

## VALLE INCLAN'S RECENT MANNER.

By Arthur L. Owen.

RAMON MARIA DEL VALLE INCLAN. *Luces de Bohemia*. Renacimiento. Madrid. 1924; *Los Cuernos de Don Friolera*. Idem. Idem. 1925; *Tirano Banderas*. Rivadeneira. Idem. 1926.

The work of the last three years indicates that Valle Inclán is feeling the pull of liberal ideas to a degree that would have seemed incredible enough ten years ago. The mysticism of "Flor de Santidad", the chiseled beauty of the "Sonatas", the power and tragic pathos of the "Comedias Bárbaras", the state'y detachment of the "Novelas de la Guerra Carlista", the graceful fantasy of "La Cabeza del Dragón", the raw brutality of "Divinas Palabras", the delightfully cynical irony of "La Reina Castiza",—of these and other valid qualities was built the solid reputation of Valle Inclán, the impressive figure that one knew before 1924. His gallery of full-length portraits was small but very choice. At least two of the figures are certain to live—Don Juan Manuel Montenegro and the more celebrated but somewhat meretricious Marquis of Bradomín. Valle Inclán's singular ability to catch and reproduce the spirit of the Middle Ages without recourse to its stage properties, to project into modern times a living embodiment of feudal lord and vassal by a psychological analysis of the mental and emotional reactions of Don Juan Manuel, was, next to the extraordinary beauty of his prose, his most notable achievement. He remained always an artist pure and simple, in the sense in which our generation understands the term, free of preoccupation with propaganda or "moral lessons". His studies

of the more or less wicked poor, e. g. in "Divinas Palabras", did not contain either censure or suggestions for the amelioration of their condition, which he evidently considered divinely ordered. His analyses of psychopathological types, e. g. in "Tula Varona", were done without the semi-technical jargon which clutters up the pages of our modern psychological novelists. He wrote always as an aristocrat, contemplating with perfect detachment the struggles and tragedies of an inferior race, for whom he was not without the sympathy which is implicit in perfect justice of treatment, but in whose lives he had no other immediate personal concern than that of the painter in his models.

With "Luces de Bohemia" one notices a subtle change of attitude. Max Estrella, a radical and a man of genius, who by his talents is the first poet of Spain, has lost his sight and fallen into great poverty. Dissipated, sick and destitute, he is ignored by critics, press and the respectable public, by reason of his rebellion against conventional authority, although he is still adored by the little group of wretched bohemians among whom he lives. We see him in the last day or two of his life, drunk, arrested and barbarously beaten in jail, finally released to die. The play is a mordant satire directed against a smug, bourgeois society and its venal government, as well as against those feigned liberals who prate of humanitarianism but are concerned only with their own advantage. The tone is cynical and discouraged, both with Spain and with humanity. The salient difference between this and the earlier works lies in the fact that the author is here genuinely concerned with the matter for its own sake. It is true that he has not a remedy to propose, but it is clearly on his mind and conscience that genius is of less consequence in Spain than conventional morality.

"Los Cuernos de Don Friolera" is more trivial in subject although the manner is the same. A middle-aged lieutenant (risen from the ranks) is told that his wife is deceiving him. He sincerely wishes that he did not know it. According to the absurd code of the army, an officer must avenge his lost "honor" by slaying the guilty pair, and Don Friolera has no stomach for the business. He was very comfortable as he was; why couldn't they have left him alone? He argues the matter with himself so long that his brother officers decide to force him either to comply with the code or to resign his commission. Finally, forced to act, he bungles the matter so badly that he kills his daughter instead of the wife. The effect is of satire bordering upon farce, and

directed against the army or, more properly, against its officers. The "court martial" of poor Friolera reminds one vaguely of Joyce's "Ivy Day in the Committee Room". There is the same inane conversation of a group of dull-witted men, animated by stupid prejudices. While there is enough coarse language to lend realism to the speech of the class represented, Valle Inclán falls measurably behind Joyce in this respect.

Both the foregoing are in dramatic form and are called by the author "Esperpentos", which is, so far as I know, a new term, and which might perhaps be translated "Grotesques".

"Tirano Banderas", the last of Valle Inclán's books to come into my hands, is a full length novel, longer, in fact, than any that has preceded it. It too is a satire, dealing with a successful revolution in an imaginary republic on the west coast of South America, which the author calls Santa Fe de Tierra Firme. The revolution seeks to redeem the Indian from peonage. The President, Santos Banderas, a full-blooded Indian himself, is a caricature of the South American despot. He is a caricature to the extent that the salient characteristics of the figure are exaggerated, but the whole stems solidly from a sort of transcendental reality. Banderas is a psychopath, but the author reveals the fact, not through the method of modern Freudian novelists, who disclose their subjects' mental states by reporting at tiresome length their imaginary and tedious reflections, but rather by showing us the behavior patterns of a psychopath. Sinister, coldly cruel, cynical, Banderas knows that revolutionary leaders can be bribed more easily than shot, but when silver is hard to come at he shoots them as indifferently as he bribes, playing a silly game while the firing squads execute revolutionaries close at hand, in no way disturbed by the reports of the volleys. He has the politician's jargon at his tongue's end, and prates hypocritically of brotherhood and justice in the same breath in which he orders a comrade's death. His only normal human trait is his love for his maniac daughter, whom at the last he kills lest she fall into the hands of the revolutionists.

All the characters are three-dimensional, even the minor ones. Satire does not spare the mother country. Spain sends her dregs to America. The Spanish Colony gives money to suppress revolutions, interested in the politics of the republic only to the extent of wishing to keep in power the party which is most generous in concessions and can best keep that order which will enable them to continue their exploitation of the country. The Spanish

minister is a homosexual and a drug addict, pale, fat and loathsome, affected even in his intellectual tastes, without an honest or a decent thought. Don Celestino Galindo, unofficial representative of the Spanish Colony, is a disgusting sycophant. The unspeakable pawnbroker, Pereda, is also a Spaniard. Very interesting psychologically is the weakling Nachito, the tyrant's minion. Fully conscious of the degradation of his state and hating it and his master with a bitter hatred, he is yet desolated when he falls from such poor favor as he had. The Yankee adventurer is not lacking from the picture. "If the whites remain masters it is due to the ships and guns of the United States", he remarks cynically, and the Liberals shout "Muera el Tío Sam". The capitalistic press treats the Liberals with unjust ridicule, misreports their meetings and encourages the paid thugs of the tyrant who disperse them with the aid of the gendarmes. The Diplomatic Corps is a solemn band of crooks and idiots, who in the face of the crisis gravely draw up a note advising the closing of the saloons and the strengthening of the legation guards. The peons are dull and uncomprehending. They fight obediently at the orders of the rancheros whose virtual slaves they are. Only the revolutionary leader, Roque Cepeda, is possessed of idealistic motives. A Spaniard himself and a man of wealth, he espouses the cause of the Indians from a pure sense of abstract justice.

Valle Inclán has not lost his feeling for atmosphere. That of Tirano Banderas is one of cold and indifferent cruelty. The dominant note is struck in the Prologue, with the scene of the soldier who is buried in the earth to the waist and flogged. He is still there when the novel ends.

The style of these three books is more terse and nervous than of the Sonatas. The effects are attained with greater economy. Some times a single word suffices, e. g. "Cacareó Don Celestino". The characteristic grouped adjectives appear infrequently. Often in rapid description the verbs are omitted from half a dozen consecutive sentences. In "Tirano Banderas" americanisms abound to an extent which makes the novel difficult reading for the academically trained foreigner.

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