

DECADENT SPACES, VALLE-INCLÁN'S SONATA DE OTOÑO, EUROPEAN DECADENCE, AND THE «PROBLEMA DE ESPAÑA»

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Resumen: *Sonata de otoño*, de Ramón María del Valle-Inclán, publicado en 1902, es uno de los grandes logros de la prosa modernista. Muchos críticos la han incluido exclusivamente entre las obras esteticistas de este autor. Sin embargo, una lectura detenida revela que Valle-Inclán ofrece una crítica mordaz, aunque sutil, de la sociedad española de fin de siglo (XIX) y, por extensión, alude a la decadencia extendida por Europa en general. A lo largo de esta *Sonata*, para diagnosticar el «problema de España» –la corrupción total de una aristocracia que, junto a la Iglesia, todavía controlaba aquella España al fin de siglo–, Valle-Inclán muestra diversos espacios decadentes, como los palacios y jardines de Concha y del Marqués de Bradomín, espacios temporales de decaimiento otoñal y, además, los de espacios de los cuerpos enfermos y viejos de sus protagonistas, especialmente Concha.

Palabras clave: Valle-Inclán, *Sonata de otoño*, siglo diecinueve, el decadentismo, el modernismo, el «problema de España,» crítica social.

Abstract: Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *Sonata de otoño*, published in 1902, stands as one of the great accomplishments of *modernista* prose. Many critics have argued that Valle-Inclán focused exclusively on aesthetic concerns. However, a careful reading of the text reveals that Valle-Inclán offers a biting, albeit oblique, critique of *fin de siglo* (19th) Spanish society in particular, and European decadence by extension. Throughout the *Sonata* Valle-Inclán uses a variety of decadent spaces, including the decaying palaces and gardens inhabited by Concha and the Marqués de Bradomín, temporal spaces of autumnal decay, and even spaces of the aging, infirm bodies of his protagonists, especially Concha, to diagnose Spain's malaise – the total corruption of the aristocracy, who together with the Church, still dominated much of Spain at the end of the Nineteenth Century.

Key words: Valle-Inclán, *Sonata de otoño*, Nineteenth Century, decadentismo, modernismo, «problema de España,» social criticism.

Résumé: On estime que le *Sonata de otoño*, publié en 1902, est une des plus grandes réussites de la prose *modernista*. De nombreux critiques ont soutenu que Valle-Inclán s'était concentré purement sur des intérêts esthétiques. Pourtant, une lecture soignée du texte nous révèle que Valle-Inclán présente une critique acerbe quoique oblique de la société espagnole fin de siècle (XIX) en particulier, et par extension de la décadence européenne. À travers cette *Sonata*, Valle-Inclán se sert d'une variété d'espaces décadents, y compris les palais et les jardins habités par Concha et le Marquis de Bradomín, des espaces temporels de la décomposition automnale, et même des espaces des corps malades et vieillissants de ses protagonistes, surtout Concha, pour diagnostiquer le malaise de l'Espagne –la corruption totale de l'aristocratie, qui ensemble avec l'église, dominait encore une grande partie de l'Espagne au dix-neuvième siècle.

Mots-clés: Valle-Inclán, *Sonata de otoño*, dix-neuvième siècle, le *decadentismo* (mouvement decadent), le *modernismo*, le problème de l'Espagne, la critique sociale.

Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *Sonata de otoño*, published in 1902, stands as one of the great accomplishments of *modernista* prose, as well as a major contribution to Spanish literature by one of the «Generación de 1898.» While most studies include Valle-Inclán as a member of the «noventaochistas,» they often have trouble linking Valle-Inclán's early works with his generation's efforts to identify the source of Spain's decadence, brought into sharp relief by the loss of the Spanish-American War. Critics have argued that Valle-Inclán's first writings, including *Sonata de otoño*, focused exclusively on aesthetic experimentation. However, a careful reading of the text reveals that Valle-Inclán offers a biting, albeit oblique, critique of *fin de siglo* Spanish society in particular, and European decadence by extension. Although certainly Valle-Inclán makes no direct references to Spain's political and economic problems, he pointedly leaves out the modern, urban spaces so important to many Realist writers like Galdós, situating his work in the rural landscape of Galicia with its feudal, medieval social structure. Throughout the *Sonata*, Valle-Inclán uses a variety of decadent spaces, including (1) the physically decaying palaces, chapels, and gardens belonging to Concha and the Marqués de Bradomín, (2) temporal spaces of autumnal decay contrasting with Spain's imperial past, and (3) the corporal spaces of decay, inscribed in the aging, infirm bodies of his protagonists, especially Concha, to diagnose Spain's malaise – the total corruption of the aristocracy, who together with the Church, still dominated much of Spain at the end of the Nineteenth Century.

Critics in general pay less attention to the place or the setting, the «space» of a novel, than to any other aspect. As critic Guillón observes, «El espacio y cuanto con él se relaciona es uno de los aspectos de la novela menos atendidos por la crítica hispánica» (Guillón, 1980: ix). Nevertheless, the space of a text holds a critical function within the fictional construct. The great American storyteller, Eudora Welty affirms that «it is because of its own nature that fiction is inseparable from place or setting,» adding that «the work of fiction depends for its very existence on its setting» (Welty, 1986:251). Critic Alexander Gelley observes that the elements of the setting «fuse together in a system of symbolic space that defines the ethical and affective values of the action in a totally new manner» (Gelley, 1973:187). Thus, the setting, the spaces of a novel, form an integral part of the text and assume a more important function than that of simply allowing for exquisite descriptions of scenery. Actually, space or setting becomes one of the bases on which the writer constructs the literary world within the text. Bal argues that space function in a story in two distinct ways: first, as simply a frame, a place in which actions occur, and second, as «thematized» space, «becoming an object of presentation itself for its own sake» (Bal, 1985: 95). He clarifies that this second type of space, which, I argue, defines the spaces of *Sonata de otoño*, becomes «an 'acting space' rather than the place of action» (Bal, 1985:95). Space contributes to the overall message

of the work. In short, as Bland comments, for the setting to fulfill its function, it should be appropriate, be adequate for the world of the narrative, and should form such an essential part of the fabric of the text that were it changed, it would do irreparable damage (Bland, 1968:247). Mikael Bakhtin uses the concept of «chronotope,» defined literally as «time-space,» and argues that «the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and special relationships» means that the temporal and spatial aspects of a novel are inseparable and both bear careful study (Bakhtin, 1994:84). In *Sonata de otoño*, precisely through its setting, its spaces, Valle-Inclán underscores the decline from which Spain, perhaps more intensely than the rest of Europe, suffered at the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, Frank opines that the novel offers a vision of reality that has been refracted through an extra-temporal perspective (Frank, 1996:69). Thus, the examination of these spaces, physical, temporal and corporal, i.e., the space of the protagonists' bodies, reveals the depth of the decadence into which Spain had fallen.

The *Sonatas* have received extensive critical attention, much of it focused on Valle-Inclán's use of *Modernismo*. In fact, some question whether he really belongs to the Generation of 1898 because of his enormous concern with reshaping aesthetic values to challenge those of Naturalism, perhaps to the exclusion of any other issue. González López comments that of all his generation, Valle-Inclán was the most in tune with what he labels «las corrientes estéticas que iban agitando el espíritu y la cultura de los pueblos de la Europa occidental» (González López, 1967:19). Francisco Ayala affirms that he does belong to '98, although he also stresses that Valle's main preoccupation was always aesthetic rather than social criticism (Ayala, 1968:39). Tasende comments that many lambasted the *Sonatas* for what she calls «la ausencia de trascendencia y la falta de interés por el mundo en torno y los problemas sociales de su época» (Tasende, 2002:791-2).

Some critics have read the *Sonatas* as a perverse response to French *Symbolisme* or as an answer to French aesthetics pervading Spanish letters in the second half of the nineteenth century. While the Generation of 1898 certainly responded to literary trends coming from other parts of Europe, they also rebelled against the prevailing movements of Realism and Naturalism dominating literary production in their own country by experimenting with the novel's format. In the *Sonata de otoño* Valle-Inclán uses a fragmented, collage structure that challenged Realism's attempt to capture a totalized reality in chronological order. Noël Valis, among Valle-Inclán critics, notes that its decadence mirrors that generally present in European letters, commenting «While the perception of decay and lost opportunities was generally felt throughout Europe, in Spain the circumstances were particularly striking» (Valis, 2003:138). Robert Spires' analysis of the *Sonatas*, especially *Sonata de estío*, highlights its pervasive post-Colonial discourse, reflecting the nostalgia for Spain's glory days as its characters stand among

the ruins of the fallen empire. He further adds that the disconnect between the writer and the character points to a reading at odds with the surface text (Spires, 2001:743-4). While Valle-Inclán clearly concerned himself with questions of aesthetics and language, all of these comments point to the reaction of an entire generation of young writers to the decadence and stagnation of Spain, and by extension, of the rest of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. As Shaw aptly summarizes, «[Ganivet's spiritual] approach to the problem of Spain was uniformly followed by the other members of the Generation of 1898, every one of whom accepted that what the country was facing was above all a 'crisis of conscience'» (Shaw, 1975:8).

Although all of the writers of the *Generación de 1898* agreed that Spain faced a crisis, politically and morally, as Shaw and many others have averred, they differed on how best to present «problema de España» as they also struggled with artistic and aesthetic concerns. Some like Baroja and Azorín chose a prose style closer to that of realism; Valle-Inclán's decadently elegant prose, heavily influenced by Darío's *modernismo* lie at the other extreme. While most of the Generation of '98 writers focused specifically on their own country, they were, in fact, part of a pan-European movement. As more recent criticism has affirmed, Spain was not alone in facing a crisis of conscience at the end of the nineteenth century; it was a European crisis, perhaps deeper in Spain than in England or Germany, but widespread throughout the European continent. Cerezo Galán, in a lengthy study, argues that the «problema de España» was really a «problema de Europa» caused by a clash between the Enlightenment ideals and objective reason and those of romanticism with its emotional, irrational mindset, heightened by the industrial revolution and the rise of the bourgeoisie (Cerezo Galán, 2003:19). He avers, «la crisis cultural del fin del siglo les obligó a plantearse problemas radicales que iban más allá del problema de España» (Cerezo Galán, 2003: 18) Traditional values of an agrarian society had begun to crumble and those displaced by such cultural, moral, ethical shifts found themselves disillusioned by the promise of reason offered by the eighteenth century Enlightenment and nineteenth century scientific developments. Religion had become passé, reflected in Nietzsche's famous 1882 statements on the death of God. Cerezo Galán summarizes the conflict stating, «un agudo episodio en la secular contienda intestina entre Ilustración y romanticismo, éste a la sombra del dorado árbol de la vida, como lo llamara Goethe, [...] y la otra guardiana del árbol del conocimiento, cuyos frutos son el dominio técnico del mundo y la utilidad social» (Cerezo Galán, 2003:51). Valle-Inclán's decadent spaces and perverse characters in the *Sonata* thus become a reflection of the crumbling traditional ideals and lost values across Europe.

The result of this conflict between mindsets and values led some philosophers and writers to embrace nihilism, often expressed as egotism, moral decadence, perversion, and decline. They thus became a generation who had lost faith in positivistic reason

reflected in naturalism, but also the metaphysical stance embraced by Romanticism. (Cerezo Galán 2003: 57). The Revolution of 1868, La *Gloriosa*, brought hopes for radical changes in the bases of power, just as the year of revolution across Europe in 1848 had brought such hopes in England and Germany, only to have them truncated with the restoration of traditional institutions. In Spain the return of the monarchy in 1874 and with it the Church's continuing domination stopped incipient democratic ideals. Such dashed hopes, politically and economically, combined with the ideological and philosophical disenchantment led to the crisis of culture mentioned earlier. While widespread across Europe, Spanish writers of '98 attempted to contextualize the malaise to their particular social reality. In Valle-Inclán's case, the context for his novel, albeit idealized, was his native region of Galicia, which shaped and was in turn shaped by his own aesthetic and social concerns.

Valle-Inclán's treatment of space, of *paisaje*, differed significantly from those of earlier writers, including Emilia Pardo Bazán, also a Galician, who used the spaces of her home region as the setting for her realistic/naturalistic portraits of her contemporary society. She emphasized the pervasive poverty and sordidness of the everyday existence of the landless peasants who barely survived farming the region's rocky soil. Typical of her use of the Galician setting is the story «Las medias rojas» which chronicles the beatings sustained by a young lady, Ildara, who attempts to emigrate to the Americas. Her father, poor, disheveled and repulsive, administers the beating which leaves her disfigured and no longer eligible to emigrate. He acts out of a fear of being unable to farm his rented lands without the help of his daughter, lands that he has watered with his sweat and tears. Pardo Bazán's language describing the coarse, revolting details of their impoverished existence underscores the ugliness and injustices of the backward society that she presents in her brutally realistic portrayal of a region she knew well.

Galicia, also Valle-Inclán's home province, likewise provides the backdrop for the *Sonata de otoño* although presented very differently. This setting has received much critical attention focused on the region's beauty, rural qualities, and its people's obsession with tradition, myth, and superstition in the midst of their grinding poverty. *Sonata de otoño's* opening description of the countryside in section two points to most of these qualities: «Cuando salimos al campo empezaba la claridad del alba. Vi en lontananza unas lomas yermas y tristes, veladas por la niebla. Traspuestas aquéllas, vi otras y después otras. El sudario ceniciento de la llovizna las envolvía» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:34). The mention of the dawn and the hills veiled in the fog produces a sense of the picturesque qualities of the natural landscape. However, the adjectives «tristes» and «yermas» and the metonymy «sudario ceniciento» undercut the loveliness of the scene by pointedly referencing death, the polar opposite of life. The Marqués and his overseer stop at the home of the miller of Gundar, knocking on the door «como si aquello fuese nuestro feudo» (Valle-Inclán,

1999:35). The latter sentence points to the poverty of the lower class. The word «feudo» highlights the region's poverty and the chasm between rich and poor by suggesting that it still adheres to medieval social structures. Galicia had never modernized. In these few sentences, a complex of characteristics underscores the beauty, but also the social stagnation of the region, all elements of Spain's decadence.

The descriptions of the palaces, the chapels within these palaces of the rich, and their gardens compound the impression of a decaying space created within the Galician setting. The novel opens with a reproduction of Concha's letter to the Marqués, stating that she is dying and begging him to visit her. He has come to Galicia in autumn to hunt and is lodged in his house in Viana del Prior. As he meditates on her letter in his study, he comments that the door knockers produce sounds that seem «sepulcrales y medrosas» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:33). While visiting the convent housing Concha's sisters, he remarks that the light in the chapel seems «incierto y moribunda» (32). Both sets of adjectives mark associations with death, and also suggest fear and uncertainty. In fact, throughout the novel, the narrator uses adjectives evoking death for presenting most physical spaces.

The description of Concha's house, a significant space in Valle-Inclán's novel, also suggests a certain decadence, given its age and ties to the past. In fact, as Wellek and Warren observe «ambientes, especialmente los interiores domésticos, pueden ser vistos como expresiones metonímicas o metafóricas, del personaje. La casa de un hombre es una extensión de él mismo. Describíde y lo habréis descrito» (quoted in Gullón, 1980: 6). Just as noted above, Concha's palace and garden become a metaphor for their owner. Concha is dying; thus, her house represents a moribund environment. The narrator describes it as follows:

El Palacio de Brandeso, aunque del siglo décimo octavo, es casi todo de estilo plateresco. Un Palacio a la italiana con miradores, fuentes, y jardines, mandado edificar por el Obispo de Corinto don Pedro de Bendaña, caballero del Hábito de Santiago, Comisario de Cruzada y Confesor de la Reina Doña María Amelia de Parma [...] La historia de la noble Casa de Bendaña es la historia de la Cancillería de Valladolid (Valle-Inclán, 1999:61).

Clearly, the palace mirrors its owners' social position and the power and history of Spain's upper class, closely connected to Spain's other powerful institution—the Church—. The palace dates from the eighteenth century, but the style, Plateresque, typified architecture of Spain's Golden Age, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus, the palace seems to embody tradition, dominance and continuity. However, in the next paragraph, the narrator reveals the decay at work amidst such opulence: «Aquella mañana, cuando nosotros subíamos la derruida escalinata, las palomas remontaron el vuelo y

fueron a posarse sobre la piedra de armas [...] los viejos alalíes florecían entre las grietas del muro, y un lagarto paseaba por el balaustrab» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:61). The adjective «derruida» in combination with the mention of «grietas» characterizes a building in decay. In fact, the word «derruida» appears prominently among the writings of others of the Generation of '98, such as in works by Pío Baroja, Azorín, and Antonio Machado, to describe the spaces of Castilla, and by extension to point to the «problema de España,» an issue for all the writers of this group. The coat of arms, symbols of the nobility, now serves as a perch for pigeons, and a lizard, another animal symbolizing decay and often associated with the Devil, sits on the staircase. Even the «alalíes,» also known as «pinks» or «gillyflowers» are old and bloom, not in formal flower pots, but in the cracks of the walls. The narrator also notes that the wardrobes of the palace emit «una fragancia delicada y antigua» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:43). While the palace may still be beautiful, it constitutes a decadent space, reflective of its geographical setting and its owners, both settling into ruin.

Discovering beauty out of those elements traditionally considered unaesthetic became the credo of the movement known as «decadentismo,» connected with *modernismo* at the end of the nineteenth century. French in origin and linked to Baudelaire, Verlaine and others who founded a magazine called *Lo Décadent*, from which the movement received its name, it quickly spread to Spanish writers. Kronik says that the group never gave a precise definition; however, he adds, «En su acepción más estrecha, se trata de un simbolismo intensificado, rebuscado, que cultiva los sentidos, sacude al lector, y [...] convierte en arte los bajos mundos de lo erótico y lo satánico» (Kronik, 2002:1-2). Although he labels Alejandro Sawa as «el decadente sin par» he says that «Valle-Inclán le haría la competencia» (Kronik, 2002:2). González López contends that Valle-Inclán's writings before 1900 were dominated by *decadentismo*, and adds, «En este período predomina la nota erótica, algunas veces morbosa y demoníaca» (González López, 1967:24). While he goes on to argue that starting with *Sonata de otoño*, Valle-Inclán moves to *simbolismo*, (González López, 1967:24), certainly many elements of *decadentismo* remain, reflected in the lengthy descriptions of crumbling palaces and dying gardens that appear throughout the novel. The erotic, satanic, and morbid all associated with *decadentismo* predominate in *Sonata de otoño*. González López explains the appeal of *decadentismo* as follows: «La pose decadente, exquisita y en algunos casos morbosa, fue el arma de estos escritores para afirmar su honda discrepancia con la sensibilidad y la moral de la sociedad española, cada vez más burguesa y acomodaticia de este tiempo» (González López, 1967: 23). Thus, the presentation of decay, death, and perversion with exquisite language not only offered Valle-Inclán aesthetic innovations in his rebellion against the strictures of Realism—a type of Pre-Vanguard writing—, but also a vehicle for criticism of Spanish society at the end of the nineteenth century.

Gardens, normally considered natural spaces of great beauty, occupy a prominent place in Valle's narrative, but they too come to represent decadence in their autumnal state. The Marqués, upon arrival at Concha's palace, remarks on the «viejo jardín sin flores» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:39), certainly indicative of a space past its prime. He also notes the presence in this garden of the ancient cedars and cypresses, both traditionally associated with Spanish cemeteries, which compound the moribund ambience. He adds, that the trees «contaban la edad del Palacio» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:39), again emphasizing the age and ruin of Concha's space. The garden is dying, just like its owner. In a later scene, he characterizes the garden as follows: «El jardín y el Palacio tenían esa vejez señorial y melancólica de los lugares por donde en otro tiempo pasó la vida amable» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:58). He continues, observing the following: «los cipreses venerables parecían tener el ensueño de la vida monástica» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:59). The choice of the word «ensueño» echoes the description of fellow members of the Generation of 1898, Antonio Machado's labeling of Spain as a «país en ensueños». In fact, Machado, like Valle-Inclán, uses historical buildings to represent the decadence of his country, typified in his poem «Soria fría, Soria pura,» with its «murallas roídas» and its «casas renegridas». Even the mention of «la vida monástica» points to stillness, sterility, and death, contributing a further image of decadence to this description of the garden. It also connects the space and its owner to the Church, suggesting, by extension that this institution is also in decline. The garden's beauty, like the palace's opulence, is undercut by adjectives that stress its deteriorating condition. Such adjectives appear repeatedly to describe gardens throughout the novel. Gardens often evoke the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve walked in a perfect world; inversely, this garden through which the Marqués and Concha walk, in spite of its attractiveness, reminds them that they, like the flowers of autumn, face an imminent demise.

The religious spaces of the novel receive similar presentations, an oblique criticism of the Church and its role in Spain's backwardness. The Marqués' and Concha's footsteps evoke «las iglesias desiertas» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:62). The chapel in the Palacio de Brandeso is «húmeda, tenebrosa, resonante» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:104). Although the main altar has an exquisite altarpiece with sixteen enameled and gilded panels, it is flanked by tombs of distant ancestors, full of death and corruption. Even when Concha decorates the chapel for mass the following day, the roses she uses shed their petals and their aroma creates a cloying scent, reminding the Marqués of his past. The description of the chapel conveys an overall impression of dampness, crumbling beauty, and abandonment. Such details, connected to use of religious language in describing Concha's wasted body, which we will comment upon later, undercuts the beauty and power traditionally associated with the Church. It has become another decadent space, connected here with the palaces and garden of the nobility, all spaces of the nobility

gone «to seed».

The temporal spaces of the novel, the «cronotope» as Bakhtin calls it (Bakhtin, 1994:84), also mark a world in decline. Bakhtin explains that each moment of the work offers a unique, unrepeatable snapshot of a place and time (Bakhtin, 1994:84). This time-space concept applies well to Valle-Inclán's work. The novel's very title immediately evokes that season of the year when everything reaches maturity and begins to fade. Although autumn has beautifully colored leaves and occasionally, clear, sunny days, it presages the arrival of winter when everything dies. The temporal space of *Sonata de otoño* conveys these same emotions. Repeatedly, the narrator remarks on the fact that autumn has arrived and that winter will soon come. In a particularly revealing sentence, emblematic of seasonal references through the work, the Marqués comments, «Aquella tarde el sol de Otoño penetraba hasta el centro como la fatigada lanza de un héroe antiguo» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:81). On the most literal narrative level, the natural world is dying, the use of a capital letter for «otoño» stressing its importance. On a metaphorical level, with the simile of the sun's rays like a «fatigada lanza» held by a «héroe antiguo,» the narrator implies that the nobility, Spain's heroes of the past, are likewise tired and worn.

Sonata de otoño revolves around the «memorias amables del Marqués de Bradomín» who recounts the renewal of his love affair with his cousin Concha in her final days. Because it consists of memories, the novel also occupies the temporal space of the past. The constant look backwards, like the novel's settings, functions to critique the «problema de España». As Bakhtin observes, «Characteristically, it is not the private life that is subjected to and interpreted in light of social and political events, but rather the other way around – social and political events gain meaning in the novel only thanks to their connection with private life» (Bakhtin 1994:109). Obviously, the memoir format allows a very aged Marqués to recount his personal history, but to select only those «amables memorias» that then acquire political and social significance. Zamora Vicente comments as follows, «Para el modernismo, uno de los mejores y más eficaces remedios contra el vulgarismo realista es la presentación de personajes y ambientes refinados» (Zamora Vicente, 1966:32). He adds, «La necesidad de insistir sobre la prosapia conduce a la machaconería erudita, entre mitos heráldicos y privilegios históricos» (Zamora Vicente, 1966:35-6). Characters constantly relive the past. For example, when describing a conversation that Isabel and Concha have, the Marqués comments «Al verse después de tanto tiempo, las dos volvían los ojos al pasado y recordaban cosas lejanas» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:90). Turning eyes to the past, wallowing in nostalgia for bygone days, summarizes the principal activity of the upper-class, since their current existence encapsulates only decline and ruin.

Genealogical discourses, focusing on distinguished ancestors, appear in almost every

chapter. For example, their uncle, Don Juan Manuel Montenegro explains: «Españoles y tudescos, sobrina. Los Montenegros de Galicia descendemos de una emperatriz alemana [...] Pero entre todos los títulos de su casa: Marquesado de Bradomín, Marquesado de San Miguel, Condado de Barbazón y Señorío de Padín, el más antiguo y el más esclarecido es el Señorío» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:79). Because of looking backwards so frequently, these aristocrats have no vision for the future, obsessed by what Xavier calls «el culto de los recuerdos» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:60). History has become their religion, worshipped, adored and recounted endlessly, leaving no time for looking forward to contemplate Spain's future. They have become a deformation of the strong nobility that dominated Spain's past. Unlike the medieval knights that fought Moors for control of the Iberian Peninsula or the Renaissance nobility who helped rule an empire, these aristocrats simply sit in their crumbling palaces reminiscing.

If on the most literal level, the novel occupies the temporal space of autumn, a season in decadence, the Marqués's memories not only focus on the past, they attempt to escape time all together, moving to a mythic, literary space, away from the ravages of time. The Marqués describes himself as a Don Juan, Spain's famed seducer. However, he is «feo, católico y sentimental,» the apotheosis of Tirso's or Zorrilla's mythic character. The degeneration of the mythic character is inscribed into the body of the Marqués de Bradomín, who is aged rather than young and seductive, sentimental rather than passionate, and cynical rather than defiant. Xavier is the inverse of everything that characterized Tirso's or Zorrilla's Don Juan. His physical and moral decadence is inscribed on the space of the body, an appropriate body for a dying, decaying environment. At certain points, such as after he returns Concha's lifeless body to her room, he recognizes that his desire to kiss her once more is perverse, but seems to delight in actions that flout God's laws and social conventions. His Catholicism only finds expression in his use of religious terminology to describe the dying Concha. He lives out none of the Church's core values. Valle-Inclán himself explains his use of the Don Juan myth as follows: «intenté tratar un tema eterno [...] Don Juan es un tema eterno y nacional; pero Don Juan no es esencialmente conquistador de mujeres; se caracteriza también por la impiedad y por el desacato a las leyes y a los hombres» (quoted in Anderson-Imbert, 1968:209). Thus, Valle-Inclán returns to a national myth that supposedly embodies national values, but uses it ironically, inverting all of its salient features. He reduces the figure to a parody of the Romantic hero. López de Abiada labels Valle-Inclán's presentation of don Juan as follows: «un proceso sistemático de desmantelamiento y destrucción» (López de Abiada, 2002:19). Like don Juans before him, the Marqués receives epithets associated with evil and the Satanic, such as «perversa» «cruel», and «hereje» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:108-9). Shaw observes that Valle's presentation reflects «modern man living with hedonism and selfish without guiding ideals» (Shaw,

1975:88). The Marqués' memories attempt to escape time, ironically highlighting its destructive force on individuals and their surroundings, as well as a national myth in decadence. Furthermore, he embodies a religion that offers him no hope, giving adherents no expectations of eternal life or heaven; his Catholicism has become empty, dead ritual.

Just as the Marqués de Bradomín represents a decadent Don Juan, the female protagonist of *Sonata de otoño*, also represents decay. Concha, whom he seduces, is not a lovely young woman, like Doña Elvira or Doña Inés, but rather his own cousin who is probably suffering from tuberculosis and whom he describes repeatedly as «demacrada y tan pálida» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:74). While Doña Elvira or Doña Inés represents freshness, true love, and innocence (even though both die from a broken heart caused by Don Juan), Concha is a married woman with two young daughters, who has learned the ways of love (or perhaps lust) from a blood relative. Her body is in such a state of decay that she literally dies while making love with the Marqués in the novel's most dramatic, shocking, and macabre scene. She clearly represents moral decay inscribed in the space of her own body. The Marqués says of her, in the opening pages, «Era muy piadosa la pobre Concha, y sufría porque nuestros amores se le figuraban un pecado mortal» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:32). She is right in that her relationship with this aging Don Juan is adulterous, violating one of the Ten Commandments. She states flatly «¡Temo tanto ofender a Dios!» (Valle-Inclán, 1999:108). Her religion gives her no hope, but rather an overwhelming sense of guilt. Yet, neither pure nor innocent nor willing to change her behavior that provokes so much guilt, she continues her adulterous affair with the Marqués literally until her death (Valle-Inclán, 1999:108). The inversion of the mythic characters' traits subverts their narrative and transforms them into empty caricatures or parodies of the hero and heroine, devoid of traditional values. While they may try to occupy the timeless space of myth, they ironically represent the degradation or complete dismantling of Spain's most identifiable mythical figures.

Sonata de otoño's strange, perverse mélange or blending of totally incongruous themes including those of love or sex, religion, and death all in a decadent autumnal world further underscores the «problema de España». Litvak commenting on decadent eroticism in late nineteenth century literature (Litvak, 1979:85), typified in Baudelaire's, «Les fleurs du mal,» remarks that Valle-Inclán's *Sonata de otoño* offers a catalog of perversions including extraordinary ambiances, necrophilia, Satanism, fetishism, horror and the grotesque (Litvak, 1979:89-125). Numerous passages in *Sonata de otoño* exemplify this pastiche of perversions. However, one example will suffice.

Yo sentí toda la noche a mi lado aquel pobre cuerpo donde la fiebre ardía, como una luz sepulcral [...] los ojos en las cuencas descarnadas y violáceas, le daban la apariencia

espiritual de una santa muy bella consumida por la penitencia y el ayuno. El cuello florecía de los hombros como un lirio enfermo, los senos eran dos rosas blancas aromando un altar [...] (Valle-Inclán, 1999:52).

The mention of fever and the adjective «sepulcral» together with the «cuencas descarnadas» immediately evokes skulls and therefore, death. The comparison of Concha's neck to a «lirio enfermo» and her breasts to «dos rosas blancas» introduces the erotic or sexual combined with nature, also seen in her gardens. It simultaneously applies the traditional metaphors of feminine beauty to a woman who will soon die inverting Garcilaso's famous *carpe diem* imagery in the sonnet «En tanto que de rosa y de azucena». The religious vocabulary «apariencia espiritual,» «santa» «penitencia» and «ayuno» jars against the language of love and death. Perhaps, the culmination of the perverse mixture of religion and sex is the comparison of Concha's breasts to roses, which are then linked to those that perfume an altar. In the next chapter, Concha decorates the altar of her family chapel with roses, and the Marqués comments on their perfuming the church altar. Together, these three dissonant idioms merge into the language of necrophilia, Satanism, and eroticism that surely made Valle-Inclán's readers who held any traditional Christian values (and perhaps even those who did not) cross themselves against such perverseness and total depravity. The presentation holds a certain shock value. This Don Juan, unlike the Romantic hero who rescues damsels in distress, finds exciting the wasted body of a woman literally dying in his arms, a perverted version of the mythical figure.

Sonata de otoño's physical and temporal spaces, combined with the corporal and moral spaces of his protagonists all point to a decay destroying the society portrayed. While Valle-Inclán's concerns were certainly aesthetic, his attempt to recreate the decadent beauty of his native Galicia reveals a reality, although not in a traditionally realistic fashion, that something was indeed «rotten at the core». If the aristocratic leaders of the country lived only in the past, completely blocking from their view any signs of modernity, how could the country possibly progress? If the nobility only focused on themselves and their pleasures, indulging their hedonistic desires and perversions, how could they improve their nation? Ayala contends that Valle does not adhere to the «tragedy of Spain» and that the focus of his grotesque presentation resulted from «direct experience of the Spanish condition» (Ayala, 1968:38). He concludes «Valle-Inclán's purpose was not to diagnose the 'Spanish problem' but to recreate it as a deformed anomaly in the context of the modern world» (Ayala, 1968:38). Valle-Inclán may not have intended such a diagnosis. If his decadent world portrayed in *Sonata de otoño* was indeed based on «direct experience,» then that representation in itself constitutes a national tragedy. The «memorias amables» of his egotistical, demonic Don Juan sexually excited by a dying woman recreate the «Spanish problem» as an atemporal, «deformed

anomaly» distanced from the modern bourgeoisie, urban present. The aristocracy ultimately constitutes an anachronism, living in luxurious indolence, waited on by servants who seem more like feudal serfs, and contributing nothing to the progress or economic well-being of the nation which was moving into the industrialized modern world dominated by the bourgeoisie. The exquisite *modernista* prose style underscore the chilling dichotomy between the text's verbal beauty and the perverse, decaying spaces the beautiful words construct. Such dissonance not only shaped a fascinating narrative, but simultaneously highlighted the «problema de España» and, more inclusively, the decadence of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century in a way that no other writer of Valle-Inclán's generation achieved.

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