche trágico” (p. 95), the closer we are drawn toward that common source of farce and tragedy—“las fuerzas naturales”—and away from social and theatrical “formulismos.” At a great distance, the distance provided by Valle’s critique of the contemporary stage, puppetry and tragedy merge. At that distance, don Friolera becomes not simply another “turco sanguinario,” as his wife calls him, nor just the “títere” that he calls himself,

¹⁰ Octavio Paz, *Los hijos del limo* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981), p. 22.

but, as the stage notes specify at the end, "el fantoche de Otelo" (161).

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MUERTE Y TRANSFIGURACION DEL ESCRITOR: BORGES Y (EN) SUS LECTORES

Quisiéramos llamar la atención, en la prosa que nos disponemos a comentar, a dos rasgos que si por un lado son de índole circunstancial, por otro, estimamos, en cierto modo justifican su inclusión en un número de revista cuyo fin es rendir homenaje a un eminente estudioso norteamericano que ha dedicado su vida a las letras hispánicas y que reside en Cambridge, Massachusetts. Aunque la página a que aludimos está impresa en español, lleva un título en inglés ("His End and His Beginning" en *Elogio de la sombra*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1969) y, nos informa Norman Thomas di Giovanni, fue originariamente redactada en esa lengua:

["His End and His Beginning"] was first written in English with the help of John Murchison. For *Elogio de la sombra*, Borges translated the English draft into Spanish.¹

Las circunstancias que rodean su origen parecerían indicar, además, que, en primera instancia, fue redactada precisamente en Cambridge. Un número considerable de los poemas y prosas que aparecen en el *Elogio* fueron elaborados durante aquellos meses en que Borges ocupó la cátedra de póstica Charles Elliot Norton en Harvard, y John Murchison, por esos años estudiante graduado en el Departamento de Lenguas y Literaturas Románicas de esa institución, se desempeñó como ayudante especial del escritor argentino mientras residía en Nueva Inglaterra.

Ocupándonos ahora no ya de rasgos circunstanciales sino de su ubicación en el contexto del *Elogio de la sombra*, que primordialmente es un libro de poemas, desearíamos hacer las siguientes observaciones. "His End and His Beginning" es, dentro del conjunto, uno de seis textos redactados en prosa. Con la excepción de "Una oración", texto que valiéndose de una serie de indicaciones internas pretende ser de índole "confesional" puesto que el yo que escribe pide en última instancia "morir del todo", las cinco prosas restantes están estructuradas a modo de relatos breves. De éstos, todos

¹ Norman Thomas di Giovanni, "Bibliographical Note" en *In Praise of Darkness*, trad. de Norman Thomas di Giovanni, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1963, p. 140.