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Tirano Banderas: A Case of Early Postmodernism

Jeffrey Oxford / University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

Tirano Banderas (1926) is often cited as the Spanish author Valle-Inclán's masterpiece; as well, the novel is pointed out as the prototypical esperpento--the caricaturesque literary form for which the author achieved fame. That Tirano Banderas has roots in 19th-century naturalism is undisputed, and no one denies the influence that the esperpento has on the post-Civil War tremendista literature of Camilo José Cela, Carmen Laforet, and others. Interestingly, especially in light of the common critical attention to aesthetics, language and character creation, and irony in the work, is the lack of acknowledgement and/or study of the parallels between Tirano Banderas and later, postmodernist literature. This latter movement's emphasis on language--in particular the parody--as well as nonsensical speech, and the lack of order in life, among other techniques and tropes, has been adequately noted. But no study currently exists detailing the importance of Valle-Inclán or his work

to the postmodernists. In this essay, I will focus on three aspects of Tirano Banderas that indicate nascent characteristics of what would later become known as postmodernism: breakdown of identity, fragmentation of time, and an emphasis on language manipulation. It is my contention, then, that Tirano Banderas is, in fact, an early example of Spanish postmodernism.

Breakdown of identity

The establishment of one's identity has traditionally been perceived as fundamental to understanding one's existence, to the reason for being; postmodernism, however, esteems individual identity to be of little importance, preferring instead to offer "a sense of breakdown of national, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural identities" (Irvine). There is, then, a "'global village' phenomena [or a] globalization of cultures, races, images, capital, products" (Irvine). Tirano Banderas reflects such through its construction of itself as a type of global community. In the two-day time frame of the novel's plot, the reader learns that gachupines, "con el rudo acento del Ebro" (68), control the country and that people of other countries are more important to the nation's well-being than the natives themselves. Europe has the means by which "esos hombres pueden hacer estudios que aquí nos orienten" (15); a Polish scientist introduces biomagnetism and works as the hypnotizer that succeeds in having Lupita read Banderas's mind, and a North American is the one, in spite of the general hatred of Yankees expressed by the Indians, who supplies the financial means to exploit the country's resources. But this breakdown of a homogenous identity is even more notable when one considers that the transplants never are able to assimilate themselves totally into either the native indigenous or the Hispanic culture and language. Mr. Contum, the "yanqui," professes to understand the political speeches, but his own words render that suspect: "Estar mucho interesante oír los discursos. Así

mañana estar bien enterado mí. Nadie lo contar mí. Oírlo de las orejas” (66). The peasant girl’s grandmother breaks out in Italian: “¿Perché questa follia? Se il Filomeno trova fortuna nella rivoluzione potrà diventar un Garibaldi. ¡Non mi spaventar i bambini!” (159), and the written text includes the inverted Spanish punctuation marks at the beginning of both the question and exclamation (typographical marks not present in Italian), further confusing the distinction between the two languages and the character’s identity. And even the indigenous Banderas himself enters the room exclaiming in Latin, again with the troublesome introductory exclamation point, “¡Salutem plurimam!” (187).

But it’s not just the confusion/utilization of a variety of languages by the narrative’s characters that leads to a sense of hybridity, globalization, and lack of any recognizable identity; the critic Valencia comments on the use of language by Valle-Inclán in the novel by noting that “Figuraban en él raros términos castellanos entreverados de americanismos, por lo común remotos, propios del habla mejicana, cubana, peruana, argentina, chilena, en una síntesis genial que atendería artísticamente mucho más a su brillo y color expresivo que a su propiedad purista estricta” (Valle-Inclán 22). And Lima notes that “Despite Valle-Inclán’s concentrated effort to amalgamate many strains of culture, history, and character, individual reviewers [...] extracted from the synthetic novel the circumstances depicting their own region” (151). Language, then, becomes an important narrative element that leads to the reading of the novel as an emerging postmodern work.

In addition to the breakdown of identity as demonstrated through language, Tirano Banderas also contains what Irvine refers to as the postmodern “cyborgian mixing of organic and inorganic,

human and machine and electronic.” When the Mayor del Valle speaks with Banderas, “la voz tenía una modulación maquinal” (185), and the soldiers receive their orders to capture Coronel Domiciano “con ritmo de autómatas alemanes” (185). Meanwhile, Kirschner, while not specifically mentioning the issue of identity, also notes the “automatismo” and “teatralería” of the narrative (632). El Cabo de Vara, as well, demonstrates a complex hybridization of identities, national as well as (in)organic in that “Era mulato, muy escueto, con automatismo de fantoche: Se cubría con un chafado quepis francés, llevaba pantalones colorados de uniforme, y guayabera rabona muy sudada” (162).

Multiple hybridization of cultures, however, is also reflected through the overall narrative structure and the unresolved question of whether Tirano Banderas is really a novel or a drama. The author himself is quoted by Madrid as calling it a “novela” (Boudreau 695), but perhaps such should be taken lightly since Valle-Inclán, upon beginning to receive the accolades from Tirano Banderas’s success, also then repudiated all his previous writings. And while it is true that the work lacks theatrical markings such as scene or act number, character cues indicating each change of speaker, or stage directions, Valencia does note that the narrative is “Desarrollada en cuadros cinematográficos” (23). Guillón goes even further in explaining the multiple hybridities of the structure when he notes that “en cuanto a la forma, es teatral y, más específicamente, guiñolesca y circense, con interpolaciones de la comedia de figurón. Guiñol y circo son las metáforas determinantes del ser y el actuar de los personajes: autómatas o animalescos, encuentran en esos recintos el escenario adecuado” (730).

Interestingly, and not as superficial as it may at first appear, the mixing of genres which leads the reader to question whether the work is really a novel or a drama further arises within the narrative itself. Espronceda’s “Canción del pirata” appears, being intoned by “el negro catedrático” with the alveolar liquid replacing the palatal liquid: “Navega, velelo mío, / sin temol, / que ni enemigo navío, / ni tolmenta, ni bonanza, / a tolcel tu lumbo alcanza, / ni a sujetal tu valol” (37). The ballad foreshadows Pedernales’s downfall, immediately prior to Lupita’s mind-reading (90, 92, 93), when Banderas, standing in his window, is surveying his kingdom (49). And Banderas himself affirms that “¡Estamos en un folletín de Alejandro Dumas! ¿Se recuerdan ustedes la novela? Un folletín muy

interesante. ¡Lo estamos viviendo!” (207). In light of this hybridization of narrative structure, hardly can the work be considered merely another examination of, and focus on, language “a la Generación de 98.” Even Unamuno’s nivola remained at the core faithful to the literary structures demanded of a novel; it is, among the Generation of 98--if not prewar--writers only Valle-Inclán who so radically breaks from tradition, constructs his own literary archetypes, and foreshadows what Irvine calls postmodernism’s “promiscuous genres [and] recombinant culture.”

Finally, the labeling of the work’s divisions, as well, demonstrates a hybridization--or more accurately, a confusion of nomenclature. The narrative is divided into seven parts, with an additional “Prólogo” and “Epílogo”, and each of these, in turn, is further segmented into “Libros” and numbered divisions, these later not beginning on a new folio as would be the case with traditional chapters. Whether or not this is reflective of the Bible or some other piece of literature in which the overall tome is divided into “books” is not made clear, but the fact remains that traditionally novels have been divided into parts and chapters while drama contains acts and scenes, norms that Tirano Banderas violates. Thus, the reader remains at a loss of a full understanding, and the critic can not satisfactorily explain the seemingly aberrant divisions without resorting to what Hassan refers to as the postmodern structural aspects of “ambiguity,” “pluralism,” “decenterment,” and “disjunction” (153).

Fragmentation of Time

In addition to the hybridization of narrative structures, globalization, and the mixing of the organic and inorganic, Irvine notes that literary postmodernism demonstrates a marked “fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents.” In fact, Klages affirms that “Postmodernism [...] doesn’t lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that.” Clearly, fragmentation and incoherence of time are prevalent throughout Tirano Banderas. The plot occurs over a time frame of a mere two days, with the final paragraph of the epilogue--where Banderas’s “cabeza, befada por sentencia, estuvo tres días puesta sobre un cadalso con hopas amarillas” (240)--encompassing more clock time than the novel itself.

Perhaps it should not be surprising then that the novel offers various manners in which it can be read. One way is the traditional cover-to-cover, beginning with page one and continuing to the conclusion. This, however, fails to take into account the not-always chronological arrangement of the chapters and the complex fragmentation of simultaneity such as, for example, the fact that the events of the “Prólogo” actually occur immediately prior to the events of Part VII, book three, section five (only thirteen paragraphs prior to the “Epílogo”). In a general sense, Tirano Banderas is the story of Coronel Gándara’s fall from grace and taking up of arms beside those opposing the dictator. Another, somewhat similar, reading would be Nacho’s unplanned collusion with Gándara and attempts to save himself. Yet another reading would focus on Filomeno, and a fourth would render Zacarías as the main character. Contemporaneous to all of these, however, would be the Foreign Ministers’s meeting, resulting in the letter signed by twenty-seven nations. However, it should be remembered that any, or all, of these readings are legitimate and can be read independently of each other; that is, the novel/drama deconstructs itself into multiple

interpretations, points of departure, and foci. As can be seen, then, the work is a complicated portrayal of some five simultaneous story lines much closer to the postmodern schizophrenia (Hassan 152) than the neoclassical unities of time, place and plot.

Language manipulation

Postmodernism quite frequently focuses on an author's use of language in its analyses; in fact, it often appears that only elements of speech and language are of value in postmodernist criticism. Such comes as no surprise when one considers the importance that postmodernists place on deconstruction, phenomenology, and semiotics. Lyotard, for instance, affirms that "human discourses occur in any number of discrete and incommensurable realms, none of which is privileged to pass judgment on the success or value of any of the others," and Klages states that postmodernism "emphasiz[es] pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony and playfulness." In Tirano Banderas, while these are of varying importance, an examination of playfulness and parody reveals an element of postmodern humor and carnivalesque hyperbole.

Banderas himself is an ironic caricature of not just the Spanish dictator Primo de Rivera, but "el retrato de [...] todos los 'hombres fuertes'" (Valencia 27). He "parece una calavera con antiparras negras y corbatín de clérigo" (Valle-Inclán 40) and has "la costumbre de rumiar la coca, por donde en las comisuras de los labios tenía siempre una salivilla de verde veneno" (40). Certainly, an interpretation of "veneno" as either "venom" or "poison" reflects the dangerous nature of the dictator and his disregard of any sanctity of life, but it is a juxtapositioning of the "verde veneno"

and the juego de la rana that reveals the particularly postmodern subversive nature of the narrative. The juego de la rana seems to be what gives him most pleasure: “vamos a divertir honestamente este rabo de tarde, en el jueguito de la rana” (56). And while the intricacies of the game are never explained in the text, it apparently is some dubious parody of the bolos-type competition (La rana or El juego de sapo) with the victorious shout of “¡rana!” being converted into a submissive frog croak (191-2) by Banderas’s playmate. But when Banderas enters the prison to speak with Roque, Nacho’s submissiveness seems to have no positive effect; in fact, the dictator, “con la punta de la bota, le hizo rodar por delante del centinela” (192) after Nacho’s tenth utterance of “(cuá!”

Conclusion

In conclusion, Tirano Banderas is often cited as the Spanish author Valle-Inclán’s masterpiece out of deference to its important position as the prototypical esperpento--the caricaturesque literary form for which the author achieved fame. Less than half a century after the publication of Valle-Inclán’s work, however, postmodernism would seem to overtake the literary stage of the western world. This latter movement’s emphasis on identity, the breakdown of time and language manipulation--as opposed to the historically important plot structure, sensical speech, and an attempt to create order in life--has been frequently noted among the critics. But no study has previously been carried out detailing the importance of Valle-Inclán or his work to the postmodernists. My argument in the present essay, then, is to show how Tirano Banderas reveals nascent postmodernist tendencies and merits a reexamination in light of its position as an early example of Spanish postmodernism.

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