

## BOOKS ABROAD

Edited by  
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## A Spanish Bard of Love and Cruelty

Ramon del Valle-  
InclánTIRANO BANDERAS.  
Novela por Don Ramón del Valle-  
Inclán.  
Opera Omnia. Volume XVI.  
Madrid: Mundo Latino.

IN THE "Völundarkvitha," one of the oldest songs of the Edda, is related one of the most gruesomely terrible stories in legendary literature—the story of the greatest of the elves, Völundr, or Wayland the Smith, as he is known in the folk-lore of Westphalia and Southern England. Cruelly maimed and deprived of liberty by the cupidity of King Nithuth, Völundr lived apart in his island cave, fashioning of his master's gold and jewels things more beautiful than ever the world had known before, until at length the moment of his revenge was at hand. Then, before he flew away on the wings that he had made for his escape, he employed his most cunning workmanship upon three fatal gifts. To his master, he gave silver armlets entwined with the golden hair of Nithuth's murdered sons; to the Queen, he gave a ring set with their eyes; and to the fair Bothvild, Nithuth's daughter, who was to bear the famed craftsman the shame of her father's hated house, he gave a brooch wrought of the teeth of her dead brothers.

The relentless ferocity inherent in this tale of the offended smith who fashioned gems beautiful and cruel while black wrath glowed in his heart like the fire of his incessant forge, is curiously suggested in the literary activity of Ramón María del Valle-Inclán, to whose native Galicia the German conquerors of a remote age must have brought the legend of the sanguinary smith of Saevaraeth. In all of Europe it would be difficult to discover another man who can create such flippid and ravishing beauty with words as this ambiguous hidalgo with his empty sleeve, his threadbare cloak and his air of decayed romanticism. And it would be difficult anywhere to find at the heart of so much beauty, so much cruelty, moral atrophy so complete, and such a decadence of every humane sentiment.

The case of Ramón del Valle-Inclán is somewhat baffling. A Gallegan, by the unique features of his racial inheritance, he is somewhat differentiated, on the sides of lyricism and intuition, from our habitual conception of the Spanish (that is, the Castilian) traditional literary character. Born in 1869, near Pontevedra, he made his debut in literature at the age of twenty-six with a volume of six short stories, entitled "Femeninas." Mr. Ernest Boyd makes some interesting observations on the peregrinations of the germs of these first stories through the complicated mazes of Valle-Inclán's subsequent bibliography, and quotes a Spanish critic's remark that "so frequently have these first stories been reworked and elaborated that one ordinary book of three hundred pages would contain all that is original in his writings, apart from some plays and his three novels dealing with the Carlist wars."

In the same excellent essay, Mr. Boyd quotes an autobiographical note by Valle-Inclán which will immediate-

DON RAMON DEL  
VALLE-INCLANFARSA Y LI-  
CENCIA DE LA  
REINA CASTIZA

From the jacket design of "Farsa y Licencia de la Reina Castiza"

ly explain the coyness of the Spaniard's commentators, in the absence of a more dependable authority than his own, in enlarging upon the particulars of a career of which we know almost nothing that can be taken without sodium chloride, but which we feel must have been, at least in the emotional sense, singularly interesting and unusual.

With the exaggerated hauteur which is at once a part of his pose and a part of his personality, Valle-Inclán has veiled the details of his private life in an obscurity which prevents the critics from reading intimate confessions in the episodes of his books. All that we can say of him with certainty is that he is a consummate poseur and that he is one of the greatest living stylists. We have Mr. Boyd's word for it that his first book, "Femeninas," apart from Valle-Inclán's own later drafts upon it for plot material, is devoid of interest. But, once in Madrid, the young author lost no time in attaching himself to the most advanced groups of the young rebels, who were then just coming to the fore, and learning from them the passion of art, and, learning meanwhile to savor the best productions of the writers of France and Italy, he found himself presently in the possession of a style.

If "style" were to be defined broadly and the works of the author judged with corresponding narrowness, it might justly be said that Valle-Inclán has hardly accomplished more than the perfection of his particular style. We have observed the constant repetitions of his plots, and his plagiarisms are so obvious that they hardly need to be mentioned. Barbey d'Aurevilly and Gabriele d'Annunzio, Maeterlinck, Canova, Eça de Queiroz and Pérez Galdós are all his literary creditors, and so many more that to enumerate them would be as tiresome as it would be futile. For, like Anatole France, whom he resembles in many ways, and like

"those ineffable poets, Homer," Valle-Inclán commits his plagiarisms openly and unabashed. His is the type of adaptive talent which requires a stimulus to creation outside of itself, and what he finds that he can utilize he takes by the divine right of use, without embarrassment and without attempting to dissemble what only pedants would consider as his shame. To observe how exquisitely he has adorned what he has borrowed, one has only to compare his "Sonata de Otoño" with its source, the story "Le Rideau Craquelé" in Barbey d'Aurevilly's "Les Diaboliques."

The productions of Valle-Inclán's first creative phase—the phase of "El Marqués de Bradomín"—will probably remain the most attractive to non-Spanish readers, although undoubtedly his most substantial work is that contained in his trilogy of romances of the Carlist wars, "Los Cruzados de la Causa," "El Resplandor de la Hoguera" and "Gerifaltes de Antaño," and in the quasi-picaresque novels with which he has occupied himself within the last decade. His verse, in the volumes "Aromas de Leyenda," "El Pasajero" and "Voces de Gesta," have a distinctive appeal in their rich Galician flavor, their somber delicacy, the exquisite sensibility of their expression and their direct communications by the senses of sight, smell and hearing, a legacy from the French Symbolists which Valle-Inclán has finely assimilated into his style and which he employs to extraordinary advantage in his prose. In his lyrical dramas, especially "La Marquesa Rosalinda" and "Cuento de Abril," are blended the best qualities of his picaresque style with that of his verse.

It would be difficult to term Ramón María del Valle-Inclán a great novelist or a great poet. He is neither the one nor the other. He has made the figure of Xavier de Bradomín, "ugly, Catholic and sentimental," the center

of a series of ingenious episodes set in luscious prose; in "Aguila de Blasón" and "Romance de Lobos" he has created within the dark spirits of Don Juan Manuel Montenegro and his bestial sons a vital drama which will last as long as any of his work; and in his novels of Galicia he has preserved a medley of characters and episodes which the reader will never be able to forget. Yet, in reading his novels, one does not feel the flux of creative vigor which fills with life and substance the little world within the covers of the book. Nor, in reading his poetry, although it is exquisite, does one feel that Valle-Inclán is more than a gifted amateur or verser.

Somewhere in the creative faculty of Ramón María del Valle-Inclán there is concealed a flaw which prevents him from achieving even the debatable greatness of his French similar, Anatole France. For France was capable of moral indignation, of humane impulses, of the precious quality of pity. Therefore, beyond the thinness and the frequent meretriciousness of his work there are moments when it is filled with life, when it even becomes noble. With Valle-Inclán there are no such moments, for he is limited by a singular incapacity for any moral feeling, and this places the seal of sterility upon the exquisite vessel of his art.

This is the limitation of Valle-Inclán as a creator. It is not that the charges of plagiarism so frequently brought against him have sometimes been sustained in fact. It is not, as Cejador says, that his art is marred by a too obvious preciosity. It is not because he is a swashbuckler, a poseur and a hypocrite. It is not because, although accounted among the leaders of the modernist movement, he is a lone minstrel who has had no actual sires and can have no inheritors. It is because he is inhuman, because there is a senseless and wanton quality in his perpetual cruelty that has no human answer, because he writes as if in an infernal void, with black hate, not in his heart, which might serve as a creative force of the greatest value, but with the door of his heart closed and with black hate in his brain. Great artist as he is, he cannot create magnificently, because he cannot feel, because he cannot experience through any medium except his meticulously wrought style and his too subtle, sarcastic intellect.

This is the quality which chiefly offends in Valle-Inclán's most recent novel, "Tirano Banderas." The story, which is written in the best flavor of Valle-Inclán's romances of the Carlist wars, is a fantasy on a revolution in a mythical republic, which will be immediately recognized as Mexico. The book contains, besides the perfect writing which the reader can always depend on having from Valle-Inclán, some excellent characterizations and many striking episodes. The novel is apparently intended as a satire, but, for the reason which we have mentioned above, the satire does not quite come through. The brutality, the violence and the violence of the revolutionists and their powerful opposers, all of which Valle-Inclán describes in minute detail and with an all too obvious gusto, are so revolting that, as observed in the setting of the author's exquisite prose and in the gorgeous landscape which he has painted in such vibrant colors, the book appears as the fatal gems of the smith Völundr must have appeared to their unlucky possessors.