

# NIHILISM IN TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY SPANISH DRAMA

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## ABSTRACT

Tyler R. Oakley: Nihilism in Turn-of-the-Century Spanish Drama  
(Under the direction of Dr. Samuel Amago)

The present study employs the concept of nihilist transvaluation to investigate what has generally been referred to as Modernism and the Avant-Garde, and more specifically the Generations of 98 and 14 in Spanish Peninsular literature. This analysis builds on the works of Gonzalo Sobejano's *Nietzsche en España* (1967) and Jesús G. Maestro's *El personaje nihilista* (2001), while refocusing the guiding concept in the context of literary drama at the turn-of-the-century in Spain. Nihilism proves to be a transnational phenomenon in the arts with a unique manifestation in Spanish drama that allows us to genealogically reconstruct a period of continuity from Benito Pérez Galdós to Federico García Lorca. This stylistic commonality is explained through a return to the Aristotelian poetics of tragedy, not without temporal, regional, and individual stylistic nuances, which lead to the possibility of a typology of these authors and their theatrical works.

Thanks to Sam, the committee, my friends, and family.

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## Introduction

This dissertation outlines the movement of nihilism in the Spanish theater at the turn of the century, beginning in 1892, when Benito Pérez Galdós (1843-1920) adapted and performed *Realidad*, and Jacinto Benavente (1866-1954) published his *Teatro fantástico*, to 1937, when Miguel Hernández (1910-1942) wrote *El labrador de más aire*. These figures and works establish a convenient, and somewhat novel, bookend for the avant-garde drama of Spain. During this period, traditional themes and styles in Spanish drama were under pressure by a new wave of writers who were eager to express themselves and their predicament. This twentieth century distrust toward the dominant aesthetics of the previous century peaked in the avant-garde in which acts of creative destruction were carried out in the name of renewal and regeneration. The attacks by dramatists of the avant-garde were generally conceived as tragic farce or tragedy and were made in the name of theatricality. Innovation in these genres functioned to express their respective aesthetic and ethical preoccupations during the first decades of the twentieth century. In these new dramas limits were tested and exceeded, but these transgressions were replaced in subsequent works by a more conciliatory approach to dramaturgy in which many of the dramatists resorted to traditional forms to continue their innovative work in the theater. For instance, Hernández resorted to verse and Aristotelian poetics in his tragedy from 1937, in stark contrast to Galdós's expansive Five Act, naturalist-symbolist adaptation of his dialogic novel, and Benavente's experimental One Act sketches. This revival of tragedy was not a mere return to

tradition, but a transformation of it due to the Spanish playwright's confrontation with nihilism and the indictment of his bourgeois audience. Aestheticism, transvaluation, theatricality, and tragic poetics define the movement of avant-garde drama in Spain, and explain the subsequent oscillations between tradition and novelty that constitute the theory of creative destruction through various forms of nihilism.

A reevaluation of the tragic work at the turn of the century in Spain reveals a sensitivity to the movement of nihilism that bid the avant-garde dramatist to reengage with tragedy as he sought to revitalize the national stage and establish a new rapport with an often unsympathetic, indifferent public. The avant-garde then reconceives the problem of modern theater as one of relevance and decadence, thereby displacing a theatrical tradition corrupted by a combination of bad taste and mercantile interests. Scandal onstage also occurred back and offstage, then was usually carried over into the press such that a debut could flounder or flourish, affecting all parties involved. Meanwhile, spectacles like vaudeville and the movies were in competition with drama, all of which contributed to the creative tension of avant-garde drama, and its uneasy relation to, and sometimes retreat from society. The revival of tragedy differs in overall intent and effect, but adheres to the Aristotelian tradition of tragic poetics, reflecting an adjustment in Spanish drama between playwright and audience. Accordingly, Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) begins his dramatic career with a destructive approach towards the stage, but later alters his work in his Andalusian trilogy to accommodate the constraints of the discipline. García Lorca's anxiety toward conventional drama is a matter and motive of his unpublished and unperformed works like *El público* (1930) and *Así que pasen cinco años* (1931). This so called "impossible theater" was written after his stay in New York City after the stock market crash of 1929; in these works García Lorca turns away from the popular lyric of his home to the covert

dramatizing of nihilism. However, with his involvement in the troupe *La Barraca*, he eventually abandons this impossible, unrepresentable style for a more approachable return to tragedy in his rural Andalusian trilogy. In Rafael Alberti's (1902-1999) dramatic career we witness a similar stylistic variance in which he experiments with the renewal of traditional forms to craft tragic pieces that are also transformative. Following Jacinto Benavente's unperformed *Teatro fantástico*, Ramón María del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936), Jacinto Grau (1877-1958), and Ramón Gómz de la Serna (1888-1963) enriched the tragicomic tradition of farce for García Lorca and Alberti. As such, this dissertation promotes the idea that the avant-garde movement in Spanish drama was an epiphenomenon of Western nihilism, rich with stylistic variety and change.

The decadent theater afforded the period dramatist new freedoms to explore much of what was repressed under the aegis of realism in the mid to late nineteenth century; that is, the liberal imagination hardens, becoming skeptical and pessimistic to the point that norms and customs are questioned and displaced through transvaluation.<sup>1</sup> This dramatic interrogation of nihilist culture aimed at social transformation beyond the stage, but the estrangement of the dramatist from his public made this reunion difficult. Naturalism was pivotal in the development of a nihilist aesthetic, and its positive avant-garde project of transvaluation through aestheticism. Conversely, modernism came to iconize the dominant aesthetic of bourgeois liberalism as its privileged mode of representation, a style fraught with the contradictions of commodity art, and generally attacked by the so-called Generation of 98. This study will demonstrate how the

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<sup>1</sup> Labanyi poignantly states, "if liberal man is self-made, liberal woman is made" (411). This aspect of realism is not overcome with the dawn of naturalism, but continued into symbolism. Significantly, this essay will not discuss a single female dramatist although it will study in some detail the portrayal of feminine characters in turn of the century Spanish drama. In my view the deficiencies of this hegemonic aesthetic, in spite of its progressive tendencies, were carried over into the twentieth century as they were deeply rooted in the hierarchy of the male dominated arts. This perspective on late nineteenth and early twentieth century aesthetic continuity coincides with an observation of Litvak's in that "La iconografía de la época se pobló de procesiones de mujeres de belleza fría, criaturas irracionales y perversas que llevaban al hombre a su perdición" (248-249). The modern *femme fatale* is also attended to in the following chapters.



exploration and utilization of nihilism as a guiding concept advances an alternative interpretation to turn of the century art and culture, going beyond the category of modernism, which has largely served as a hegemonic, aporetic term in literary history. As Lily Litvak's *España 1900* (1990) argues, the various aspects of modernism were vilified by the anti-modernists as contradictory – medievalism, Gothicism, dilettantism, eclecticism, pessimism, aestheticism, narcissism, individualism, Gallicism, orientalism–, and demonstrates how the conformist Benavente ironically bore the brunt of this initial criticism in the theater (118-122). As Litvak also demonstrates, many proletarian parties and syndicates also attacked modernism from their political perspective, while the movement also garnered criticism from the middle classes (119-120). This powerful, sometimes resentful new art endured attacks from all angles (123), as it asserted its transcendental hegemony in the new commercial landscape. Along with Litvak's valuable monographic treatment of modernism, Jesús Rubio Jiménez's important book, *El teatro poético en España* (1993), dates modernism in the Spanish theater to the year 1900 (12). Rubio Jiménez states, in agreement with Litvak, that Benavente is the major exponent of this new dramatic movement (14), and explains this turn of the century dynamic by recounting how Galdós grew sick of the stage, its actors, owners, and audience, taking refuge again in the dialogic novel; meanwhile, Benavente took another approach by ceding to the dominant tastes and debuting plays characteristic of his “modernismo endulcorado” (22). This capitulation to popular taste would therefore compromise modernism and commit the aesthetic to bourgeois mannerism, and romantic realist paradigms of the past century.

This dissertation challenges the historically linear generational method in Spanish literary studies, in favor of a genealogical approach that reevaluates the tragic genre and focuses on differences of formation. Genealogy in this study of dramatic literature means the critical and

philosophical approach to retracing the origin of values and their differential formal expression through the author, his work, and its relation to the public. Rubio Jiménez's chronology compliments the course of nihilist drama proposed here, but differs somewhat in that he focuses on cultural events to highlight his reconstruction of the modernist moment, referring to Spanish modernism's relation to French Parnassianism in Catalonia that was eventually domesticated and nationalized. Recognizing that chronology is necessary to literary history, despite the fluidity and simultaneity of literary movements in time, we can still signal events of Spanish nihilist drama through their continuity of development and differences in style. In this movement, the avant-garde reflects its own media as a compositional element by theatricality, tragic poetics, and the aesthetic transvaluation of realist verisimilitude and romantic idealization. This overturning is an aesthetic revelation that confronts the nineteenth century with the outcome that art should be autonomous, and flourish in relative independence of social and mercantile influence.

Modern performance, as such, is no longer a mimetic reflection, but a play of the author's expression, the directors and actors serving as mediators in this communicative process. This new spectacle is a sensual experience in itself; meanwhile, the majority of society attended a very different sort of spectacle for their diversion, from the Spanish *sainete* and *zarzuela*, to the cabaret and cinema.<sup>2</sup> Modernism as an aesthetic category is manifest in such developments of bourgeois culture as the new society intervened and asserted itself through taste, pastime, and recreation. This debasement of high art was a reactive instance of massive transvaluation, which

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<sup>2</sup> "Of Dartmouth College's collection of Spanish drama, 15,072 total published between 1795 and 1936; 11,657 are published in Madrid with 1,781 from Barcelona; the most common denominations are comedy (4,136), drama (2,782), juguete (2,134), zarzuela (1,477), sainete (716), entremés (287), revista (275), drama histórico (236), tragedia (212), monólogo (207), propósito (138), disparate (94), fantasía (77), pasatiempo (69), farsa cómica (42)" (Swislocki and Valladares, *Estrenado con gran aplauso*. 24-25). Tragedy and the tragic are clearly at a quantitative disadvantage in what is one of the most representative collections of modern Spanish drama in the world. Lazzarini-Dossin states that regarding tragic studies, the Mediterranean countries are subject to "une position réduite, dans la meilleur des cas" (*L'impasse du tragique* 8). It may be that Spanish studies have neglected the tragic aspect of twentieth-century drama because "il n'y a pas de définition qui puisse réunir les différentes générations de la littérature tragique et mesurer 'l'inspiration tragique'" (9).

yielded the self-questioning, reflexivity, and retrenchment found in the preoccupations with decadence and the fear of irrelevance surrounding drama from the period. However, modernism proves problematic in Spanish literary studies as it pretends to address problems with the generational conception of literary history and competes terminologically with the already established poetic movement from Rubén Darío (1867-1916) to Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881-1958).

Nil Santiáñez (2002) similarly describes the privileging of the concept of *modernismo* over the *Generación de 98* in the last thirty or so years by Spanish scholars (89), yet cites several common errors: confusion surrounding the definition of *modernismo*; lack of a temporal model that could account for the arrhythmic literary history of the concept; a monistic conception of the literary periods it comprises; persistence of the generational concept despite its questioning; founding the literary history upon authors; the equation of distinct terms, especially *modernismo* and *modernidad*; and finally, “la aplicación acrítica de esquemas procedentes de la historia literaria británica y estadounidense” (*Investigaciones literarias* 90). Fond of lists, Santiáñez continues to enumerate three conceptions of *modernismo* that lead to confusion: 1) Darío, and those from Latin America and Spain associated with him; 2) the epochal understanding of the term associated with a crisis in bourgeois culture around the last third of the eighteenth century; 3) –related to number two, but distinct because of its scholarly persistence– the application of the Anglo-American understanding of modernism to Spanish literature (101). This lament is justified as a call for clarity in the face of ongoing interest and an ever-growing bibliography on the Spanish avant-garde and hegemonic modernism. Santiáñez also questions the legitimacy of the Generation of 98 as a historical reality or productive analytic category when he observes:

El rechazo de la «generación del 98» y la superación del binomio 98-modernismo no ha implicado, sin embargo, una total superación de los problemas metodológicos y terminológicos que han aquejado al hispanismo. Las teorías de (2) y (3), hoy día hegemónicas en los estudios hispánicos, plantean más problemas de los que pretenden resolver. (102)

The present study investigates what Santiáñez cautions and complains of as methodological and terminological problems for modern Spanish literature and culture. However, Santiáñez seems nostalgic for the simplicity of the 98-modernism dichotomy, which he himself forsakes as an example of monolithic, linear, epochal history, while also objecting to international criticism of Spanish literature. Interestingly, instead of a unilateral approach, he proposes an opening of Spanish *modernismo* to European modernism that is mutually enriching for criticism and literary study (119). Like most literary scholarship, Santiáñez delimits and incapacitates the conceptual power of nihilism, referring to nihilism obliquely through a reference to Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* in which Bell discusses and degrades the concept as an effect of narcissism (38). Santiáñez's brief mention of nihilism is, however, not coincidental as he quickly picks up the concept through a brief discussion of Nietzsche's philosophy (39-41). This overview is treated as one of the many vectors of modernity as he calls the philosophical influences on the literary arts. He links the philosophy of nihilism with naturalism and expressionism, but Santiáñez is skeptical of the possibilities that nihilism offers, relating it to José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), Spenglerian fascism, and the reactive criticism of modernity. Building on Raymond Williams's structure of feeling, Santiáñez attributes these "manifestaciones apocalípticas" to a certain "vivencia subjetiva" that characterized the European community (43). That is, this body of decadent thought and art is not expressive of a reality, but

a collective modern psychology in temporary crisis. Yet nihilism moved within and motivated the drama and culture of the period, while the avant-garde playwrights resorted to aestheticism to write tragic works that reflected the formal and philosophical problems posed by European decadence. Nihilism functioned productively as an impulse for the Spanish dramatists to develop tragedy at the turn of the century, the best of which took aestheticism as its guiding principle, and not only reformed Aristotelian tragic poetics, but also heightened consciousness, and shared knowledge.

In fact, nihilism was not a name for the political right, much less the hallmark of fascism or stolid conservatism as Santiáñez suggests. Still, he is far from alone in this bias as Gonzalo Sobejano's monumental *Nietzsche en España* (1967) also associates nihilism in Spain with the conservative literati of Pío Baroja (1872-1956) and Ortega y Gasset (395, 564), thereby misunderstanding the philosophical affirmation and aesthetic optimization born of European decadence. What Nietzsche meant by the advent of nihilism was that "the highest values devalue themselves" (*The Will to Power* 9). Similarly, as Ackerman and Puchner explain with respect to turn of the century drama, the avant-garde theater was a creative destruction of the nineteenth century theater that returned to the basis of the art form itself: that is, theatricality was the new basis from which these dramatists worked, and in Spain this theater turned toward tragedy.

Jesús G. Maestro's *El personaje nihilista* (2001) initiates a genealogy of the nihilist *dramatis personae* in the European theater beginning with the tragicomedy *La Celestina* (1499), up to modern bourgeois drama, and finds the nihilist character expressive of "la conciencia poética de una heterodoxia, de una provocación moral, expresada durante siglos por la literatura de Occidente" (14). This centuries old nihilist heterodoxy in the West was consolidated in the

middle ages of European civilization and to this day persists through the modern logic of humanism and its derivatives. However, it was not the scholar who communicated the tragic knowledge of nihilism best, but the dramatic poet. As we shall see in the third chapter, nowhere is this seen better than in the dramaturgy of the classics scholar Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), who attempted to bridge the gap between theology, philosophy, and tragedy; conversely, the aestheticism of García Lorca internalized the problem of nihilism, assumed theatricality as a constituent principle of his craft, and created works powerful enough to fill the void of a dead god. Aestheticism affirmed life in its multiplicity while avoiding the sublimation and specter of Unamuno's sphinx.<sup>3</sup>

Nihilism is a mechanism of change and affects the turgid movements on and off stage during the twentieth century. Dominique Rabaté in her essay "Un soupçon fructueux" from the volume *Modernités. Nihilismes?* (2012) eloquently states that "Le nihilisme est un soupçon, une force de perturbation que semble se diffuser sans limites," and explains how the constitutive trait of this fruitful supposition is its ambivalence (12-13). As evidenced from the title of this recent French work, and in accordance with the above summation of scholarship in Spanish literary studies, modernism is undergoing a process of criticism that questions its lack of productivity and rigor. Academic research is increasingly supportive of such a position as Eric Benoit in the same volume reconstructs a typology of nihilism beginning with eighteenth century theological nihilism, up to nineteenth century political, revolutionary, pessimistic, and ontological nihilisms (17-46). Departing from nineteenth century realism, naturalism embraced the psychological plays that also staged physiological maladies, but exhausted itself in the aesthetic demands of

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<sup>3</sup> In 1912 Unamuno wrote *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, which interrogates "el ¿para qué? de la Esfinge" (96), ending in morbid desire for eternity, and an afterlife that reduces human existence to a negative dialectic of "Todo" or "nada" (186). The advanced aesthetes of the avant-garde attacked this necromancy through tragic drama that celebrated life, thereby favoring the imagery of appearances over permanence and faith in truth.

performance. Out of this ferment came Galdós's syncretism, Valle-Inclán's pessimistic symbolism, the Left-Right political plays of the socialist Manuel Altolaguirre (1905-1959) and conservative Ramiro de Maeztu (1875-1936), Unamuno's religious plays, and García Lorca's dramatization of place and power. Because it is ongoing, the movement of nihilism is still developing and requires a critical sensitivity to ascertain its multiplicity in drama: a synchronic model is therefore necessary to approach this specter of tragic affirmation and excitement.

The phenomenon of European nihilism, its aesthetic manifestation in the avant-garde, and its sublimation through modernism is born out onstage in the dissolution of naturalist drama and its symbolist deformation. The aestheticism of theatricality was a formalization of chaos that relied on the tragic poetics practiced by Aeschylus and observed by Aristotle around the fifth century BC. The first chapter in this dissertation, "Aestheticism: Mimesis and the Movement of Decadence in the Spanish Theater," relates ancient transgressions in the theater to nihilist transvaluation of the modern period. This aesthetic reallocation breaks with the realism and mannerism of the nineteenth century, signaling a change in style and countermovement begun by Galdós and Benavente, and carried on by the likes of Gómez de la Serna and Valle-Inclán. The most accomplished appropriation and adaptation of tragedy, however, was initiated by Jacinto Grau and carried on by García Lorca. The Westernization of Greek tragedy in Spain had the effect of inaugurating an erotic drama of the teens and twenties that relied on violence, the grotesque, and the absurd for artistic composition and social criticism, especially in Gómez de la Serna's *greguería* and Valle's *esperpento*. Disfigured bodies appear in nihilist drama, symbolizing and tracing modern physiology and sexuality in the avant-garde tragedies of love, life, and death. Sexual and social injustices of domination and repression are represented mimetically by the avant-garde playwrights of the period. The first chapter on "Aestheticism"

rehabilitates mimesis as a liberating activity in drama that imparts knowledge of the world through a shared work of feeling. The utilization of symbolic expression in performance allows for the appearance of reality and its dissimulation of truth principles, as tragic errors and misrecognition prove fatal.<sup>4</sup> The second chapter, “Synthesis and Eclosion: Genealogy of Nihilist Drama in Spain,” traces differentials of expression onstage, and the development of avant-garde tragedy through Galdós, Benavente, and Valle-Inclán. Their innovative mobilization of the tradition conserved some aspects of Aristotelian tragic poetics, but ultimately signaled an aesthetic destabilization of the nineteenth century paradigm and emergence of the avant-garde. The third chapter, “Typology of Ascetic, Aesthetic, and Political Tragedy,” reconstructs the development of avant-garde tragic poetics, and their eventual dissolution through the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). The typology is a categorical method by which each author’s tragic poetics is analyzed as an intersection of aesthetic confluences with potentially active and reactive consequences. The avant-garde drama of passion and destruction at the turn of the century in Spain requires a genealogy to trace this movement, and a typology to differentiate each drama’s significance. The dissertation presented here begins this endeavor.

The bold historiographical account by Gonzalo Sobejano of Nietzsche in Spain was never adequately continued by Spanish literary scholarship of the seventies, eighties, and nineties. Perhaps the lack of Nietzschean analysis of Spanish literature is due to the Franco dictatorship (1936-1975) and transition to democracy, marked by the 1978 constitution and 1981 attempted coup. This dissertation attempts to recover lost opportunity and reorient this body of dramatic

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<sup>4</sup> For the ancient Greeks the sun was a “truth-teller and life-nurturer” (Aeschylus, *Oresteia* 633). Ancient metaphors return to the avant-garde stage through symbolism, which expressed ontological truths opposed to the metaphysics of humanism. Beistegui states “the romantic symbol is possibly the highest and ultimate expression of mimesis, in that it seeks the absolute unity of subject and object, or man and nature, as well as that of the various arts and genres in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*” (28). In chapter two of the dissertation, we follow a discussion of Valle-Inclán’s adaptation of the total work in his tripartite barbaric comedies.



literature within the context of Western drama. Significantly, Ramón Gómez de la Serna cites Nietzsche at the beginning of the single act of *El drama del palacio deshabitado* (1909), “Todo lo que es profundo ama la careta” (227).<sup>5</sup> With the mask we, the civilized and cosmopolitan, are one with the drunken, singing, sacrilegious satyr. We are closer to what is eternal and natural, what appears to be, and enjoy what is performed as actors and spectators. This is why drama is significant among the arts, and Gómez de la Serna is a great renovator of the stage, although he never enjoyed the success of some of his contemporaries. In his prologue to the tragic work, he openly defends his employment of aestheticism due to the impurity of his piece, “impura en una acepción deificada del adjetivo” (223). In his attempt to express a monistic, anti-pragmatic, decadent perspective on life, Gómez de la Serna also ridicules modernism and bourgeois liberalism. In line with the continuity of acute cultural nihilism and the embrace of aestheticism, Gómez de la Serna is skeptical of “frases, de veneraciones y de trascendencias” (223). He offers the drama, as explained in the prologue, because he is sick of the conventional conventions “que se han hecho músculos en la humanidad y lóbulos y nervios” (224). We are all constituted through conventions and civilized accordingly, with the only outlet available being to follow this continuity toward a new delta. This horizon, or, opening of possibilities is unknown and uncertain, but is implied in the movement of an affirmative decadence that Gómez de la Serna poeticizes. As the author states in his epilogue to *El drama del palacio deshabitado*, the play centers on the anxiety of death, “inquietudes léxicas no más” (251). Lexical here refers back to

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<sup>5</sup> “Así, cuando Ramón Gómez de la Serna asevera en 1909 que ‘hoy no se puede escribir una página ignorando a Nietzsche,’ ello significa: en 1909 no se debe escribir sin previo conocimiento de lo que él simboliza; por tanto, su actualidad es imperiosa” (Sobejano 520). Gonzalo Sobejano further explains how Spain, even into the 1930s, lacked proper translations of Nietzsche, which required the talents of a poet-philosopher. The Spanish fascination with Nietzsche and the familiarity with nihilism was generally mediated by positivist and existentialist theories, or simply acquired through the arts. A clear example of this in drama is the Catalan Joan Maragall’s *Nausica* (1910), which stages the superhuman hero Ulysses that must “Recobrar l’espendor de ma naixença [...] / Glorificar la generosa empresa / D’aquest cor ignoscent, la sobrehumana / Discreció amb què ha volgut portar-la a terme” (197, 200-202). The Apollonian verse resonates with Catalan nationalism, and demonstrates how nihilism was a continuous aesthetic differential in Spanish drama.

his prologue of conventional conventions, which is what the author is forced to employ in his drama of the ineffable. Literature is formed by language, which has its own laws, yet this lexis penetrates art in social patterns as well.<sup>6</sup> In the epilogue to *El drama del palacio deshabitado*, Gómez de la Serna clarifies how an enchantment of life through art depends on a healthy relation to death:

Yo soy un hombre reflexivo, cuya mirada no polariza las cosas artísticamente. Por esto la vida se me ofrece tan específica como ella es. Esto me hace trágico en estos momentos, trágico de una manera distinta de los románticos y de los fantasistas, a los que se les ofrece la vida y la muerte imovibles, elecubrantes y caleidoscópicas. Así ante ellos la muerte dejaba de ser algo comprimido, estreñado, monístico forjando en ellos sin medida una borrachera monstruosa, que en el fondo era una exaltación voluptuosa, histérica, de la vida. (252)

This tragic exaltation of life is revealed carefully by the dramatic artist through a process of stylized selection in which he imprints his own values through the mimetic work of another world. The artist's gaze should not dialectically polarize, but instead show us the specificity of life; his work should excite because art is a vital function. Sobejano explains Gómez de la Serna's physiological vitalism as an encounter with a version of Nietzsche from *Ecce Homo* (1888) that was "corporal y dietético" (593). The fatality Gómez de la Serna dramatizes is an abysmal time of suffering, but also an intellectual vantage point of change. To reorient this heightened perspectivism, while attacking reactive morbidity, the author visits a morgue for

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<sup>6</sup> Through the lexical principles of language "it was also thought that in its sovereignty it could bring to light the eternal and visible body of truth; it was thought that its essence resided in the form of words or in the breath that made them vibrate. In fact, it is only a formless rumbling, a streaming; its power resides in dissimulation" (Foucault, *Aesthetics* 167). Gómez de la Serna and his cohort sought to destabilize the penetration of normative language in law, the regulation of life, and the literary canon. Valle's intermediate work, the tragicomedy *Divinas palabras* (1920), also deals with the sovereignty of language, ecclesiastical Latin, and casts the *leguleyo*, charlatan country lawyer as the one who catches Mari Gaila and Séptimo Miao fornicating in the wild.

clinical research. There, he describes a corpse he sees, shaved and gaunt, exhibiting “un aspecto andrógino,” then, “Levanté un poco más la sábana. Era una mujer insexuada, pues hasta los pechos, secos, sin plasticidad, chupados por la tierra, se habían adaptado al tórax y no tenían más relieve” (254). This aestheticism of facticity, a mix of vitality and morbidity, relates back to the ancient erotic unveiling, and spring rites of Maya, but Gómez de la Serna’s account is a montage of Dionysian revelry, “una descomposición nihilista,” “disgregación y congregación inesperadas” (Sobejano 593). As an instance of condensed and suspenseful life and death, Gómez de la Serna’s *greguería* forebodes Valle-Inclán’s *esperpento* and García Lorca’s compounding symbols, while picking up on the legacy of fantastic theater undertaken by Jacinto Benavente.

Gómez de la Serna seeks to transform the macabre specter and recast the abyss as he shows us another way of approaching death as beyond and below life. The writer dedicates *Los sonámbulos* to the painter Miguel Viladrich because he does not indulge in painting bourgeois Yankees, and has shown him the Tree of Knowledge (259). The two decadent esthetes value typicality over personality in a supranational turn to the phantasmagoric humanoid. The old woman with too much makeup is, perhaps, the uncanniest character of his play, in spite of her referentially modern depiction. The author describes her as “una vieja en la que cuelgan los postizos con descuido y en cuya faz el colorete es rancio ya, a tan alta hora” (264). It is a frightfully hilarious image he paints us of La Vieja Pintada, tragically envisioned and followed by other modern types: the Inconsolable, the Virgen, and the nurse, La Mujer de la Bata Roja, who wakes everyone to their dismay, “Todas las mujeres tienen esta mirada agresiva al final de su rato de amor porque se ven abandonadas y rechazadas de improviso” (277). The male characters in *Los sonámbulos* are also crudely characterized by Gómez de la Serna’s oblique

vision, including the gambler, loan shark, a parody of Jesus, and the skeletal, mystical Justo. In *El drama del palacio deshabitado*, El Hombre Anónimo introduces the play, inviting parallels to Rafael Alberti's *El hombre deshabitado*, saying that the heroic act of the tragedy is to "invalidar la Esfinge, la última divinidad" (228). This would also invite comparison to Unamuno's theological tragedy of the Sphinx and persistent use of the crippling Everyman, but it is Azorín's *superrealismo* that he shares more with as both contemplate the feminine figure as an ideal symbol.

In Azorín's *Angelita* (1930), the young woman time travels and tests her sanity, while these movements express for the writer the physics of human existence; in the prologue he explains his attempt to capture, compress, and solidify this interaction into every scene (92). This tragicomic dream is more fanciful than the dead characters of Gómez de la Serna's second play, mired in regretful decadence because they lived as if they were dead, and never loved. The Count's daughter has a "gesto perverso, de una perversidad sin límites y sin temblores, firme, toda certeza," and regrets not having sex with the household servants (238-39). Perverted and powerless, the ghosts repeat their follies in purgatory, only finding a peaceful redemption when a peasant couple enters the palace and seemingly makes love unaware of their meta-theatrical onlookers. According to Gómez de la Serna's tragic works, when love and lust are repressed by morality they are perverted; in this society of guilt, men are chained to money and violence, while women resentfully seek satisfaction in luxuries. His erotic monism encounters nihilist decadence through an embrace of aestheticism; the "voluptuousness of the martyr" is a youthful female in his tragic farce (*The Will to Power* 224), while death is androgynous, sexually indeterminate, and ubiquitous. From Galdós's *Augusta*, Benavente's *Acacia*, Grau's noblewomen, Valle's *Mari Gaila*, Alberti's *Mujer*, and García Lorca's *Adela*, a dizzying array of

heroines are raked through the embers of tragedy as symbols of sacrifice in Spanish avant-garde drama. While the present study is comparative and makes connections through differences in matter and meaning, it is also limited in scope, intending to foreground future works on the mimetic aestheticism of dramatized power in nihilism.

Historically, Galdós's anti-clerical *Electra* (1901) was a watershed for avant-garde drama in Spain, attacking Church hierarchy and promoting secularization. The villainous Catholic tutor Pantoja, is all that stands in the way of Electra and Máximo's marital bliss. Their imminent wedding is metaphorized through a laboratory experiment of melding: "blanco incipiente," as Electra observes, "¡La fusion!" Máximo exclaims, both waiting for the "blanco resplandeciente" of a new metal (179-80).<sup>7</sup> The cleric lies to his pupil about her dead, vivacious mother turned nun, telling her that Máximo is her brother, that the promiscuous Eleuteria conceived them from different fathers. Pantoja crushes her with this nightmarish news, "Estoy soñando... Todo lo que veo es mentira, illusion" (234). While the children sing in the background Electra runs offstage screaming, "la muerte ó la verdad," crying for her dead mother who only knows the truth (235). Electra wants to join her mother, who harbors the truth in her tomb (248). Máximo tries to claim her as his, but she rejects him, saying she belongs only to her mother's pain. Subdued by Don Urbano and the Marquis, Máximo wants deliverance back to truth and science, his laboratory, and salvation from this uncertain and deceptive world (250). Yet the couple eventually unites in this melodrama, thereby averting the radicalism of tragedy, restoring an organic order and ultimately conservative ideology, to borrow Hayden White's modes of emplotment. Chapter two of this dissertation addresses the genealogical significance of Galdós in relation to more

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<sup>7</sup> Sumner Greenfield sees the color white as symbolic of repressed sexual effusion in García Lorca's *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*, including, the matriarch's name referring to the color; the whitewashed walls of her house; a white sheep the grandmother as truth bearer carries; and a white horse bucking in the barn (*García Lorca, Valle-Inclán* 213).

powerful, radical examples of nihilist tragedy in Benavente's *La Malquerida* (1913) and the development of Valle-Inclán's *esperpento* in the twenties.

Building on this genealogy, García Lorca's tragedy of the thirties is sudden, suspenseful, and not at all discursive, with the fall of his tragic heroines prescribed in their bodies: "les héroïnes lorquiennes luttent pied à pied contre une temporalité cyclique et prévisible" (Lazzarini-Dossin, *Théâtre* 45). This tragic time is cyclical and embodied through fate as when Martirio and Amelia discuss their younger, half-sister, Adela's ancestry in the First Act of *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, the first sign of her tragic predestination. Foucault makes clear that in the search for beginnings the genealogist's object would be the body, its heredity and its intensities; he writes "History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells" (Foucault, *Language* 145). Tragedy and the hermeneutic of history are entwined, even more so in antiquity than our modernity. Adela's fall from grace –her desire and error– was due to the "stigmata of past experiences" that emboldened her and enraged her siblings, mother, and scandalized the household (Foucault, *Language* 148). Tragedy always depends on the genealogical question of *who*, just as history is the narrative of corporal affliction. García Lorca plays with the idea of authenticity in his drama, explaining the function of his tragic poetics as "verdadero estilo vivo; es decir, de sangre; es decir, de viejísima cultura, de creación en acto" ("Teoría y juego del duende" 110). This language is not metaphorical, but literal, and more vital than Azorín's *superrealismo* or the surrealism of Alberti. García Lorca's tragedy is a vortex of suddenness, preceded by duration of immanence then suspense, with the action prescribed in his heroines' bodies. Chapter three of the dissertation addresses this treatment in a comparative way and argues that García Lorca's aesthetic mimesis is a superior depuration of tragic poetics with respect to the moralizing

preoccupations of his contemporaries, which debase the original, ontological intent of sensual tragedy as a dismantling of the violence of revenge, and rectification of the wrongs perpetrated through resentment.

The first chapter on aestheticism establishes a basis for this approach in the Spanish drama of the avant-garde in which an active art form affirmed nihilism and served to transvaluate naturalism, which exhausted the paradox of mimetic realism onstage. The new art embraced European decadence and turned to tragedy for its invigoration of drama through a new theatricalization of the work of life. Spanish avant-garde tragedy had a uniquely productive relation to its Golden Age tradition, in large part due to an encounter with Aristotelian poetics, Dionysian chaos, and Apollonian form.<sup>8</sup> In the second chapter a heterodoxy is established through the genealogy of nihilist drama, founded on Galdós's *Realidad* and Benavente's *Teatro fantástico*, and continued through Valle-Inclán's tragicomic interventions and barbaric innovations. The grotesque and erotic are treated aesthetically and form the basis for a typology of nihilist drama in Spain, leading us to political, theological, and theatrical compositions, based on the reactive and active types of nihilism. Jacinto Grau's overlooked adaptation of medieval legend and futurist dystopia combine the archetype and automaton onstage, coalescing in a symbolic expressionism carried over into the deformations of Rafael Alberti's *auto* and Federico García Lorca's Andalusian trilogy. Throughout the dissertation evaluations are made regarding the competing formal principles that combine to enhance dramatic texts that genuinely or falsely reflect the multiplicity of lived experience at the turn of the century.

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<sup>8</sup> Federico García Lorca describes his admiration of Baroque as a war between the populist, romanticized nationalism of Garcilaso, Herrera, and Lope, and the Catholic aristocrats including Calderón and Góngora: "la guerra entre los partidarios del fino cordobés y los amigos del incansable Lope de Vega llega a un grado de atrevimiento y exaltación como en ninguna época literaria" ("La imagen poética de don Luis de Góngora" 64).

## **I. Aestheticism: Mimesis and the Movement of Decadence in the Spanish Theater**

It is telling that the famous Spanish director of the time, Cipriano Rivas Cherif (1891-1967), warned his readership in an article from 1921 of the error and danger of aestheticism, “cuya boga ha malogrado tantos ingenios” (“El teatro de la escuela nueva” 145). Such a disparaging description of the movement by an advanced stage director of the Spanish avant-garde reveals to what extent aestheticism was perceived to pose a threat to traditional moral conceptions of the theater. Rivas Cherif, over a decade before his famous direction of García Lorca’s *Yerma* in 1934, was actually quite moderate in his aesthetic outlook. In the same article he also incongruently lauds Valle-Inclán’s uncanny *Comedias bárbaras*, a fundamental piece to the avant-garde movement of aestheticism on the Peninsula, which he champions as reconciliation between the experimental, fantastic, modernist drama, and the bourgeois drama that embraced verisimilitude, nationalism, and class identification. A year earlier Rivas Cherif, in another periodical, associates aestheticism with Wagner and states that he simply wants to entertain himself at the theater, not unlike the vulgar audience that frequents most spectacles who do not partake in some ritualistic priesthood (“Nuevo repertorio teatral” 252). Through his criticism of aestheticism, perhaps Rivas Cherif chose to distance himself from what Renato Poggioli describes as the “incipient vulgarization of artistic novelty” which came to characterize *modernismo* in its late stages as it seemed to parody itself (228). This is a possibility Valle



himself recognized in *Luces de Bohemia* (1924) in which the bohemian poet, Máximo Estrella, is ruined by commercial society, and then nihilistically ruins himself. It could also be that Rivas Cherif attempted to avoid the influence of Catalan modernism,<sup>9</sup> which had an affinity for decadence, or that as an ardent republican he simply saw aestheticism as opposed to any civic engagement the theater might pretend. Whatever the case, the foremost director of the Spanish stage in the 1920s misunderstood this movement, and felt compelled to warn the public of its threat to the national theater.

In tandem with the problem of aestheticism is that of Aristotle's millennial poetics, either affirmed or rejected throughout the period of avant-garde drama, from the 1890s to the 1930s. The Romanized, Renaissance, parliamentary five act play, of which Galdós's *Realidad*, originally a "novela en cinco jornadas," and Valle's first barbaric comedy in five acts, *Águila de blasón* (1907) are examples, were forsaken after naturalism in which a return to the original tripartite structure prevailed. Aristotelian poetics nurtured the movement of aestheticism, which began to take shape in consonance with symbolism and in opposition to realism. Contrary to what Florence Dupont's *Aristote ou le vampire du théâtre occidental* presents as the progressive colonization of the European theater by aristotelianism (23), I find that Aristotle's tragic poetics played an indispensably creative role in the development of Spanish avant-garde drama, especially in the task it set for itself of overturning conventional theater. This antagonism toward Aristotle points toward the productivity of his poetics, as his treatise established a basis for the radical aesthetic transvaluation of Western drama, rather than a predatory theory of the text.

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<sup>9</sup> Rubio Jiménez points to this influence, referring to the proliferation of such designations as dream theater, intimate theater, poetic theater, ideal theater, and the adaptations of Maeterlinck's fatalism with Mallarmé's symbolism, and Shakespeare's fantasy: "El teatro modernista catalán, desde el estreno de *La intrusa* en Sitges, en 1893, se llenó de ecos maeterlinckianos" ("Perspectivas críticas" 202). Styan remarks on this type of automatic, architectonic play saying that it is "a drama of human vanity" in which "there is no apparent virtue in rising above the sordidness of the human condition or in trying to reach a decisive conclusion about its problems" (*The Dark Comedy* 283). This stylization of decadence in the theater was also an exploration of normativity and the affirmation of deviance and tragic transgression.

Loren Kruger, in an illuminating essay, also demonstrates anti-Aristotelian tendencies when he links “Aristotle’s strict anti-theatricality” to Hegelian aesthetics of the subject (84). What one sees, however, when one reads Aristotle’s essay is that mimetic action is the grounding of his aesthetics of tragedy, “a mimesis not of men [simply] but of actions – that is, of life” (73). Subsequently, avant-garde aestheticism presents itself as a response to the vitality of Aristotelian poetics eschewed in realist and neo-romantic drama, which reflected ascendant bourgeois culture and the subject of that movement, the gentleman.<sup>10</sup> Avant-garde tragedy in Spain returns to Aristotelian poetics, employing the elements of plot over character, while error, change, recognition, and suffering serve this active plot to excite pity and terror in the audience. The nineteenth century *alta comedia* and *costumbrismo burgués*, of which Galdós is the last genealogical exponent, underwent the nihilist process of transvaluation begun by Benavente and Valle, as the avant-garde movement of aestheticism returned to tragedy in an elliptical movement.

The modern Spanish tragedian reconciled aestheticism and Aristotelian poetics by focusing on the recourse to theatricality, utilizing what Jochen Mecke calls “modernidad transversal,” or the idea that Spanish modernity was completely and uniquely conscious of its debt to the literary tradition (“La estética del 98” 209). Spanish tragic drama offers a unique national response to European nihilism through the use of Aristotelian tragic poetics and avant-garde aestheticism; this movement constituted an encounter, or cultural intersection with the non-Western tradition, as opposed to a linear, historical development in dramatic literature.

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<sup>10</sup> Gómez Castellano analyzes the “hombre de bien” of the late eighteenth century in Spanish poetry, contrasting him with the “petimetre,” “erudito a la violeta,” “currutaco,” and “contradanzante,” all of which resonate with the dandy and bohemian at the turn of the century (23). These caricatures of a counter culture were part of the age of rationalism that bred the British fop, but signaled patterns of representation for the modern period. By the late nineteenth century the upright man was even criticized from the political right, as evinced by Gies’s reading of Manuel Tamayo y Baús’s 1870 *Los hombres de bien* (246-47). Throughout the last two decades of the nineteenth century a thorough transvaluation of this type was underway in drama, especially as he was cast alongside tragic heroines.

Mecke's "modernidad transversal" adds another dimension to the debate on Spanish and world literature as it uniquely comes round to the Spanish crucible with European nihilism, thereby refining the diachronic understanding of modernity. Avant-garde drama in Spain was born through aestheticism, which accommodated its rich theatrical tradition as it also explored the possibilities of pre-Romanic and somatic conceptions of the theater. Whether this constitutes backwardness, as Renato Poggioli and others have suggested, is a matter of biased opinion. Spanish avant-garde drama incorporated European avant-garde developments, but adapted them to the regions, including Valle's Galicia, García Lorca's Andalusia, Benavente's Castile, and the Catalan *renaixença*. Referring to monolithic Spanish *modernismo*, Poggioli, the canonical theoretician of the avant-garde, says that it "paradoxically, may be described as one of the most discreet, timid, or moderate avant-garde tendencies to appear since the end of the nineteenth century" (218). If Spanish and Latin American *modernismo* was conservative aesthetically – principally Rubén Darío and Juan Ramón Jiménez in poetry, along with the dramaturgy of Valle-Inclán in his earlier phase–, it was because the leaders of this movement were reasonably circumspect of the idealistic, utopian novelties Western civilization offered the world through modernism. Still, it must be reiterated that *modernismo* is not the central topic or target of this study, but one more instance of why we might elide the convoluted concept of modernism altogether. Poggioli's criticism is indicative of a Eurocentric approach to art that puts Spain and the Americas at the periphery of a movement these geopolitically marginalized people inevitably developed and endured. His work demonstrates to what extent the topic of the avant-garde, especially with respect to specific genres, neglected concepts, and understudied national literatures warrants renewed attention.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Continuing the same tendency in literary studies, Philip Beitchman's *The Theater of Naturalism* regretfully excludes the Spanish dramatists from his consideration while a similar negligence of the Spanish stage at

Despite the general omission of Spain from discussions on turn of the century European drama, Spanish theaters underwent nihilist transvaluation through the reaction of free commerce, which devalued the national and continental theaters. Significant of this shift in the theater was the appearance of Benavente's published but never performed *Teatro fantástico* and Galdós's stage adaptation of his novel *Realidad*, both from 1892. These works explore the possibilities of symbolism and break the realist mold, while also portraying modern heroines onstage. As Benavente clarifies in the last dialogue of his *Teatro fantástico* series, "Modernismo, nuevos moldes," a sort of meta-dramatic manifesto, the author speaks through the Modernista to the Autor novel saying, "En cualquier momento hay modernismo, como hay vejez y juventud en el mundo; que la juventud esté en oposición de ideas con la vejez no quiere decir que las ideas de la juventud sean nuevas; basta con que sean otras" (221). The problematic of modernism for Spanish drama is presented in this period of transition as alterity and heterodoxy to the bourgeois norm of the nineteenth century, a position Benavente came to renounce for commercial success and social acceptance. As a point of comparison, Juan Ramón Jiménez's conception of modernism differs markedly, as he was a self-styled modernist poet: "Repito que el modernismo, movimiento modernista, empezó en Alemania a mediados del siglo XIX y se acentuó mucho a fines del siglo XIX" (*El Modernismo* 222). In this lecture course given in exile after the triumph of the Falange the professor-poet reflects broadly on modernism as a world historical culture with roots in late romantic Germany. He reiterates "cabén escuelas tan diferentes como el naturalismo, el simbolismo, el impresionismo" (*El Modernismo* 223). It becomes apparent in retrospect that the modernist movement in Spanish literature took a cosmopolitan approach to the

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the turn of the century is seen in Claude Schumacher's *Naturalism and Symbolism in European-Theater* in which the Iberian Peninsula receives a scant fifteen pages of text in a five hundred and thirty-one page volume. While Spanish literature is often ignored in such works, Spanish literary studies are also often performed eccentrically and parochially.

synthesis of traditional and experimental modes of writing with a particular long view of history. This perspective allowed the Spanish dramatists to reconcile continental and regional aesthetics to their own style as they also worked through turn of the century nihilism. Benavente's *Teatro fantástico*, for instance, engages in the picaresque and Shakespearian style comedies to construct one-act dialogues and puppet plays that transvaluate such archetypes as Don Juan, Columbina, and Arlequín.

Nil Santiáñez compliments this synergistic view of modernism as he points out that in the first decade of the twentieth century, *modernismo* in Spain was already linked to the Nietzschean philosophy of transvaluation, nihilism, the search for new styles, and the will to form inherited from the romantics (92-94). This renovation in literary language was translated into ordinary life as the new cosmopolitan lifestyle relativized hierarchies of the past; a fact transmitted on stage in a multiplicity of ways. Nihilism, however, has the advantage over modernism because it genealogically traces the beginnings of European aesthetics to an ontology of art, even as it affirms decadence. Symbolic of the decadent modern period and rise of the corrupt bourgeoisie after the Enlightenment revolutions, Benavente's *El Encanto de una hora* stages two porcelain statues from Sèvres, Incroyable and Merveilleuse, in a sexually charged, but ultimately repressed, scene in which he damages her while advancing for a kiss, "¿Pretendes destrozarne?" she begs him (98). Reiterating the theme of destruction, Ackerman and Puchner are more specific in their functional definition of modernism yet pay tribute to the basic activity of nihilism as it inflects the subtitle of their work *Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*. Nevertheless, they chart out the concept of modernism for the stage in a normative way that emphasizes the meta-dramatic over the mimetic; despite the suggestive subtitle of their work, it should be noted that the role of nihilism as a basic drive of modernism remains unexplored. Lily

Litvak notes in her *España 1900* that the intent of international modernism was “un cambio de fondo y no sólo de forma, y presentaba una nueva escala de valores que iba más allá de la poesía” (111). That this change in values purportedly formed the modernist project could also be apprehended as a consequence of nihilist transvaluation. Santiáñez similarly demonstrates how *modernismo* was not only an aesthetic, but also an ethical, educational, and socio-political dimension, that is, it became the term for revolutionary republicanism (98-97). Interestingly, Santiáñez opposes the term to aestheticism as the aesthetes proclaimed an art independent of mercantile influence, whereas modernism was used throughout all media and cultural spheres to imply something like political liberalism. That is, the revolutionary bourgeoisie in Spain cultivated and identified with modernism, but found aestheticism too radical.

This millennial interplay of politics and poetics can be seen in Spain in the convulsive Left-Right movements at the turn of the century. For instance, in 1923 with the rise of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera we see Valle through his *Luces de Bohemia* move leftward after his split with Carlism (Ricci, *Le retour du tragique* 91-92), while some writers, like Ramiro de Maeztu, move to the right (Sobejano, *Nietzsche en España* 340). Peter Brooks, in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, points to the series of revolutions in Europe’s modern period as the “last act in a process of desacralization that was set in motion at the Renaissance,” “a process in which the explanatory and cohesive force of sacred myth lost its power, and its political and social representations lost their legitimacy” (16). Although Spain was caught in the movement of European secularization, the national literature dealt with this process of modern affiliation differently. Yet unlike Brooks, who followed Nietzsche and believed that tragedy was dead and lost in the seventeenth century with Racine, the Spanish avant-garde revived the genre through an awakening of the national tradition of tragicomedy, a unique heterodox dating at least to

Fernando de Rojas's *La Celestina* (1499). That is, the Spanish theater's ambivalence to and distance from classical tragedy allowed its dramatists sufficient freedom to rediscover and explore the genre when it was discounted by other literatures.

Often times mixed with the excesses of melodrama, the tragic mode thrived in Spain among the most advanced dramatic artists as it best expressed their anxieties toward nihilism. The survival of the tragic mode in Spain was due to its novelty and hybridity, which was an outgrowth of the neo-romantic movement of the mid to late nineteenth century, seen in the period's persistence through Galdós, Benavente, and Valle, all of who wrote decades after the *belle époque*. Up to the 1930s Spanish drama witnessed a marked period of change due to the ascendancy of bourgeois society. Vilches de Frutos confirms this linkage between a new theater going public and innovative performance, situated within a decidedly political context that capitalized on "la adecuación a los géneros más populares, la ingeniosidad del lenguaje y el tratamiento conservador de algunos temas específicos" ("La otra vanguardia histórica" 257). The spectacle of romantic nihilism is persistent in Spanish drama as the ethical urgency and practicality of the stage for political purposes mesh with idealistic aesthetics. The politically committed stage writer, which was almost ever playwright by the mid to late thirties in Spain, was forced to abandon aestheticism through the process of politicization which relegated drama to the unenviable task of decrying evils in society.

Nihilism was the underlying cultural movement that instituted this crisis in the arts and was the catalyst for the cultural change generally referred to as bourgeois modernism, including the elitist, separatist avant-garde. However, Jesús Maestro shows how this meta-historical process reaches far back into the past as analysed through his exploration of the concept in *El personaje nihilista*; according to him, nihilism "se configura ante todo como el predicado de una

negación cuya intención social y epistemológica destruye, antes que referentes u objetos (reales o imaginarios), los juicios o interpretaciones que fundamentan tales referentes” (20). As such, nihilism functions similarly to the modernism referenced earlier, but Maestro’s literary analysis allows us to chart from the modern period, the crux of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the rise of an aesthetic tendency that signaled a turn toward the secularization of Europe through nihilist transvaluation. By linking this process to the Renaissance and the birth of Spanish tragicomedy, we can reorient Spain in the debate on modernity, especially with the precedent of Benavente’s return to these forms.

As far as the link between modernism and nihilism, the connection has been made explicit in Éric Benoit and Dominique Rabaté’s recent volume *Modernités. Nihilismes?* in which Benoit’s essay “Comme si de rien n’était... (typologie des nihilismes)” outlines the ethereal quality of nihilism, and suggests the need for a typology of the concept. According to Benoit the symbolists, especially Mallarmé, were successful in overturning the idealistic Judeo-Christian ontological support that guided ideas of the absolute. Ironically, the passive, Christian, Schopenhauerian nihilism of continental Europe and the nineteenth century appeared in Spain through the likes of many modernist writers, especially those committed to write drama for political and theological reasons. A nihilist motif typical of the turn of the century, Valle has his protagonist from *Luces de Bohemia* bid farewell to his college friend turned politician, “con los brazos abiertos en cruz, la cabeza erguida, los ojos parados, trágicos en su ciega quietud, avanza como un fantasma” (917). When he is gone the Minister confesses to his aid that all Max lacked was will, and that his outlet from a similar bohemian fate was to renounce poetry (918). We can tell by the conversation between the middle-aged friends, that to be bohemian is already out of fashion and essentially unhealthy. Continuing the warning, once Max is reunited with Don



Latino they go in search of Rubén Darío, who sits in the Café Colón like a “cerdo triste” (920). Max, seemingly, self-aggrandizes himself in his fellow poet’s presence saying “Muerto yo, el cetro de la poesía pasa a ese negro” (920). This resentful insult of such a revered poet of Hispanic literature is due to the supreme iconoclasm of Valle’s *esperpento*. When Max and Rubén speak, the first topic is death, which Rubén evades, “¡No hablemos de Ella!” (921). “¡Tú la temes, y yo la cortejo!” Max replies (921). To judge his work as evasive of death, too exuberant and artificial as Valle insinuates through Max, is a critique of its delicacy. The tension between the two esthetes is heightened when Rubén says “es preciso huir de la bohemia” (921). The reason why is evident when Max declares that he has pawned his cape and will treat Rubén to a champagne dinner. Rubén and Don Latino offer theosophies while Max claims that the only thing eternal is nothing. This will to nothingness –his old friend, the Minister, faulted him for it– is purposelessness, or power without a goal, which leads to absurdity, and is the pretext to disorganize (Klossowsky, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle* 113). For this nihilistic stance he is accused of being irreligious and Voltairian, signaling the mediocre leveling of the mass’s skepticism versus Max’s meteoric insanity. These outbursts of Max’s desperate wisdom are due to his intoxication the night of his unfortunate death. Before Rubén and Max leave each other they toast to the Marqués de Bradomín, the protagonist of Valle’s narrative *Sonatas* (1902-1905), which leads us to believe that he is dead, but Valle has him return in the play during Max’s funeral a decrepit survivor of modernism.

Perhaps tragedy is weakest and least sensible when not practiced as an end in itself. Accordingly, Maestro pits the moralist against the tragedian, saying that they are fundamentally in opposition (14). This is revealed through the antagonism of moral, Platonic orthodoxies against tragic theatricality, and idealistic visions of humanity versus the tragic exploration of

conflict through performance. Gonzalo Sobejano's *Nietzsche en España* corroborates this questioning of nineteenth century conceptions of theater as he describes the so-called modernists and Generation of 98:

los modernistas sienten como mayores focos de atracción en el pensamiento de Nietzsche la exaltación dionisiaca de la vida y la justificación estética del mundo; los noventayochistas se fijan tanto o más que en esto en los pilares del evangelio de Zaratustra: muerte de Dios, voluntad de poder, eterno retorno, anhelo del superhombre. (195)

Despite the insightful distinction, Sobejano's adherence to the long standing dichotomy between the two types of turn of the century Spanish literati does not recognize the unifying principle of nihilism as transvaluation, and how this translates into aestheticism as a strategy to reevaluate art. Dependence on the generational concept is pervasive and never delimited or justified by Sobejano; sustaining that *modernistas* were more attracted to the Dionysian and aesthetic aspects of Nietzsche's work, while the *noventayochistas* supposedly focused on the moral and metaphysical side of the work ushered in by Zarathustra is too arbitrary and conveniently dialectical. Valle's dramatic career, especially the complexity and maturity of *Luces de Bohemia*, is only one instance of the arbitrary distinction between modernists and the Generation of 98. In fact, the tragic poetics of aestheticism spanned the dramaturgy from Benito Pérez Galdós, born in 1843, to Miguel Hernández, born in 1910, while the transvaluation of nihilism heralds and endures their work.

The avant-garde Spanish playwright's encounter with nihilism was also an embrace of aestheticism, while the return to tragedy was a national phenomenon. Pierre Klossowsky states that European nihilism is rooted in the precepts and praxis of the Decalogue, with an outlet

available to Christendom through Dionysian pessimism (*Such a Deathly Desire* 12-13). The revival of Aristotelian aestheticism is fundamental to the Dionysian pessimism that constitutes the Spanish avant-garde at the turn of the century. This vitalist response by an elite group of artists and theorists resulted from the ferment of nineteenth century decadence. Contrary to what Poggioli finds to be the “the negative and destructive principle of art for art’s sake” (127), we might reevaluate the negation and destruction that aestheticism advances in the arts; for it is precisely this nothingness and powerlessness that was confronted through aestheticism and the anguish of the bohemian. The quintessential Spanish modernist poet, Juan Ramón Jiménez, realizes this link between theology and modernism when he claims that it is “un movimiento jeneral teológico, científico y literario, que en lo teológico, su intención primera, comenzó a mediados del siglo XIX en Alemania y se propagó a distintos países, Francia, Rusia, Estados Unidos y otros” (*El Modernismo* 50). This coincides with Benoit’s typology of nihilism mentioned earlier as well as the observations made by Nelson Orringer in his essay “Introduction to Hispanic Modernisms” (2002) in which he finds the nineteenth century secular philosophies of central and northern Europe reinterpreted in the Catholic south through the edicts of Pope Pius X. The Spanish bourgeoisie was still precarious at the turn of the century, in an intermediary position of power, which resulted in a nuanced modernism. In contrast to much of Europe in which the various church authorities were questioned, Inman Fox finds that in Spain the ecclesiastical institution was reinforced:

Ya que casi todos los liberales eran sinceramente cristianos, católicos, creyentes al fin y al cabo, el conflicto del catolicismo español consistió en decidir si la convivencia política y social del país radicaría en la «Iglesia-institución», que se

quedaba distante de las realidades sociales del pueblo, o en la «Iglesia-comunidad». (“Grupos y posiciones intelectuales del 98” 23)

This religious passion was not so easily dissipated as it was in other countries, yet we see a telling correspondence between church ritual and the fervor of a theater going public in Spain. Both institutions were imbedded in the national psyche from at least the fifteenth century; and, as we shall see, the Spanish avant-garde dramatists hardly dismiss the power of the *auto de fe* and other resources of ecclesiastical stagecraft. For instance, Rafael Alberti’s *Fermín Galán* and *El hombre deshabitado* remit to the medieval appeal of popular performance, specifically the recitation of the *romance* and the staging of the *auto sacramental*. These medieval forms have mass appeal, and work well with the communicative strategy of tragedy in which the construction of an abstract community is reformed and restated by the end of the performance. The parallel between religious faith and Alberti’s communist political beliefs should be highlighted here: the Catholic Church is reified through a meta-theatrical communion in which the communitarian body is restored through ritual performance.

Through the revival of the ecclesiastical tradition during the avant-garde, this elitist art intended to change the popular taste of the time, and enact a more communitarian, less esoteric style. There were, however, early attempts at subverting ecclesiastical power, as in Benavente’s *Comedia italiana* from his fantastic theater in which his Columbine recounts her freedom from the Church to the Harlequin, and professes her devotion to sensuality instead of subjecting herself to doctrines of morbidity. She describes her past experience of the Church as paradox, “Perfume de exquisitas esencias y sofocante vaho de miserables harapientos me sofocaban confundidos” (104), while in this same passage she concludes, “Mentiras coloreadas por la luz de la verdad, eso era mi vida; hoy resplandece en ella el sol” (104). Forsaking mysticism, she remits

to an ontological physicality in which beings are in becoming and awake through relationships with their environment. Similar to Fox, yet perhaps unaware of some tentative critiques of the Church in drama, Serge Salas (2012) gives credence to the earlier assertions about the social power of the Catholic Church throughout the Spanish modernist period, which “quizás explique, en parte, que el Modernismo español no haya escogido la vía iconoclasta” (“El cuerpo tiene la palabra” 289). Mecke notes that this moderate Spanish modernism, or *modernidad transversal*, is consonant with the avant-garde strategy of Aristotelian aestheticism, which the artistic elites employed to confront the nihilistic basis of modernity. Actually, the transversal metaphor of moving across and carrying over that Mecke utilizes shares Benoit’s typology of nihilism in which “Cette traversée du nihilisme s’effectuerait par l’affirmation de la volonté de puissance (et non sa négation), par la création de valeurs nouvelles,” precisely what Spanish modernism attempted to accomplish (32). As an exercise in dramatic transvaluation, Benavente’s fantastic skits cast the masculine obsession of Don Juan, Leandro, and Pierrot as forms of patriarchal domination through murderers who feign eternal love to satisfy their lust. The interface of modernism and nihilism stands to assimilate the ontological aspects of alterity and heterodoxy to construe a dynamic, hermeneutic history of dramatic literature based on the value of art as exceeding itself and life affirming. Within the matrix of European nihilism, the Spanish avant-garde created a uniquely active path in dramaturgy that revitalized dramatic writing, while aestheticism served as a selective mechanism by which artists crafted their works for the sake of art in life.

As a geopolitical bridge between Europe, the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Americas, the Spanish nation unabashedly explored the possibilities of militarism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the Moroccan Wars, up to the Spanish Civil War. Azorín’s “La araña

en el espejo” from *Lo invisible* (1928) portrays Leonor as a nihilist victim of Spain’s neocolonialism, a sickly bride, possibly a virgin, who is wedded to the macho Fernando, away on a military campaign in Africa. She is withering away, from some malady, possibly tuberculosis, and, as she says, she can’t believe he would even consider marrying her. Since the day they married, “no me importaba nada: ni la vida ni la muerte” (58). As a Romantic corpse-bride, she is otherworldly in her declining dream state; meanwhile, quite predictably, Fernando dies abroad at war. She emphasizes to her father what she told her servant earlier, “Yo no deseo ya nada en el mundo” (64). Like Max from Valle’s *Luces*, this lack of desire seems to be her main sickness, her melancholic wantonness. She seems to combine the qualities of a child and woman in her untimely sagacity, “la niña terrible de antaño, la niña que lo sabía todo, todo el misterio de las cosas, te habla ahora” (64). Azorín employs the sound of a ship in the distance to announce what the father could not utter to his daughter, the arrival of Fernando’s corpse: “Quiero morir, quiero morir,” she wails in anguish (65). Death is her only desire; she has a death wish, defying her own existence, wanting only not to be.

With respect to the Basque Miguel de Unamuno and the Catalan Joan Maragall, predecessors to the *superrealismo* of Azorín, Brad Epps elucidates the pivotal role Spain played in cultural and colonial discourse at the time in which “Europe’s battle with what was other than itself was also, and in no small measure, a battle with itself, the devastation it wreaked elsewhere coming home, again and again, in a welter of colonial wars and, most spectacularly, two world wars” (“Between Europe and Africa” 119). Gilles Deleuze also wrote that “It is characteristic of Christian and European history to achieve, by iron and fire, an end which, elsewhere, is already given and naturally attained: the final outcome of nihilism” (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 155). The Rif War (1909-1927) portrayed by Azorín, eerily recounts a pattern of repetition leading up to

the Spanish Civil War as an interlude to European World War, the ferocity of which is domesticated in nihilist Spanish drama. In these tragic works, the hypertension in Spanish foreign policy was exacerbated by more localized problems in the family, with both aspects reaching expression through spectacle.

Western morality and modernity codetermine the globalized world during the twentieth century; however, this process has its roots in absolutist, idealist, and Platonic philosophies stemming from scholasticism. In opposition to this universalizing tendency, as well as the rhetoric of sophistry, stood Aristotle, a harbinger of aestheticism for the Greco-Latin, European world. As Matthew Potolsky observes in his study *Mimesis* (2006), “Aristotle opens up the possibility, not fully explored until the nineteenth century, that artistic and ethical choices are distinct and should be kept separate” (36). This distinction has formal consequences that are heightened at the turn of the century, particularly through the wider movement of aestheticism, and the intended formal clarity of symbolism. This encounter with nihilism produced an aesthetic of decadence that reduced modernism to an absurdity by the dawn of Valle’s *esperpento*. Litvak, in her *España 1900*, finds that the proliferation of Salome in decadent aesthetic literature embodies this gesture of revolt, as she demands the decapitation of the Baptist for an erotic dance (253).<sup>12</sup> This revel in immorality as a motif has the advantage of relativizing and reassessing nihilistic orthodoxies that shaped the Western outlook of the world. The transgressive feminine character populates decadent aesthetics, and Spanish drama appropriates her for the purpose of transvaluation. Playing with this character, Benavente’s Shakespearean *Cuento de primavera* was the pinnacle of his fantastic theater and casts Ganimedes as a

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<sup>12</sup> Deleuze and Guatarri state that “a central figure will start proliferating directly” to form a line of escape from contiguous plot segments that are supposed to entrap (*Kafka* 55). Galdós’s heroine from *Realidad*, Augusta, along with Benavente’s Columbina, Ganimedes, and Zafirino sustain this tragic role of the transgressive female as a symbol of nihilist transvaluation.

disguised, androgynous female, instead of the traditional homoerotic adolescent boy of Greek mythology. In between being and seeming, Ganymedes appeals to men for what she is, and to women for what she appears to be; opposite her, Lesbia, a princess who lacks a mask and must fulfill a social role, is promised in marriage for reasons of state, while Zafirino, a female transvestite and bastard sister to the prince Zafir, –described as “hermoso en demasía para hombre” and dressed “con sin igual bizarría” (154-55)–, almost seduces Ganymedes. As in Rivas Cheriff’s cited misunderstanding, decadence and aestheticism were generally reviled, but they stand to represent instances of heterodoxy in the genealogy of nihilism. A refocus of nihilism and its positive project of aestheticism allow us to better appreciate the aesthetic accomplishment of this multifarious movement in decadence that internalized the chaos and crisis of the modern world.<sup>13</sup>

A more precise chronological definition of this period succeeding naturalism in drama is perhaps overdue. Germán Gullón in “La modernidad silenciada” locates this as one of the first instances of modernism, “del momento simbolista, colindante con diversos otros componentes, como el exotismo, el erotismo y la bohemia, y que se extiende desde aproximadamente 1885 a 1910” (270). This would encompass in Spanish drama Galdós’s *Realidad*, Benavente’s *Teatro fantástico*, and, including others, the more experimental tragic drama of Valle-Inclán. Two facets of this decadent aestheticism in Spanish drama are melodrama and mythology, the former an immediate neo-romantic influence while the latter was formed by a sustained interest in the classical tradition due to anxiety over desacralization. We see these two manifestations of the modernist stage engaged differently by the various playwrights, neither of which is altogether

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<sup>13</sup> Appropriately, the Harlequin of Benavente’s *Cuento de primavera*, symbol of Spanish *sinrazón*, is allowed the epilogue in this court of chaos. Benavente reforms him though, in the guise of court poet recounting the virtue of a volatile spring that overturns courtly customs. The court jester apologizes for the flux of the court and chaotic masquerading, but eventually restores order as counselor of nuptials.



silenced. It might be ventured that aestheticism eschews the melodramatic somewhat, but its persistence is felt on the Spanish stage, even in the foremost dramatists such as García Lorca. Meanwhile, mythology is recuperated and recreated by the same writer, as well as others before him like Maragall, Grau, Unamuno, and D'Ors. The question that arises from this play with melodrama and mythology is how these forms bear nihilism? Aesthetic experimentation was the hallmark of the avant-garde, but the Spanish variation had the historical advantage of relating to and relativizing its literary past in favor of a genuinely tragic encounter with the present. Peter Brooks warns of the quick criticism of melodrama, as well as the tendency to misread or neglect it, and furthers its continued relevance after romanticism as “the expressionism of the moral imagination” (55). From what we have already noted, the moral imagination was heavy from nihilism at the turn of the century and sought to relieve itself through aestheticism, decadence, and a return to Aristotelian tragic poetics, among other more frivolous escapes. Nevertheless, this modernist drama in Spain, even with the recourse of symbolism, could not forsake the legacy of melodrama, with its sedimented choral, operatic, and post-romantic pseudo realism. This exuberant, Wagnerian art form pushed the boundaries of theatricality, delighting the audience even as it challenged its public with an overtly synthetic style. As Brooks reconsiders melodrama, Jean Luc Nancy demands a reevaluation of myth as a Western, structural idea that “one might call the entire hallucination, or the entire imposture, of the self-consciousness of a modern world that has exhausted itself in the fabulous representation of its own power” (*The Inoperative Community* 46). These comments on myth as a foundation of Western idealism strike at the center of nihilism and how it self-perpetuates. An analysis of the melodramatic and mythological in Spanish tragic drama reveals a novel interpretation in these tragic works and demonstrates their wider significance in an aesthetics of nihilism.

Nihilism, as a mechanism of cultural change, is located in Europe and found at the turn of the century through the long historical process of transvaluation. In this way, bourgeois modernism and the avant-garde are a continuous epiphenomenon of the crisis in the European moral conscience rooted in Christianity and Platonism. Nihilism, and its positive manifestations through Aristotelian tragic poetics and aestheticism, also holds the advantage over modernism and the questions of whether something, someone or someplace were modernist because the concept explains this rapid change at the turn of the century as a hyperactive, affective, Western self-consciousness. Much of the scholarship on modernism has paid attention to the segmenting of certain places and dates, but the movement of nihilism, a theory that encompasses cultures as distinct as imperialism and syndicalism, can circumvent this aporia. Attempting to avoid theoretical simplifications, Delgado, Mendelson, and Vázquez (2007) view Spanish modernism through an anti-essentialist reading of the nation, highlighting the simultaneous process of incorporation and isolation that becomes the nature of Spanish exceptionalism (108). To these authors, Spanish modernism is a question of cultural difference in need of deconstruction, with Spanish identity defined in relation to European modernity (109).

Regarding Spanish eccentricity, Valle's Max in *Luces* rabidly spews, "Este pueblo miserable, transforma todos los grandes conceptos en un cuento de beatas costureras. Su religión es una chochez de viejas que disecan al gato cuando se les muere," ironically capturing the national movement of nihilism as he becomes a caricature of modernism (884). Rodolfo Cardona and Anthony N. Zahareas conclude that the ingenious *esperpento* is, at once, "arte verbal" and "perspectiva estética" (30). It has its roots in Spanish tragicomedy and breeds a later theater of the absurd. The *esperpento* is tragic, but not tragedy, because it has no hero and does not allow for catharsis; Cardona and Zahareas clarify, "en una tragedia lo humano logra alcanzar su

auténtica grandeza; en el esperpento, el hombre alcanza su verdadera incoherencia y su verdadera degradación” (74). The European gentleman’s rationalism in Valle’s *esperpento* is questioned through the nihilistic transvaluation of tragedy, or, the genre’s reformation. This Deleuzian *neoformation* is Valle’s most important contribution to the stage (*Kafka* 75), the relevance of which has not been exhausted in the arts, even though scholarship has scarcely recognized the importance of modern Spanish tragedy. Again, Valle can enjoy the tragic mode without writing tragedy because his *esperpento* does not rely on catharsis, which is functionally the inverse of the tragic (Lazzarini-Dossin 142). Therefore, much of what can be recounted of the tragic –as well as of the absurd and grotesque– can be said of Valle’s *esperpento*. The tragic, as well as the *esperpentic*, expose us to alterity and the rational logic of identification, “qui est responsable, en ultime instance, des convulsions linguistiques, spatio-temporelles et personnelles” (166-67). Valle foregoes classical tragedy and catharsis because his drama intends to incite the bourgeoisie, denying them a somniferous transcendent organizing principle. Valle’s secondary character Don Latino, petty author of cheap, plagiarized, outmoded novels, is a foil for his protagonist Max, an agonistic, anti-heroic, blind, and unrecognized poet. Their penury drives them to drink, but impoverishment and alcoholism is the extent of what the two share. Max is affable, honest, and witty, whereas Don Latino is a pretentious, opportunistic lowlife, stealing his wallet, idea of the *esperpento*, and leaving him dead at his doorstep after a night of debauchery. These two meander in Madrid, “absurdo, brillante y hambriento,” for an evening and morning, but Max does not survive to live through the next day (*Luces* 876). Máximo Estrella is Bohemian, revered by the *modernistas*, his successors, but unknown, misunderstood, and vilified by the public. We can see in these two characters an opposition of the absurd (Don Latino) and the tragic (Max). The tragic aspect of the play is Max’s miserable life, full of potential, and his

untimely death. His demise is at hand, and he willingly accepts it; he cannot stand the absurdity of his valueless existence in a senseless world. He despairs as his wife tries to console him before leaving and intoxicating himself. She assures him “Otra puerta abrirá,” as he concedes “La de la muerte. Podemos suicidarnos colectivamente” (877). This resort to passive nihilism works in conjunction with Don Latino’s reactive nihilism to create an atmosphere of consuming decadence, which leads to death. Nietzsche, who is briefly parodied in Valle’s *esperpento* through the bookie Zarathustra and his visitor Don Peregrino Gay, informs the author’s perspective from the outset in this scathing critique of Restoration society.

The aesthetic trajectory before the turn of the century, into the thirties, charts a trend toward more democratic drama, distanced from its beginnings in Europe as a cathedral and palatial proscenium, an admixture of pagan and Christian rites and games. These modern theaters of different sizes and intentions, arose from the metropolises of Europe, sometimes enjoying state sponsorship, and at others suffering taxation. The structural change, in which the state intervenes and rescues the ailing theater in Spain, is echoed in the constant humdrum of crisis in the periodicals of the time. An instance of this complicated time in drama was the transition by Galdós from the novel to the stage, and his struggle to find success in this art form. Jesús Rubio Jiménez points out that:

Su producción dramática no encontraba salida sino como teatro para lectura. Galdós, asqueado de cómicos y empresarios, se había refugiado de nuevo en la novela dialogada, y los nuevos escritores, salvo quienes cediendo a los gustos dominantes estrenaban piezas de un modernismo edulcorado (Benavente) prefiriendo el posibilismo al silencio, sólo en revistas o volúmenes de corta tirada sacaban adelante su producción. (*El teatro poético en España* 22)

The temptation to write for the stage in Spain was due to the pull of its theatrical tradition and the possibility of quick financial return, but the serious turn of the century dramatist generally found his efforts frustrated when his work debuted. The elusive glory the stage held out for these famous novelists and poets was impossible in Spain at the time because of the commercial structure and industrial apparatus in place, all of which favored comedy. Why did this incongruity between dramatist, audience, and other elements of stagecraft peak at the turn of the century? To complicate matters, the discrepancies between literary and performative aspects of drama were heightened as the writers of other genres attempted to make immediate contact with the Spanish bourgeois public. Dupont asserts that “le théâtre moderne depuis le XVIIIe siècle est au contraire de plus en plus aristotélicien,” with the consequence that a text takes center stage at the expense of the spectacle (80). Dupont finds this supposed textual dominance of the stage, which was apparently Aristotle’s scheme, restrictive of the playful dimension of stagecraft: is this Aristotelian vampirism the fundamental operation of modern drama? For Dupont, an idealistic, post-Aristotelian theater would be a popular, carnivalesque art form (83). Such a prescription combines ancient rituals and orgies with the excesses of revolutionary protest, identifying with the people through commonality, yet the bourgeois stage in Spain attempted as much, from the persistence of comedy, to the bourgeois dramas of Echegaray and Benavente: avant-garde drama, however, broke this symmetry between public and playwright.

Aristotle’s *Poetics* was a descriptive treatise of Attic tragedy that also, at one time in its entirety, covered comedy as well. The work offers an explanation of the ancient tragic phenomenon onstage and helps the modern scholar of drama reread and conceptualize stagecraft as an art form. Aristotelian tragic poetics allows mimesis to enrapture an audience, thereby stimulating a collective somatic effect. From this perspective, an aesthetics of drama would

depend on the sensuality of artistic conception and reception. How to relate this complex of feelings, and explain the nihilist works that resulted, at the turn of the century in Spain is our task ahead. From the standpoint of nihilism, aestheticism becomes a redemptive approach to human existence as the work affirms the artist's genius and place in the world. This fame, or shame, however, is shared through national glory and patrimony as the states and societies of the modern world accept or reject their artists. As the encounter with nihilism developed, these feelings of exaltation and humiliation came to form the backdrop of Spanish drama at the turn of the century. Art, as an instance of will to form allowed for the confrontation of nihilism through the transformative technique of mimesis. On Valle's aesthetics of dissidence, Sumner Greenfield (1996) observes that "la pasión por el arte, todas las artes, y un impulso creador y sintetizante nutrido por la voluntad de experimentación y superación estéticas," was the force behind his *esperpento* departing from his tragicomedy *Divinas palabras* (39). The trajectory of this aestheticism, however, goes back long before Valle, at least to Aristotle, and persists long after the Galician's creative literary career. While aestheticism wanes at times throughout literary history, its creative force unifies the most brilliant artistic energies at times like the so-called Golden and Silver Ages in Spain.

Aestheticism in drama attempted to create works that exhibit the matter of form as its central aspect; this, in turn, led the Spanish dramatist to a tragic poetics of theatricality. Claude Le Bigot in "Innovation théâtrale et subversion des genres codifiés" points out that "le théâtre total n'est pas limité au plan esthétique, qu'il s'agit d'une dramaturgie de la participation qui veut rendre au public la place qui lui revient comme dans les usages sociaux de la fête" (190). This festive element of the theater as a social spectacle is witnessed from the bourgeois dramas of Galdós and Benavente to the avant-garde dramaturgy of García Lorca, albeit through

increasing proximity to formal tragedy. The important point made by Le Bigot is that the stage has a social role to play in modern, European societies, and that the work of the dramatist is an art form valued disproportionately to others because it actively expresses inhibitions of the public. A play allows its audience to breathe more freely or suffocates society in a stultifying mirror image that flatters and violates the creative power of mimesis. This totalizing, physiological aspect of drama set the task of liberating a stifled bourgeois conscious through aestheticism. Frantisek Deak clarifies how:

The avant-garde, then, is characterized not by a simple antagonism to bourgeois society and art but by a systematic, conscious, and radical attempt to reclaim through art the fullness of life—to bring onto the level of discourse those aspects of life that society chooses to neglect, disregard, or openly suppress. For the symbolists at the turn of the century, art became the exclusive domain in which this was still possible. (*Symbolist Theater. The Formation of an Avant-Garde* 132)

What comes to the fore through aestheticism, and the crucial symbolist moment of the early avant-garde, is that human life and art are fundamentally intertwined, and that the quality of the former is radically linked to the purity of the latter. Peter Bürger advances a complimentary yet critical view of this vitalist element in avant-garde art as he attempts to analyze the ideological and aesthetic disjuncture of the movement, which purportedly transformed life into an aesthetic pursuit (49). In sum, a positive evaluation of aestheticism reveals that the movement was apt at questioning turn of the century social norms through a reassessment of the life-art interstice. Aestheticism was the avant-garde project to create an aesthetics of nihilism that was life affirming; this change was signaled by the shift in evaluation from emphasis on the author to his work. As Ackerman and Puchner explain, “If modernism extends Romantic concerns with

interiority, modernist artists also decenter the subject and shift emphasis from an individual person on to the texture of the work itself” (7). The focus of avant-garde drama is no longer identity, subjectivity, or psychology, but rather a physics of the art work expressive of a potentially sensual experience that would make the world intelligible through scintillating art. This expansion outward rather than inward, away from characterization and toward action in tragic drama, is what distinguishes the avant-garde theater from its early naturalist antecedents of the realist phase. The search for literary value in a society that had little esteem for it as art compelled the writers to place a newfound emphasis on the work itself. This craftsmanship and technicality were to have a sensual effect, which could elicit “una reconfiguración del mapa sensorial humano” (Gullón, “La modernidad silenciada” 278). The avant-garde work becomes a thing of refinement, enjoyment, and enlightenment created by the artist to share with others. There are many ways to conceive and receive the work of aestheticism, but it was an already embodied creation, although sometimes circumscribed by an ism. Deak highlights the importance of “gestural theatricality of incarnation” for the avant-garde (251), while we might also include for the Spanish stage traditional incarnations of tragic form, from the Dionysian to the Apollonian and Christian; these tragic embodiments are matrices that typify and rarify Spanish avant-garde drama. These avant-garde works of aestheticism were not reflections of nature or reality but transformations of matter and meaning that conveyed emotive power, not unlike the religious rites and icons of antiquity and Christianity.

Still, aestheticism went above and beyond the historical forms associated with these epochs in the Western tradition. Aestheticism was moved to transgression because the avant-garde movement was aware, always to a greater or lesser degree, of its nihilist foundation. The reflexive aspect of nihilism went first through the naturalist apprehension toward realism, which



bid representation burrow further, even to the depths of the voyeuristic and grotesque. To upend mores, uncover truths, and not hold back lies were the ways in which naturalism advanced aestheticism. Pathology, physicality, bodies, drugs, and corpses all take center stage, attacking the metaphysical discourses held holy before the turn of the century. Naturalism was an initial backlash toward nihilism in Europe, weary of what it perceived as rampant degeneracy. The “biological and technological modes of generating persons” and the coordination of “body and machine” were new realities in the modern period, and naturalism was the first aesthetic movement to fixate on them (Garner 78). Stanton Garner’s convincing exposition of “modernism’s theatrical body” (77) and the subsequent “medicalization” (75) of it is an important precedent in the symbolist undertaking which recuperated the ecumenical, pagan, and primitive rites and motifs to produce a radical aesthetic approach that embraced modern decadence over apocalyptic degeneracy. Naturalist decline was overcome through symbolist return, rotation, and the rise of aestheticism in the avant-garde. Cyclical time, color, tonality, and rhythm replaced verisimilitude, description, and representation; enigmatic surfaces and appearances showed forth over dirty details; to the aesthete modern science was seen as a form of symbolism that focused on the atomic and lost sight of the global. This transition from naturalism to symbolism in Spanish drama is epitomized by Galdós’s unclassifiable works, which were the catalyst for aestheticism, and the emergence of nihilist drama on the Peninsula.

The breadth and specificity of nihilism legitimate the guiding concept in studying Spanish avant-garde drama’s turn to tragedy. Aestheticism was the formal principle accounting for this change, and constitutes the nexus between naturalism and symbolism, thereby motivating the avant-garde dramatist to create anew from what was old. Deak points out how “the transference of issues previously associated with religious life into the aesthetic domain belongs

fully to symbolism, and to the avant-garde in general” (131). Among the artists at the turn of the century, from the mainland to the Mediterranean, a sense of redemption and communion arose from aestheticism generally and symbolism in particular. However, this collectivity was often felt as a belligerent difference to the dominant state and industry-supported culture of the bourgeoisie. As such, the artist as hero was born in the modern period as “it allows a perception of a work as an existential gesture vis-à-vis one’s own life and society” (Deak 17). The artist’s work was what he could positively show of the pains and pleasures he endured, a testament to how he internalized this antagonism toward the collective body, recalling the genealogical method refined by Foucault. European history is the development of nihilism and Spain has a unique part in the movement of transvaluation; accordingly, drama is a sphere in which we see some of the intensities and deficiencies of European society articulated. In Valle’s first *esperpento*, Max famously declares that “España es una deformación grotesca de la civilización europea,” and that the beauty of classicism will be transformed into modern absurdity with the mathematical precision of a concave mirror (933). The public space of the proscenium is a constructed sphere in which author, director, cast, crew, and audience perform a millennial ritual of transvaluation; however, only at the turn of the century was this act questioned by changes in society and jeopardized by new technologies. The threat of nihilism and the response of aestheticism produced a wave of total art, along with the rise of the theater of art, as both phenomena sprung from the genesis of symbolism in the face of naturalism. We see the same movement in Spanish drama at the turn of the century in which the ideal to represent truth was slowly superseded by the use of symbol, the acknowledgement of epistemological and aesthetic limits, and the subsequent reevaluation of the tragic and tragedy. Combining myth and melodrama facilitated creative destructions in stagecraft and dramaturgy, internalizing the drive

of nihilism at the center of European history. Dominique Rabaté's proposal that nihilism is a more fruitful supposition than modernism corresponds to what others have wrote on modernism, that is, "Il faut donc rendre à la littérature des XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles sa soif de destruction, sa fascination pour le néant, sa lucidité négative afin de comprendre la place de la négativité dans la formidable explosion créatrice de l'art moderne" (7). The force and function of nihilism are inseparable from this body of turn of the century literature, but modernism is a bourgeois formalization of nihilism that conceals more than it reveals, begging a thorough deconstruction.

The demise of modernism is linked historically to the interwar years of the two World Wars, but it would seem that this annihilation of life and other resources is best conceived through nihilism. The Spanish Civil War was a precursor to this self-slaughter, which breeds a culture that holds war to be its highest art form. Echoing this will to nothingness, Max's partner in *Luces de Bohemia*, the French Mme. Collette, remembers his life as a working towards death; his daughter grieves uncontrollably "con un grito estridente tuerce los ojos, y comienza a batir la cabeza contra el suelo" (942). In the next scene the two gravediggers lament their lot, and the country's dismal fate as two illustrious mourners visit the graveside, the "céltico" Marqués de Bradomín and the "índico" Rubén Darío. Both, together, are otherworldly, but somehow part of the surreal Spanish orbit created in Valle's *esperpento*. This staging is significant of European nihilism as the Galician Celt states "la única verdad es la muerte," while the Nicaraguan elides the issue, "¡Marqués, no hablemos más de Ella!" (944). This dialogue of Dionysian pessimism on death mirrors the one before between Max and the caricatured mestizo poet at their champagne dinner. Bradomín is almost a century old in this play, and fears being eternalized through immortality; that is, he represents the long nineteenth-century, the failures of romantic Carlism and Spanish chauvinism. Modernity, on the other hand, is enshrined in the bourgeois

paradox of modernism, represented by Rubén Darío. The endurance of modernism as a form of nihilism is a vicious cycle, the same movement Max was bored to death with. Klossowsky offers a clue to this movement when he writes that “In order for this propensity toward non-sense to mature into the affirmation of life itself, fatalism had to be pushed to the extreme point of active nihilism” (*Nietzsche* 94), which is, in a sense, what Valle is practicing when he expresses the grotesque and absurd, especially through the moribund Max, the immoral Bradomín, and the modernist Rubén Darío. Beyond the horrors of modern European history, nihilism operates as an ontological basis with many traps and few escapes: the turn of the century theater held out both. Mecke’s study of “La estética del 98,” in which he describes “el negativismo de la modernidad,” calling it “una época de auto-negación,” never mentions nihilism as the force behind his vision of modernism (182). Although many of these studies on modernism focus on the negativity of the age, they rarely explain why or how modernist culture was destined to destroy itself.

Most studies on turn of the century literature make the critical, moral judgment of modernism as essentially good or bad for the West and the world. An opening to nihilism allows for the displacement of this scholarly problem, and also brings the functioning of aestheticism into focus. If there are isolated instances of modernist narrative and poetry in Spain and elsewhere, the examples are scarce, and, if anything, are so disparate that they could easily fold into other movements. The commercial culture of Western modernism is now largely Anglo-American; according to this logic we live in a world of change in which life must be organized and mobilized through planning and management, with the illusion of individual freedom manifest in personal style. The genealogy of aestheticism through Aristotelian tragic poetics in Spanish avant-garde drama offered another way out of this commercial movement, attempting to relate to the world through art, for life, and elide the bourgeois paradox of modernism.

Modernism was not a critical idiom, rather a complicit agenda of the culture industry; as a methodological term it conceals petty bourgeois anxiety, and reveals the treason of art in life. As a signifying system, modernism formalized nineteenth century European ideas of the world and repackaged them in the twentieth. It has been noted that Spanish realism is remarkably modernist, while its modernism is noticeably conservative, leading the literary scholar to wonder how this could be. The question is a simple one and leads to the genealogy of whose reality, and whose modernity? This continuity was played out not so much on the stage as the serial novel and poetry review, already settled in drama as a rejection of realism and modernism. When scholars try to study modernist theater in Spain, they generally point to events and developments around 1900. The dramatists generally lumped into this group, Benavente and Valle-Inclán for example, never actually wrote in the manner of *modernismo*, nor did they write as European modernists in the Anglo-American sense. Conversely, if we ask *who* was responsible for avant-garde drama in Spain, we are led to a genealogy of writers who desired to be different, and crafted their works according to this difference.

## **II. Synthesis and Eclosion: Genealogy of Nihilist Drama in Spain**

The movement of nihilism at the turn of the century in Spanish drama signaled a change from the romanticized bourgeois worldview, to an aesthetics of resistance at odds with the dominant society's interests. The emergence of the avant-garde in Spain can be traced to the rise of aestheticism on the Peninsula in which mimesis in drama returns to symbolic and expressionistic tragedy as nineteenth century modes of representation wane. This disavowal of the bourgeois real and modern placed new demands on the Spanish avant-garde dramatist. The reconstruction of this process accounts for how immorality, decadence, total art, and the theater of art intertwined to challenge the nineteenth century theater of customs. Naturalism and symbolism, despite the persistence of inherited modes like melodrama and myth, instigated the tendency toward theatricality while a return to tragedy in Spain accompanied the analytic representation of European nihilism. A literary reconstruction of this trend in the nihilist tragedy of Spain traces the development of avant-garde drama at the turn of the century that elaborated on events in European dramaturgy, but also molded a unique supranational aesthetic that depended on the genius of the author and his novel interpretation of the Spanish tradition. This genealogy advances nihilism as a mechanism of change in the avant-garde dramatist's recourse to aestheticism and tragic poetics; as we shall see, this change was underway in the last decade of

the nineteenth century, with renewed momentum in the first decade of the twentieth. From Galdós's portrayal of Madrid's intrigue and hypocrisy during the reign of Alfonso XIII in *Realidad* (1892) to Valle-Inclán's later grotesque vision of the nation's capital under the conservative ministry of Antonio Maura in *Luces de Bohemia* (1920; finalized in the first year of Primo de Rivera's dictatorship in 1924), writing for the stage at the turn of the century in Spain afforded these artists another means of expressing their sense of being in the world, alongside their concerns involving the injustices perpetrated by modernity. Consequently, nihilism on the Spanish stage was largely a dystopia that begged its audience consider other ways of being through a cathartic reevaluation of the relation between life, art, and the world.

Nietzsche's account of tragedy for the turn of the century stage depends on the revival of consciousness, and the collective awakening of the senses aroused by the performance. The dramatic work is enjoyed as play but tragedy distinguishes itself as a genre through elevations in tone and rigorous form. In *The Birth of Tragedy* we can genealogically trace the reconciliation of Dionysian and Apollonian art forms by way of the Hellenic will to overcome states of intoxication and dreaming (33). This Pan-Hellenic will to clarity and sobriety through tragedy is what we know today as classicism, understood as a conservative aesthetic approach to nihilism. Nietzsche holds up the myth of Dionysus above all other gods because the wisdom he reveals "is an unnatural abomination" as it destroys empirical and individual ways of knowing (69). As a consequence, nobility and humanity are endowed to those who defile the other divinities that in turn exact suffering for their sacrilege (71). This righteous transgression is what he calls the virtue of active sin, which tragedy depends on for its action. According to Nietzsche, Dionysus is the original hero that the likes of Prometheus and Oedipus mime as masks. The genealogical

forms<sup>14</sup> of this original hero are individuations of an agonizing god that was first dismembered, and then reincarnated.

From Galdós to Valle-Inclán, the Spanish dramatists at the turn of the century explored ways of recreating a microcosm of appearance through innovations in mimesis based on aestheticism and the confrontation with nihilism. Hayden White elaborates on this formal incarnation of Dionysian poetics through tragedy and seems to favor the heightened rhetorical strategies in his linguistic metahistory:

This movement from chaos to form and back distinguishes Tragedy from other forms of *poiesis* (such as the epic and lyric) and from all systems of knowledge and belief (such as science and religion). All other prospects on human existence tend to freeze life in an apprehension of either chaos or form; only Tragedy requires a constant alternation of the awareness of chaos with the will to form in the interest of life. (340)

The balance of form and chaos indicates a resignation to the limits of perception and knowledge, yet exalts in these same restraints by way of art. At the extreme of drama are the excesses of play and the suspension of reality, what Nietzsche called the appearance of appearance that the stage recreates through mimesis. Of course the original hero, or heroine, in tragedy conjures up the archetype of the Christ figure, but rather than the redemption of souls, in avant-garde drama, especially in Valle's Máximo from *Luces*, we witness the perdition of livelihood and self. This aesthetic of total annihilation leaves its audience with nothing other than the sensuality of art:

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<sup>14</sup> A literary genealogy should also demonstrate "the emergence of different interpretations" (Foucault, *Language* 151-152), and "the differential element of values" (Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 2). Genealogy works within history, and is a process of differentiation between strengths that exposes the division and multiplication of forces; it traces the movements of action and domination. The differential values of aestheticism and the return to tragedy with regards to comedy, frivolity, and the cinema foreground the coming to consciousness of nihilism in the arts.



aestheticism of the work in response to cultural nihilism. Such an outlook was expressed through tragedy and we see its propitious return to the stage at the turn of the century. Consequentially, the deformation of classical tragedy was an admission of the aesthete's dependence on Aristotelian poetics. As such, aestheticism was not so much a repudiation of classicism as it was a reaction to nineteenth century bourgeois neo-romanticism, from Echegaray to Galdós's weaker pieces like *La de San Quintín* and *Electra*. As the dramatists of the modern period engaged the past and transformed the present through changes in tone and form they also explored the bounds of chaos in art. The modern will to form through aestheticism recovered a newfound wisdom of sensuality rooted in prehistorical, primitive civilizations. The Spanish dramatists at the turn of the century revived this tragic knowledge of chaos and form that Hayden White describes as the limits of tragedy.

How to fixate what is in flux was the aesthete's problem as he faced modern nihilism through his work: this circumvention of bourgeois custom and modernist culture necessitated a radical aesthetic activity onstage. Avant-garde drama is therefore iconoclastic, idiosyncratic, eccentric, and carried on what Santiáñez explains as a milieu of commerce during the eighteenth century in which writers embarked on "la búsqueda de una estética personal" (33). For many dramatists at the time, the performance of their work was increasingly important to them, and they often strove to maintain authority over the work as directors even after it was written. This idea of control is rooted in a concept of property and copyright, but also corresponds to the idea of total art because the aesthete saw himself as a godlike creator. The dramatic writer around the turn of the century sought to impregnate the work, from beginning to end, as it was penned and performed, with his own personality. This phenomenon was quite different from the bourgeois neo-romantic preoccupation with the representation of character, conflict resolution, and tragic

aversion. The abandonment of nineteenth century aesthetics in Spanish drama has generally been marked by the hegemonic literary history of modernism. In Spain this movement can be viewed accordingly, “Superado ya el período del «modernismo polémico», que correría entre 1894 (primera Festa modernista de Sitges) y 1904 (final de la revista *Helios*), era el momento en que se consumaba la aceptación social del modernismo y su domesticación” (Rubio Jiménez, *El teatro poético en España* 29). On the Peninsula, modernism, however, is too vague and partisan to account for the international, continental, regional, and personal nuances that are best described as an encounter with nihilism through the embrace of aestheticism. The return to tragedy in Spain bears this out as the dramatists of the avant-garde attempted to uproot the realist tradition that upheld neo-romantic, bourgeois conventions in the theater.

This chapter will reconstruct the movement of nihilist tragedy in Spain through developments in the dramaturgy of Galdós, Benavente, and Valle-Inclán. The bibliography on modernist and avant-garde drama in Spain provides a foundation upon which a reevaluation of the period can be built, but nihilism still lacks the attention it warrants and deserves further study. I follow the line of scholarship charted by Maestro’s *El personaje nihilista*, but move toward an understanding of nihilism that updates its role in Western culture as formally productive in the dramatists studied here; that is, nihilism became a force of change by which the West internalizes at the turn of the century, to varying degrees, realizations, and reactions, and Spanish dramaturgy has its own confrontation with this development through a return to tragedy. In agreement with Maestro, there appears to be a direct relation between nihilism and the production of tragic characters in European drama, at least beginning with the tragicomedy *La Celestina* (1499), in that they are shaped “con frecuencia desde una estética propia de la experiencia trágica, en construcciones formal y funcionalmente negadoras de cualquier orden o

realidad trascendente” (13). The forerunner of this movement in the Castilian language at the turn of the century was the Galician Valle-Inclán as he sought to reconcile the disparate aesthetics of different times and places into a total work that took on tragic forms in his *comedia bárbara*, *tragicomedia de aldea*, and *esperpento*.<sup>15</sup>

Valle-Inclán works from the torrential Wagnerian mold in his first drama, back toward the Spanish Renaissance tragicomedy in his second phase, then breaks from his native region on inaugurating the *esperpento* in *Luces de Bohemia*. Despite the same setting in the town of Viana del Prior, the trilogy of *Comedias bárbaras* is stylistically different from *Divinas palabras*, signaling an ongoing process of aesthetic revision. The egregious Montenegro clan of the former is nowhere to be found in the latter, only vulgar rustics and riffraff. The grotesque and the erotic are still here, but as Gloria Baamonde points out, in *Divinas palabras* Valle perfects his economical use of quick, conversational dialogue (64), a technique we also see surface in Benavente’s *La Malquerida*. As she assesses the work, “en ella se abandonan los mundos ficticios de naturaleza épico-mítica, poblados por una sociedad estamental, presidida por grandes héroes” (57). Valle’s rewriting of his Galician barbaric comedy turned tragicomedy is an important development in the genealogy of nihilist drama. His heroine Mari Gaila, an example of avant-garde eroticism and defiance recalls Litvak’s Salome, and Nietzsche’s voluptuous martyr, but Valle’s rendition of the female victim is somewhat naïvely seduced, abandoned by him, almost gang raped by a mob, then paraded nude in Viana del Prior as a compromise disgrace; her violation and sacrifice for church law and rural morality symbolize Valle’s dissociation from provincial Carlism. Nearly stoned to death, the Sacristán, her husband Pedro Gailo saves her as he renounces her: “Qui sine peccato est vestrum, primus in illam lapidem

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<sup>15</sup> Ricci finds a developmental correlation between Valle’s *esperpento* and his political reengagement after his split with Carlism during the proclaimed dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in 1923 (*Le retour du tragique* 91-92).

mittat,” whomever is free from sin should throw the first stone (593). The guilt-ridden mob is denied torturing her because they are sinners as well; their hypocrisy is revealed through restored hierarchy. It is the old charlatan esquire, “leguleyo” Serenín de Bretal that discovers Séptimo Miao and Mari Gaila fornicating along the riverbank, and whips up the mob to bear witness and punish. This flow of people, like water, parallels the action of the lovers, with the fatalist movement unleashed through natural symbolism of the river. The submission of mob rule by Church law is symbolized through the divine words in Latin, thereby consummating Valle’s rural tragicomedy. Valle’s vision of his *tragicomedia de aldea* can be seen schematically as the clash of modernity with a rural, peripheral mentality. The vivacious Mari Gaila was subdued and terrified through the compromise of being forced to dance, avoiding further violation and execution, but finally left to console herself in the convent. Like a cat –vis-à-vis the elusive Séptimo Miao who seduced her– the characters in Valle’s play have multiple lives, all of which are fleeting and full of pain. The mechanism at play, as Lazzarini points out, is an Eros-Thanatos complex, which is why the diabolical Séptimo Miao character is so vital to the work (350), seducing Mari Gaila and leaving his former lover to commit suicide. We can see through the symbolic Latin of *Divinas palabras* what Lazzarini refers to as the tragic crisis of language and temporality, which bring with it “el aniquilamiento del personaje” (351). Like Mari Gaila’s experience with the Church Latin, language is a common denominator that reduces and subjects us in life and death. Elaborating on this idea, Lazzarini refers to this stylization of Valle’s characters as “la animalización y el anonadamiento del personaje” (353). In this transitional piece of Valle-Inclán’s we see his symbolism maturing into what will be the ingenious deformation technique of the *esperpento*. As he increasingly defined his dramaturgy in relation to the Spanish people, Gonzalo Sobejano’s remarks on Valle’s place in Spanish literature at the

turn of the century prove valuable on relating them back to Hayden White's comments on the play of chaos and form that tragedy recreates: "Valle-Inclán reúne una materia henchida de turbia vitalidad, misterio terreno y espumante pasión con una voluntad de forma extremadamente lúcida" (*Nietzsche en España* 227). Sobejano sees Valle as an artist whose work resonates and reveals the world around him; that is, Valle achieves a remarkable fusion of the Dionysian and Apollonian and charts the Nietzschean aesthetic outlined so far. Expanding on Sobejano's work, Valle's literary career vacillates between the aesthetic possibilities of Apollonian Hellenism and Dionysian pessimism as he self-censures and revisits forms and topics throughout the arc of his dramatic writing; he increasingly engages with the grotesque, sordid, subaltern, macabre, even gothic<sup>16</sup> depiction of high and low society through stylistic distortion.

The centrality of Valle to the genealogy of nihilist drama in Spain is apparent in literary histories of turn of the century Spanish drama, but the reasons are various. He epitomizes the break with naturalism in literature and performance, an aesthetic that was "profoundly conservative and deeply antipathetic to change" (Williams, "Anti-Theatricality" 97-98). Nature was a social construct of modernity, while the most important moments in Valle's drama defamiliarized the norms that defined this modern outlook. As an aesthete, Valle was politically dissonant and seen morally as a libertine. In his time, it was hard to receive and assimilate his works as they challenged an art form turned industry, and they largely remained in obscurity or elitist admiration. Valle is best appreciated, however, because of his "dégoût de la vie, un désir du néant," which is why he pushed so hard the moral bounds of what could be written and shown

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Brooks writes on the rise of the Gothic mode in melodrama, "The dreamworld is specifically nightmare and frustration. It in fact represents the ultimate (Gothic) nightmare of burial alive, loss of mobility and of identity" (50). Even before Valle, we see this trope in Galdós's plot structure and sequencing of alternative realities in *Realidad*, and to a lesser extent in *Electra* and *La de San Quintín* in which the heroine's fateful ruin in a cloister is presented but averted. Again, contesting Brooks's assertion that tragedy ended with Racine, Spanish tragicomedy returns through Valle at the turn of the century darker than ever; at the turn of the century "the dark tones are heard again for the first time since the seventeenth century" (Styan, *The Dark Comedy* 59).

in drama (Benoit 29). Perhaps his *Sonatas* were the most scandalous, but as we can see through the mirroring and doubling of characters and places through his drama, he also wrote difficult plays intended for the stage, and not only serialized pulp fiction. Benoit's typology of the active and reactive are played out in his tragic pieces through the corrosion of murder, suicide, fratricide, debt, blackmail, and gossip, that permeate Valle's work. In this sense he has not forsaken the naturalist's commitment to social and political inspection, as evinced by some of Galdós's and Benavente's tragic works; rather, he epitomizes the "paranoiac avant-garde" in which the artists of the time conjured up archaic and mythical forms mixed with modern functionalism in order to produce "neoformations," thereby relying on the hermeneutic past and future for inspiration as they worked to transform an ineluctably bureaucratic present (Deleuze and Guatarri, *Kafka* 75). The avant-garde then embraced its marginalization and separation from society in order to erect a relatively independent body of artwork that paranoiacally went back to prehistory and unknown futures to construct performances apprehensive of bourgeois modernism. The aesthete, especially beginning with Valle and Grau, transformed the physics of his work through formal changes in spatial and temporal arrangements, thereby embracing nihilism as an internal factor and determining force that destroyed any static presence the piece was supposed to have. Nihilism was a necessary compositional factor in Valle's erratic, albeit increasingly rhythmic movement in the rural tragicomedy.

The project of aestheticism was well underway as the realist and neo-romantic successes of the mid eighteenth century, influenced by operatic melodrama, finally resorted to a radical expression of theatricality. The staged confrontation of naturalism and symbolism through Galdós and Benavente was continued through Valle-Inclán's aesthetic opening of realist dramaturgy, thereby consolidating a position from which to carry out the avant-garde resistance.

Before Valle's ingenious, albeit convoluted dramaturgy, Galdós and Benavente brought naturalist and symbolist aesthetics to a Spanish public that was by then accustomed to syncretic adaptations of the nascent European avant-garde. Although somewhat hesitant of the demands and intensities of continental aestheticism, –e.g. Alfred Jarry's raucous 1896 *Ubu Roi*–, the turn of the century dramatist knew that the rejection and radicalization the avant-garde theater proposed in relation to commercial interests would need the palliative of engaging with convention as they resorted to tragedy.

Galdós and Benavente were important predecessors to Valle's creative encounter with nihilism as they galvanized the movement of aestheticism on the Peninsula; this aesthetic linkage is crucial to a differential understanding of Spanish drama that developed in the shadows of nihilism. The movement of aestheticism depends on the naturalist exhaustion of realism, as the truthful, moral representation contradicted the appearance of mask and image in the dramatic arts, but even Galdós's, Benavente's, and Valle's characters wore masks and lived lies. Historically, naturalism was lauded and vilified throughout Europe and the Americas in the critical press, while in Spain, at the cultural crossroads of industrialization, naturalism was viewed as a radical aesthetic, affiliated with the transgressive and subversive (Santiáñez 34). If the influence of naturalism on the Iberian Peninsula was indeed so transformative, then the naturalist aesthetic could be read in tandem with the affirmative movement of nihilist transvaluation. Galdós's *Realidad* and Valle's *Águila de blasón* mark this transition from the will to truth in naturalism, to the symbolist's will to form, beginning with Benavente's *Teatro fantástico*, and finally the multiplicity that aestheticism lets shine forth as art of appearance, from Gómez de la Serna to García Lorca. Historically, the First World War exacerbated the aesthetic possibilities of mimesis as the cultural crisis of nihilism inaugurated a panacea of isms. Turn of

the century aestheticism responded to censorship and oppression implemented by the authoritarian regimes of nineteenth century *turnismo* and twentieth century dictatorship, which arrested the nation's creative elites.

Galdós's dramatic work reflects his genre conflict as novelist turned dramatist, and forebodes the uncertainty and marginality that defined aestheticism, as well as charting the tragic theater of Valle, García Lorca, and many others. As Rosa Amor asserts in her introduction to Galdós's drama *Realidad* (1892), "aún hoy, la crítica tampoco pone ningún nombre a todo el trabajo dramático de Galdós" (66). Galdós preceded aestheticism, yet was not a disciple of any movement; still, from 1889 to 1892 he followed the dramatic principles established by Aristotle's *Poetics* in the transformation of his epistolary novel *Incógnita* into the dialogic version *Realidad*, along with its subsequent dramatic translation (Caudet, *Estrenado con gran aplauso* 122). However, the champion of naturalism in Spain was Leopoldo Alas "Clarín" (1852-1901) who argued that naturalism did not respond to any concrete ideology or strict dogma, but eliminated prejudice in favor of artistic freedom (Santiáñez 232). Clearly this is not the version of French naturalism established by Zola, but an evolution, even liberation of the first self-reflexive aesthetic movement that established new roots in the Spanish literature of nihilism. The virtue of Spanish naturalism, being that it was the most advanced manifestation of this relatively tardy continental movement, provides an alternative vision of subsequent literary developments in Spain in that it opened a space for further creation that was insubordinate with respect to dominant European aesthetics at the turn of the century.

Spanish literature asserted its independence to create freely in accordance with European aesthetics, and its dramatists largely relied on the commerce of their enterprise, which afforded the national drama the unique produce of a literature fraught with the tension of being a social



commodity and symbol of national regeneration; art for art's sake, national patrimony, and commodification were, however, irreconcilable creative principles. Regional, continental, and international influences abound at the turn of the century, and this tendency to incorporate all into a total art tempted the period playwright. Hence the Galician naturalist Emilia Pardo Bazán's (1851-1921) difficulty in categorizing Galdós's dramaturgy as "realismo romántico-filosófico" (Amor del Olmo 61), which defied political and poetic categorizations of the era. As Pardo Bazán tried to connect him to his predecessors and contemporaries, Galdós exceeded them in the realization that tragedy best expressed the aesthetics of nihilism in the gilded age. Galdós's dramatic work is important because it relocates naturalism in the discussion of aestheticism in Spain, while reevaluating modernist aesthetic developments in a European culture of nihilism. He managed to employ through his fiction a tragic drama that might be characterized as departing from:

las formas melodramáticas iniciales, tan cercanas a los modos románticos, hasta el objetivismo conductista del teatro, al principio más naturalista y después más poéticamente estilizado, según la línea simbolista (modernista), pasando en gradaciones intermedias por la etapa del Naturalismo hispánico más puro y sus desarrollos posteriores del psicologismo y del espiritualismo. (Avila Arellano vi)

If the Galdosian aesthetic premise was inflected with humanitarianism, liberal republicanism, and didactic realism, his work also forebode in the tragic drama at the turn of the century not the hubris of bourgeois modernism, but the emergence of a dramatic treatment of nihilism. In light of the difficulties classifying Galdós's work, an alternative reading emerges in which the author reveals himself to be an agonistic predecessor of the Spanish avant-garde who broke the bounds

of the bourgeois novel, and forebode what a tragic poetics of mimesis might offer the avant-garde dramatist.

Galdós's synthesis of the most advanced nineteenth century aesthetics, from histrionic melodrama to phlegmatic naturalism, places him at the fore of turn of the century Spanish drama. In fact, he marks a tendency throughout twentieth century Spanish drama to embrace, rather than shun the aesthetic potential of melodrama. Galdós and his contemporaries, in need of appealing to the new theater going middle classes, engaged in the excesses of melodrama which were entertaining to the audience, as the form was apt to serve for witty insight into the tragic knowledge of nihilism. Melodrama could also quickly turn into tragedy, as in *Realidad*; or tragedy could be averted through melodrama, as in his later, more popular *Electra*. Peter Brooks in *The Melodramatic Imagination* recounts how:

The desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode. Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship. They assume psychic roles, father, mother, child, and express basic psychic conditions. Life tends, in this fiction, toward ever more concentrated and totally expressive gestures and statements. (4)

This description of an essential mode to the drama of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also signals an aesthetic transvaluation of naturalism and symbolism in Spanish tragedy. The melodramatic also anticipates the idea of the total work, Galdós here attempting to either dramatize his novels or novelize his dramas into lengthy, complex, texts in which the symbols are real, vital, and powerful, not unlike Valle's own foray into the theater. These tragic works are

marked by the social environment of the day, and are telling for what they reveal and conceal; they tell us about the reservations, questions, and affirmations of a national literary hero, the direction of such figures in society, and the future of literary experiments in Spain.

In Galdós's *Realidad* the tragic heroine Augusta is staged as a modern woman, unlike Benavente's rustic Raimunda and Valle's naïve Mari Gaila, but still a victim to patriarchal society and sexuality. She is a melodramatic character in the sense that Peter Brooks assigns it, and symbolizes the paradox of a relatively liberated bourgeois woman: what is she to do with her time, money, beauty, intellectual and physical energies? This problematic structure is expressed through her as a powerful force to be reckoned with, as she is also an object of submission and admiration by her male counterparts. Augusta, as her name implies, is a heroine of the modern stage, but also the object of attack by conservatives resentful of her immorality, duplicity, and adultery. They attempt to subject her to their hypocritical morality, but she takes responsibility for her actions and accepts her tragic fate. Her critique of morality, society, and humanity is unmistakably Nietzschean:

Eso de la moralidad es cuestión de moda. De tiempo en tiempo, sin que se sepa de dónde sale, viene una de esas rachas de opinión, uno de esos temas de interés contagioso, en que todo el mundo tiene algo que decir. ¡Moralidad, moralidad! Se habla mucho durante una temporadita, y después seguimos tan pillos como antes. La humanidad siempre, siempre igual a sí misma. Ninguna época es mejor que otra. Cuando más, varía un poco la forma o el estilo de la maldad. (*Realidad*.

Rosa Amor del Olmo, Ed. 147)

This ingenious interjection among the dissolute diplomats and crooked businessmen of the Restoration bourgeoisie and aristocracy is what fascinates them. Still, they cannot look beyond

her inferior status as a woman in the conservative Spanish society of the period; rather, they cajole her like a precocious child: “¿Eh? ¿Se explica la niña?” replies Villalonga, at which Malibrán cries out derisively, “¡Qué talentazo!” (147). The exposition sets the stage for a tragic climax in which Augusta, like Valle’s Mari Gaila, will be forced to publicly and privately confront her scandalous behavior. As in *Divinas palabras*, it amounts to an implicit divorce between herself, her lover, her husband, and Spanish society. In comparison to Galdós’s self-righteous heroine, Valle’s *Divinas palabras* stages a provincial inquisition of the sacrificial adulteress: “Conducida de la mano del marido, la mujer adúltera se acoge al asilo de la iglesia, circundada del áureo y religioso prestigio, que en aquel mundo milagrero, de almas rudas, intuye el latín ignoto de las DIVINAS PALABRAS” (594). Unlike Valle’s Mari Gaila who is subject to provincial scorn, Galdós’s savvy Augusta averts ecclesiastical punishment as she navigates the bounds of bourgeois morality in the Spanish capital. In Valle’s tragic inversion, he combines pathos and plot to expose the hypocritical hierarchy of clergy and pleb in the countryside; Galdós, on the other hand, relies on gossip and interiority to further his tragic denouement.

Augusta’s tragic exposition is due to social and sexual conflict, and quite remarkably she is defended against man’s morality, be it the chivalry of her paramour Federico or the liberalism of her husband Orozco: she rises above both honor codes with their Christian ideals of duty and charity to assert herself as an individual. Referring back to Brooks’s definition of melodrama, we can say that it is “the expressionism of the moral imagination” (55). Augusta has something of the Romantic in her, but Brooks does not comment on Romanticism specifically, rather he is describing its legacy, especially in the modern Russian novel of Dostoevsky. It is an important connection to make as Galdós is all too often compared to his French predecessors and counterparts who were working through the realist tradition of naturalism, while the Russians,

not unlike the Spaniards, wrote differently from continental Europe. Galdós's tragic heroine embodies not only the melodramatic mode, but also its moral analysis and expressionism while offering a vigorous argument against the hypocrisy of the Spanish oligarchy of military, clergy, bourgeoisie, and aristocracy. In a sense, Galdós is playing out through Augusta, and his other characters, the relativist (her), idealist (her husband), and absolutist (her lover) mentalities of the day that solidified into various modern ideologies and political reifications. Galdós, it should be recalled, was a worldly man and a public figure that eventually allied him with the progressive republicanism of the early twentieth century, after an early period of disillusionment with Restoration politics, which he satirizes at the outset of *Realidad*. This self-satire, seen in Valle's dramatic rewriting, is quite typical of the reflexive and introspective aesthetic he was engaging with in this exemplary play. As we shall see further along, Augusta, as a symbolic figure of modern tragedy, formed an archetype that proliferated in the dramatic writing at the turn of the century.<sup>17</sup>

Decadence figures prominently in *Realidad* through the guise of Federico Viera, Augusta's lover, who is an impoverished aristocrat. His life consists of affairs, gambling, gossip, drinking, evading creditors, and, ultimately, remaining aloof to his destructive lifestyle as he publicly maintains his honor and feigned superiority. Stanton Garner in his essay "Physiologies of the Modern" finds that "concern with pathologies (crime, violence, sexual deviance) are certainly relevant to naturalism's representation of the individual and collective body" (75). This decadent body is constituted scientifically by modern breakthroughs in biology and medicine,

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<sup>17</sup> Her indefinite proliferation in the line that Litvak traces to Salome shows how "the first characteristic of these proliferating series is that they work to unblock a situation that had closed elsewhere in an impasse" (Deleuze and Guattari 53). She opens up a "field of immanence that will function as a dismantling, an analysis, a prognostics of social forces and currents," and by the thirties her proliferation protagonizes Dionysian fatalism through the culmination of avant-garde drama in García Lorca's tragedy (55). It is still doubtful that Galdós fully avoids the trap of the family romance, but he almost breaks the mold in *Realidad*.

but determined through allegorical illness. Signaling his sliding social status, Federico's living quarters consist of a "Gabinete amueblado con dudosa elegancia," where the falling apart of his love affair with Augusta is played out in the Second Act (172). Augusta, it turns out, is fatefully attracted to his disorderly lifestyle, most probably because she wants to take care of him as she is childless. Feminine sexuality is here linked with maternity; she wants to reform him, have him for herself, but he refuses to relent in his obstinate decadence. This intransigent absolutism is not moderated by her pragmatic approach to life and the difficulties it presents as she offers to support him financially. She tries to persuade him, again very Nietzschean, that "con arte todo es posible" (176). Federico, like a child, tries to evade her reasoning with him as she seems to give up, defeated by his stupid pride and cowardice. In the Third and Fourth Acts, there are other attempts to save Federico from himself, but it becomes apparent that he has resolved to commit suicide. Interestingly, Galdós's choice in representing this last scene of self-annihilation in the Fourth Act is that Federico shoots himself in Augusta's presence. This spectacle of violent self-destruction must have been strangely shocking to an audience of the period as they sympathized with Augusta's trauma. Orozco, Augusta's husband, has by this point heard the rumors circulating in Madrid among the highest and lowest sectors of society –Federico tragically belonged to both–, and finally confronts his wife about the affair. She valiantly negates what he suspects to be the truth in a show of dissimulation, her fortitude feeding off of his moralizing insistence that she confess and be absolved of her sin. Delirious, Augusta doubts whether or not she has already spoken in her sleep, sleepwalking and uttering the truth. Once he has concluded his futile inquisition of her, she exits furiously while the last scene of the play consists of his own delirious monologue with the apparition of Federico, a phantasm he speaks to about the sublimity of forgiveness and his anxiety as a cuckold, "¡Ah! qué diría esa inmensidad de

mundos, si fuesen a contarles que aquí, en el nuestro, un gusanillo insignificante llamado mujer amó a un hombre en vez de amar a otro!” (225). Orozco, as the bourgeois philanthropist, exemplifies the ascetic form of nihilism, in conjunction with what Lily Litvak in *España 1900* refers to as rampant Schopenhauerian antifeminism. As the benevolent patriarch he fills in the role of shepherd to society and counters the “objective truth” of his “reactive nihilism” to Augusta’s ontological interpretation that informs her “active nihilism” (Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche* 136). It is significant that Galdós’s first stage adaptation of his narrative was *Realidad*, because it is so aesthetically complex in style, and innovative in the requirements placed on stagecraft. He would have to wait almost a decade before he had another such success; not until the anti-clerical *Electra* would he be so vilified and applauded again, with another heroine of that mythic name.

Electra’s arranged marriage through the Catholic Church mirrors the class alliance between Augusta and Orozco in which capital is accumulated at the expense of personal fulfillment, but the play of 1901 is a tragicomedy that ends well for Galdós’s more fortunate heroine. It is through the sinister clergyman Pantoja that Galdós takes aim at the corrupt church that grips Spanish society, and through the same character he emblazons a new degree of reactive nihilism that was portrayed sympathetically through the bourgeois Orozco and decadent Federico of *Realidad*. These three male characters are cast critically by Galdós and represent the social estates in control of political power in Spain during the turn of the century. Naturalism’s ability to navigate drama and appeal to a wider audience through spectacle and scandal had lasting effects that nevertheless exhausted its own aesthetic pretense as will to truth. As Kirk Williams states, “Even as Naturalism ‘uncovers’ the economic and political circumstances that create collective misery, its anti-theatrical insistence upon transparency undercuts any genuine social

subversiveness” (“Anti-Theatricality and the Limits of Naturalism” 97). Yet this assertion contradicts Santiáñez’s claims for Spanish naturalism as a radical aesthetic, and seems to counter how “Clarín,” Pardo Bazán, and Galdós envisioned themselves as writers at the literary fore. If naturalism was an aesthetic of destruction, as Williams claims, then we can see this turn in late nineteenth century literary aesthetics as, at least, destructive of the romantic-realist paradigm in the arts, which would render the movement innovative due to its destructive self-sabotage as theater. Seen as a movement in resonance with other possibilities from the inaccessible past and unknown future, naturalism gave way to aestheticism, which was by definition an opening and outlet for the European imagination.

There were advantages and disadvantages to the free artist’s marginality, which also meant that the reviewer and interpreter of the work were placed in a precarious position, one that was just as idiosyncratic and independent as that of the dramatic writer. This community of aesthetes was at the margins of society, and sought either to reject or radically transform the mediocre leveling of the commercialization that consumed their life’s work. Aestheticism in the theater followed the tragic turn already established by the naturalists, yet while the dramatic authors’ style changed considerably since the late nineteenth century, the audience generally remained the same, except for the fact that the public now expected more spectacularly sophisticated performances, a consequence of the competition with cinema in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Benavente, in an aesthetic truce with the Spanish public resorted to naturalist tragedy in his provocative *La Malquerida*, performed in 1913, to viscerally reach out in this rural drama and stimulate discussion on domestic violence. Raimunda, in the climax, refers to the illicit affair initiated by her second husband, Esteban, with her first spouse’s daughter. At the end of the play she is shot by her vengeful husband, dying, but not before



confessing and claiming: “¡Ese hombre ya no podrá nada contra ti! ¡Estás salva! ¡Bendita esta sangre que salva, como la sangre de Nuestro Señor!” (209). The sordid father figure is an unfaithful predator that intimidates his stepdaughter’s first suitor with death, then actually kills her second lover, unable to bear Acacia with another man. Although he is an obsessed psychopath, his wife, Raimunda, who forebodes García Lorca’s *Bernarda Alba*, insists till the end that he was a good man, a good husband, and honor to their home. Naturalist drama was largely the performance of a novelistic plot whereas aestheticism overturned this hybrid fiction through a return to ancient theatricality, which also privileged tragedy as a favored genre for Spanish avant-garde drama. Tragedy on the modern Spanish stage was something of a novelty when compared to its popular, commercial competitors; although like its competitors, the tragic genre also had the power to summon and enrapture its audience. In Benavente’s *La Malquerida* the action of the drama is condensed as the work relies on the spoken word to reveal the tragic action, depending on the nuanced speech patterns of each character, which also conceal information. For instance, Esteban actually seems the country gentleman, up until the third act, while his plotting, and hidden past, are finally revealed as Raimunda insists on interrogating Acacia’s second suitor, Norberto, about the murder of Faustino, which the former is accused of from jealousy. This colloquial dialogue reveals a wavering Raimunda, speaking heatedly with her fugitive husband and her dishonored daughter, “No digo náa. Lo que yo sé es que él no ha podido mirarte como hija, porque tú no lo has sólo nunca pa él” (206). She must blame someone, and she is inclined to blame her daughter, absenting her to a nunnery while echoing a common theme in Spanish drama, while she and her criminal husband shame the home in forgetfulness—what she calls forgiveness. Modern Spanish tragedy was initiated by naturalist developments in the theater that led to aestheticism, which were then born out of the symbolist transvaluation of

nineteenth century aesthetics. This movement from naturalism to symbolism by means of theatricality was also an appeal to the populace by the artistic elites to assert their indignity in the theater industry.

In *La Malquerida* Benavente demonstrates how the community of injustice is consummated through further violence. Not only is their family torn apart by a hidden sexual relationship between stepfather and stepdaughter, but the whole Castilian countryside is up in arms about who killed Faustino. The Norberto-Faustino family feud is a demand for justice that means more bloodshed, symbolized through Raimunda's gushing gunshot wound and reference to Jesus's blood. This unvoluptuous martyr judges an idea of vindication through violence that is realist, and recycled into a perpetual movement that determines all aspects of the play, and one might expect, Benavente's idea of Spanish society. Benavente's Castilian opening of naturalist tragedy recuperates the intrigue of Galdós's decadent Madrid in *Realidad*, and forebodes the scathing tragic dramas Valle and García Lorca wrote about the extremes of petty society. Love and death are determinant factors in these dramatists' works as they were since antiquity. Benavente's engagement with tragedy is best expressed through *La Malquerida*, the title itself significant of the paradox that love and malevolence play in this world as stage. The tragic irony of love and lust reaches its extreme at the climactic end when Acacia proclaims her reciprocal love for Esteban, which reverses Raimunda's sympathies for either one of her relatives. Now she wants to kill her daughter, but Acacia yells for defense from Esteban, and he murders his wife for her daughter. The Faustino-Norberto clans, united against the transgressor, apprehend him, demanding an account and reckoning as he, presumably, will be executed. The symbolism of his blood boiling in Acacia's presence finds satisfaction through further bloodshed (203). In *La Malquerida* Benavente explores through tragedy the fulfillment and repression of desire.

Everyone is a victim in this tragedy, but the quiet Acacia is the vehicle for a late reversal in the plot that reveals her powerlessness in a dynamic love-hate relationship as she resents her mother's idiocy. As the limits of naturalist drama were established by Galdós and further explored by Benavente, it becomes apparent that the movement's transgression of customs was essential to aestheticism. From the modern period and the advent of naturalism, the European imagination inherited a belief in truth; aestheticism, however, deepened this approach through an affirmative nihilism that transvaluated the will to truth with the will to form.<sup>18</sup>

Modern Spanish tragedy is traced back to the turn of the century aesthetic turmoil that naturalism began through its anti-theatrical inheritance of verisimilitude and social engagement. Aestheticism is the concept by which we understand this literary movement that gave way to the symbolism first seen in Galdós, Benavente, and Valle-Inclán.<sup>19</sup> After the failure of the naturalist experiment in drama, an opening was made possible for subsequent dramatists through which they could escape the expectations of a bourgeois audience, the conventions of the industrial theater, as well as the defunct aesthetic pretenses of the past century. This aesthetic escape in which the artist fought to free himself to create on new terms is apparent in the emotive and affective tension of the avant-garde in which a belligerency and anxiety prevail, only to be ennobled through a commitment to life, most of all by way of a return to tragedy. The national drama in Spain is unique because it responds to aesthetic movements undertaken in Europe at the time, yet also anticipates such developments as its leading dramatists faced a public that demanded to be entertained, cajoled, and even censured, but rarely appreciated the avant-garde

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<sup>18</sup> In his third chapter "El hambre de la inmortalidad," Unamuno attacks Nietzsche, without naming him, then aestheticism in successive paragraphs from *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (103). Following this rant, he denigrates the ethical aspect of recurrence, saying "La noción nietzschiana de la vuelta eterna es una idea órfica" (112-113). The ethics of return are dramatized in these tragic plays, which serve to question, open discussion, and invite interpretation, rather than offer answers about right, wrong, good, and evil.

<sup>19</sup> Note also how the Parisian theaters of art at the turn of the century still translated and adapted Ibsen and how Lugné-Poe lamented the lack of playwrights in France comparable to the Norwegian playwright, Strindberg, Hauptman, or Maeterlinck (Deak 227).

attempts to restore drama as an art form. Valle, among others, for instance, wrote plays that were supposedly never meant to be performed, and so we are left with the question, “¿Y qué hacer con tantas obras que no se representan, pero que son representables, contra la vulgar opinión, desde *La Celestina* hasta las *Comedias Bárbaras* de D. Ramón del Valle-Inclán?” (Henríquez Ureña 168). That this experimental drama defies genre categorization but constitutes itself as a five hundred year old aesthetic tradition demands scholarly attention and bids us address the question through new concepts. Are these works unwittingly linked because of their confrontation with nihilism? Do they constitute a countermovement, not because of their difficulty in staging, but because of the way in which they were created, thereby canonizing an unbeknownst tradition of nihilism? Are they utterly dysfunctional with respect to society or do they function as a social structure? Can we then speak of a sociological formalism, or is the poststructuralist theory our best option to reevaluate this body of literature whose bibliography is vast albeit repetitive? I will attempt to answer these questions as we move from the first phase of this genealogy of nihilist drama to a second, connective development with Valle’s barbaric comedies, eventually working toward a typology of Spanish avant-garde drama in the third chapter.

Recalling Henríquez Ureña’s question about the representability of great dramatic works in Spanish literature, another question arises concerning the revision of these early twentieth century tragic works and their relevance to the twenty-first. Ann Frost touches on this issue in *The Galician Works* (2010) of Valle-Inclán when she observes “where some consider not only these but all Valle’s plays totally anti-theatrical, others see them as avant-garde theater, whose apparent unsuitability for performance was not Valle’s fault, but that of the Spanish theater of the time” (123). Valle’s dramatic work, like Galdós before him, is unclassifiable because it is created in the wake of the anti-theatrical efforts of naturalism and the experimental avant-garde, with

both contradictory tendencies reconciled in his trilogy of barbaric comedies: *Águila de blasón* (1907), *Romance de lobos* (1908), and *Cara de plata* (1922). Frost rightly foregoes such categorizations and opts to identify patterns that situate the author in the place that inspired his genius. Since the works that were the product of this Galician inspiration were marked by tragedy, Valle's study of place through plot occurs at the crossroads of modernity, and is born out in Viana del Prior, where we see the problems of modern Spanish tragedy take shape in his first drama from the first decade of the twentieth century. Valle incorporated the chaotic modern world into his complex tragedies in which the physics of time, space, and a measured form or duration are constantly sped up and slowed down through symbolic assemblages in the rural community. The decadent aristocrats of the Montenegro clan prey on the peasant community and drive the hectic action of these plays, rising in fits of grace, and then fatefully falling. His barbaric comedies are overly wrought and labyrinthine, eliciting in his audience an aural and sensual experience through melodrama that goes beyond the accumulation of minutiae in naturalism, and signals the expansion of meaning through symbolism, and the technicality of filmic possibilities. Valle was the first writer at the turn of the century to insist on an aestheticism of tragedy through his dramatic works that spanned the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Valle's barbaric trilogy ends ambiguously as the trilogy was not published sequentially, but rather recast with the insertion of *Cara de plata* (1922) at the beginning of *Águila de blasón* (1907) and *Romance de lobos* (1908). This rewriting modifies the corpus, compounding any finality we might seek. Lourdes Ramos-Kueth (1985) points out that the two earlier works are modernist, coming after Valle's *Sonatas* published from 1902-1905, whereas *Cara de plata* reinscribes the *esperpento* in the trilogy. This is the first and most obvious discontinuity,

indicative of an authorial apprehension about this modernist affiliation and the need to intervene by way of a new play. Clara Luisa Barbeito's *Épica y tragedia en la obra de Valle-Inclán* (1985) focuses on Don Juan Manuel as the hero whose Dionysian rise is met with a Christian fall, but casts this movement in social terms, feudal versus bourgeois. She also insists on the tragic genre in categorizing Valle's trilogy, but mistakenly asserts that tragedy is dead to us on the sociological and mechanistic grounds that we are in a modern historical period at odds with Aristotelian tragedy. My reading of Valle's three barbaric comedies as modern tragedy proposes that the author was actively engaging with the Aristotelian tradition through aestheticism as the chaos of cultural nihilism surrounded him.

Valle's will to form was an artistic endeavor that incorporated the modern culture of predatory social relations through the crisis of a rural Galician community at an economic crossroads. Tragedy best suited this idea, as it was a genre that internalized chaos and form, while imparting communitarian knowledge. Accordingly, there is a genealogical curse that besets the fated noble family, as Don Juan Manuel's children are emphatic about their father damning them, "¡Malditos estamos ¡Y metidos en un pleito para veinte años!" (*Romance de lobos* 520). At this point they have inherited their father's fortune, but he has come back to beg pittance for himself and his consort of the poor and infirm. The other exclamation is *La Voz de Todos*, "¡Era nuestro padre!" (520). With this exchange, alternate rejoicing and lamenting, Valle asks us to read his barbaric comedies as an indictment of Don Juan Manuel's conduct, and the possibility of Christian salvation through the renunciation of his fortune as his life nears death. Why did Don Juan Manuel damn his children? Why did he adopt the beggars and the sick? Is this play about Don Juan Manuel, his children, or the people of this Galician community? Stylistically the exposition of these questions is by the end of the drama a melodramatic climax

in which illegitimate heirs to Don Juan Manuel's estate contest his sons' inheritance.<sup>20</sup> Gregorio Torres Nebrera (1999), like Ramos-Kueth before him, draws our attention to Valle's authorial interventions, as he revisits and revises Viana del Prior through the tragic poetics of the barbaric comedy, tragicomedy, and *esperpento*, but also shows the editorial changes made to the earlier works *Águila de blasón* and *Romance de lobos* on inserting the later *Cara de plata*. This process of authorial intervention is a form of systematization in which Valle recuperates a time and space for the unfinished trilogy as he attempts to "cerrar un ciclo" (Torres 47-50), apt for the tragic work that seeks, at least since Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (458 BC) to end the curse of bloodshed. As Valle's ending melodramatically makes clear, the *pleito*, or eternal demand for justice, will continue for another twenty years, and presumably return recycled. Torres confirms that the last words of the *Romance de lobos*, the last words of the trilogy uttered by the inheritors, were inserted after the inclusion of *Cara de plata* (56). We should remember, though, that the inheritors, custodians of Don Juan Manuel's fortune, are grown men at this time, somewhere between adulthood and middle-age. It is presumed that the differential problem will be resolved only with their deaths, and continued through their paternity, but the challenge is from the group of outcasts, La Voz de Todos, organized around vengeance in the name of moral paternity and responsibility versus legal patriarchy and hierarchy. Don Juan Manuel not only bequeathed his wealth but renounced it in life, yet comes back begging for it as a pauper himself in a vicious cycle. In a sense, he has become like his unruly brood of bandits, returning as a demanding

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<sup>20</sup> My interpretation focuses on the aesthetic merits of the trilogy as an instance of a work with "the infinite outside of itself...in a beautifully closed form" (Foucault, *Aesthetics* 94). The idea of ending a work and completing a cycle is a question of finality in tragic poetics; the illusions of total drama in the cosmic sense that Renaissance tragicomedy rediscovered, especially in *La Celestina*, was an awakening to nihilist drama in Europe. García Lorca consciously writes and works in this tradition, but, unlike Valle's pessimistic cycle, his tragedy embraces fatalism, the "essential discord" and "torn intimacy" between agent, patient, and performance (Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* 226). This distinction is elaborated on in the final chapter in which García Lorca's experimental life work becomes impossible during the Spanish Civil War, like Hernández and others, thereby extinguishing Spanish avant-garde drama in a death-work.

Christian figure with a consort of disciples. In sum, the nature of a tragic cycle is to continue a closure found only in new beginning –*Cara de plata*–, which only makes the cycle more profound. Several fatalisms contribute to the work’s nihilistic continuity: aging, desire, and power are the main forces at play here. The first is inevitable for these characters subject to a long time span; the second is manifest in the violent sexuality and promiscuity throughout the play; the third is seen in the different castes and sexes of Valle’s feudal Galicia.

Unresolved problems, pending justice, perpetuate themselves, and there is no resolution in Valle’s trilogy, only transformation of initial questions. As Torres confirms, in line with Ramos-Kueth’s interpretation, “los dos escenarios dominantes que giran en torno al pazo y a la Rectoral son las respectivas metáforas espaciales del enfrentamiento entre seglar y clérigo, que es el núcleo gravitatorio de la Comedia” (61). Valle’s intention is to dizzy us with his amalgams of time and place, to the point that it could be said that each place functions as a continuity of staged experience. Palace, abbey, fair, brothel, town, pasture, forest, mill, all contain their own forms of time that structure Valle’s barbaric comedies. If anything breaks this time, other than the protagonist Don Juan Manuel, then it is Fuso Negro who Torres says embodies the “expresionismo esperpentista” completed in *Cara de plata* and Valle’s renowned aesthetic development of the twenties (68). In fact, Fuso Negro breaks time and place exactly because he, seemingly, is not subject to the forces of aging, desire, and power. In this way he is diabolical, permeating the spaces appearing throughout the play, and it is no surprise that Valle stages him with the repentant, decrepit, Don Juan Manuel at the end of the trilogy, or that the author has the Don Juan character steal the virgin he preys upon at the beginning. In other words, Fuso Negro is beyond redemption, whereas Don Juan Manuel still holds out the hope of salvation in Valle’s moral imagination. Don Juan Manuel’s diabolical heathen to Christian reformation is the



backdrop to Valle's play, but it casts what seemed to be the fortitude of his former self into question. It is not so much that, structurally, the *esperpento* of *Cara de plata* is incongruent with the rest of the trilogy, but that Don Juan Manuel himself is miraculously transfigured from a decadent nobleman to Christian ascetic, suggestive of a moral, authorial leveling. The solitude of his deathbed, his vagrancy in the town and the beach, then his reunion with Fuso Negro in the cave are attempts by the author to solidify this metamorphosis from sinner to saint. Don Juan Manuel's rededication to his wife Doña María after his rapture of their god-child Sabelita, followed by another affair with the peasant Liberata, is only explicable through his reaffirmation of the Catholic faith and socio-familial reintegration. The interesting aspect about these intertwined, incestuous relationships that Valle complicates through melodramatic plot is that Sabelita was pursued by Cara de Plata, while Liberata was raped by Don Pedrito, two of Don Juan Manuel's sons. Valle links his hero with the prodigal Montenegro brood not only through the resigned matriarch that bore them, but also through their mutual love objects, signaling a weakening of the Salome heroine proliferated at the turn of the century.

When the patriarch vacates his deathbed, forced to leave his home for peace as he threatens infanticide, his servants and a visiting illegitimate daughter, Artemisa, find that at the entrance of his bedroom the stench of death permeates the place. A significant element of the patriarch's transformation is the death of his wife, someone he never respected until the end of his life. Already interred, he arrives late, after his sons have ransacked the chapel valuables where she was buried. The nobleman wants his own death and wants to see her dead, "Cuando aparece el hueco negro, pestilente, húmedo, el viejo linajudo se inclina sobre él, y solloza," then lofts up "un aire de húmeda pestilencia, que le hace sentir todo el horror de la muerte, pone frío en su rostro" (*Romance de lobos* 489-90). The power of these morbid scenes is the primary focus

of Valle's spectral play and sensual montage, while the intensity of the stage directions is complimented by the expressionism of melodramatic dialogue, but it is Valle's symbolism that drives his trilogy. When the mourning husband and his sympathetic train of beggars reach the chapel and find no food, because the eager sons devoured it all, they pine, but eventually find sustenance after their pathetic pilgrimage, "subiráse vino de la bodega y mataránse doce palomas en el palomar" (485). In other words, as the humble seamstress proclaims, they will wine and dine in recompense for accompanying their lord, indulging in the sweet flesh of dove, sacrificial meat of dawn and peace. Bloodshed renews and nourishes, but also begets violence, while the impoverished followers wonder what or who the world is for, not knowing if they will be provided for, or in what fashion. Among the sumptuously dined beggars is a woman with child, mockingly referred to as Paula la Reina, whom the patriarch advises, "Guarda los pechos, y déjalo morir," with the reason that "¡Ojalá nos retorciesen el cuello a todos cuando nacemos!" (*Romance de lobos* 480). His virility has turned to senile mysticism, while the ascetic nihilism of infanticide luridly offers salvation from Earthly struggle. The nobleman's public declaration of this change is a sort of political revelation in that "El día en que los pobres se juntasen para quemar las siembras, para envenenar las fuentes, sería el día de la gran justicia" (466). The apostolic activist preaches and propagates hope of a just world to come, redeemed through violent rebellion of the masses and led by an aristocracy serving the poor: "Nacisteis pobres, y no podréis rebelaros nunca contra vuestro destino. La redención de los humildes hemos de hacerla los que nacimos con ímpetu de señores cuando se haga la luz en nuestras conciencias" (466). This eschatology is typically modern in its combination of Christian, humanitarian, and socialist doctrine, but the sermonizing is disingenuous. Don Juan Manuel's demise is pathetic melodrama in the twofold sense that it distorts Aristotelian tragedy, focusing on the pathos

Aristotle warned of, all the while reflecting the aesthetic limits of melodrama according to Peter Brooks.<sup>21</sup> Of course Don Juan Manuel's reformation must be seen in the intertextual light of José Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio: Drama religioso-fantástico en dos partes* (1844), the famous romantic play in which another corrupt *caballero* fell from virility to senility.

This symbolic fall is repeated throughout Valle's barbaric comedies and is accompanied by imagery of the macabre. For instance, the Montenegro patriarch falls from his horse in *Romance de lobos* while coming from the cattle fair after passing a funeral procession, then a coven of witches, both of which forebode his wife's death. In *The Galician Works* Frost finds such elements to be associated with the expressionist movement, a development Valle anticipates in literary history, and she comments on the difficulty in staging such complex scenes that made the performance of Valle's work impossible, "making them almost inexplicably avant-garde" (124). This edginess and eagerness to innovate factors into our appreciation of his drama and situates him in the middle of a literary movement we refer to as aestheticism and which is included in the historical development of nihilism. Valle is important in this respect because he signals that Spanish avant-garde drama will rely on tragedy in an attempt to elevate the theater above the commercial interests of the owners and spectators who favored comedy. Valle's pre-expressionist barbaric comedies are apprehensive of modernity as they recuperate and reinstate an aesthetic tradition that affronts bourgeois entertainment and liberal politics. The trilogy also recalls the melodrama outlined in Brooks's comments on the Gothic entrapment, and is significant because it pretends to break with an established art form and push forward a genre, all the while leaving us an exemplary work of nihilist aestheticism intended for the theater.

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<sup>21</sup> "Πάθος is a determinate losing-one's-composure," and "being-taken" (Heidegger, *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* 114, 162). This focus on character analysis and psychosis was already a compositional element of Greek tragedy, one that reached its height in the nineteenth century, and breached early symbolist drama.

The aesthetic unity of tragic fatalism at the end of *Águila de blasón* is the same plot unbound by Valle to develop and conclude *Romance de lobos*. Decadence determines the fates of all involved with the Montenegro household; meanwhile, Liberata, Don Juan Manuel's second concubine, is kicked out of the palace in order not to further dishonor his aging, saintly wife. Further discrediting the aristocratic hierarchy are his wolfish sons, yet Cara de Plata maintains some of the family nobility as he and his lover La Pichona contrast with Don Juan Manuel's affairs. Sabelita, who was once pursued by Cara de Plata, is unlike Liberata, as she leaves her lord in search of simplicity, to recover her honor while the patriarch ejects the passive Liberata forcefully, as she begs him not to hurt her with his child. La Pichona is cast as a prostitute and fortune teller, someone that Cara de Plata cannot resist, in spite of his affection for Sabelita; his only consolation after he realizes his father has taken his god-sister for a lover is La Pichona. This duo offers an alternative to the nobleman-concubine structure embodied by Don Juan Manuel, Sabelita and Liberata, as well as the patriarch's relationship with Doña María, his wife. Valle casts the younger couple provocatively, always at her house, devoting herself to him and ultimately abandoning the *alcahuete*, *Celestinesque* witch matchmaker that joined them and prostituted her. The couple's encounters are brief and sporadic; the most memorable one, aside from their first drunken revel is in the seventh scene of the Fourth Act in which Cara de Plata and his brother, the corrupt priest Don Farruquiño, perform a grave robbery at the latter's instigation. Again, we can focus on the vivid, expressionistic stage directions to appreciate the phantasmagoric intensity of the cinematic scene:

La moza, con los ojos brillantes y los pechos fuera del justillo, se incorpora quitándose un zapato que arroja al candil. En la sombra de la chimenea el gato, tiznado de ceniza, maúlla y enarca el lomo, mientras el candil se columpia y se

apaga esparciendo un olor de pavesa. Los maullidos del gato continúan en la oscuridad, y acompañan el hervir del agua y el voltear del cuerpo que cuece en el caldero, asomando unas veces la calavera aún recubierta por la piel, y otras una mano de momia negruzca y angarabitada. (*Águila de blasón* 420-21)

The imagery is symbolic of the worldly ferment that is life and death, strangely grotesque and erotic. *Cara de Plata* and *La Pichona* are trying to share an intimate moment –it was just revealed he will be enlisting in the Carlist Wars– while the corrupt clergyman brother, looks on, all the while the *segundones* cook a corpse to derive its skeleton for money. We can sense, and almost smell, the extreme irony of this tragic scene of life and death combined. Nothing between Don Juan Manuel and his harem rivals it, even though the love scenes parallel each other, thereby lowering the intensity of a feigned domesticity in the old patriarch's chaotic manor.

This tonality is sustained throughout by the suspense of the cycle, formally concluded with the patriarch's death. Valle ends his 1922 revision and conclusion of the trilogy with Don Juan Manuel pathetically and egotistically exclaiming “¡Tengo miedo de ser el Diablo!” (*Cara de plata* 339). This melodramatic ending is abrupt yet conclusive, and heightens his symbolic characterization and melodramatic theatricality. *Cara de Plata* formally clarifies the rest of the trilogy, coalescing the three plays into one work that unites the barbaric comedies and his *esperpento*. Nevertheless, the *esperpento* reveals itself to be a continuation of the barbaric comedies as it serves to foreground them in the trilogy. *Cara de Plata*'s naive affection for Sabelita is spoiled by Don Juan Manuel's misogynistic defense of corrupting her before the favorite son's attempt at patricide: “Todas las horas nacen mujeres a miles, y padre no hay más que uno,” along with “Las mujeres cuando no se mueren, se hacen viejas” (337). Fatherly love, however chauvinist in *Cara de plata*, precedes concupiscence, only finally to be replaced by

ascetic patriarchy in *Romance de lobos*. The nihilist patriarch advises Cara de Plata, “No te pido que seas un santo, cada edad reclama lo suyo, pero no olvides las obligaciones de tu sangre, como hacen los otros perversos” (280). Don Juan Manuel is ultimately a pathetic anti-hero, while the salvation of the patriarch’s soul in *Cara de Plata*, and his abuse of power in the plays that precede it, reveal a cyclical genealogy of nihilism in the Montenegro brood in which the heroic son Cara de Plata assumes another tragic role through his engagement with the futile Carlist Wars.

The nihilistic foundation of their lives and deaths is built around a system of violent interactions with the rural Galician community they still control, but Valle allows us to question this basis through tragic exposition in his barbaric comedies. Sacrifice is an ugly matter throughout the works, and we are left with the idea of Cara de Plata’s body on the battlefield. Witnessing Don Juan Manuel’s self-sacrifice, delivering himself to his lupine children and devoting himself to the meek only prolongs the anguish of his fall. This fateful passivity is a religious passion to eternalize oneself through sacrifice. Throughout the barbaric comedies we see worldly excitement and fulfillment thwarted by idealistic commitments to God, country, and family, but the Montenegro brood is ultimately delivered to God on high through Galician soil. The movement of aesthetic nihilism creates a tension in Valle’s grotesquely erotic plays, while this dissonant art anticipates expressionist theater and allows for a proliferation of archetypes in which patriarchy is questioned. The politics of Carlism and Catholicism are here related through the son and the father. If we think of Valle’s barbaric comedies as tragedy in a time when the genre was not favored, then we can understand how Don Juan Manuel and Cara de Plata are forced to choose and how they are exposed to failure. That is, the life and death determinations available to them and their caste are manifest through the macabre causes of provincial Carlism

and Catholicism. A genealogy is crucial to the literary history of Valle's barbaric comedy of the Montenegro clan, and signals what Frost refers to as the destructive element of masculinity (*The Galician Works* 88). When the other *segundones* dedicate themselves to robbery, they also expose themselves to an economic fatalism. Their resentful careers as criminals consume them like the destinies Cara de Plata and Don Juan Manuel incarnate as militia and landlord. Yet Sobejano finds that "el carlismo es sólo un pretexto" for "la rebeldía del individuo frente a las tendencias allanadoras del progreso europeo, y esa rebeldía la sintió Nietzsche como nadie, aunque su obra entera esté proyectada mucho más hacia el futuro que hacia el pasado" (*Nietzsche* 222). As Don Juan Manuel shouts in his wanderings, in his going to glory, "¡Estaba maldito el sembrador! ¡Estaba maldita la simiente!" (*Romance* 504). As characters, the lives and deaths of the Montenegro brood were tragically predetermined by their creator through their genealogical resentment of European progressivism at odds with regional and individual concerns.

Valle sought to return to tragedy's fatalism as a means of reconciling naturalist determinism and symbolist allegory; as such, his barbaric comedies and *esperpento* predict the expressionist movement, which was the consummate aesthetic in the scope of twentieth century European nihilism. The popularity of melodrama was embraced by Galdós and did not escape Valle's advanced dramatic work; both dramatists were genealogically on the margins of naturalism and symbolism as the constraints of the Spanish stage were enforced on the playwrights. In this milieu of dystopian, modern Spain, they returned to tragedy in response to the commercialization of the theater, and the competition of the cinema. Self-sacrifice, class annihilation, sexual predation, and political corruption are popular thematics in turn of the century Spanish drama, and serve to question the progress that modernism proclaimed. With this

nihilist problematic came the concern for an appropriate aesthetic form to represent such a cultural milieu, as well as the relevance of stagecraft, which was in question.

This millennial problem of Aristotelian tragic poetics returned to the fore of avant-garde drama as the bounds of form and chaos were explored again through a new concept of will based on the artist's genius and capacity to innovate and create freely; the marginality of this role for the dramatist pushed the limits of his art as new scenarios were necessarily performed. The appearance onstage of active sin, –fornication, prostitution, grave desecration, fratricide, suicide, witchcraft, gambling, drinking–, led to the creation of original heroes that exemplified nihilism. Their aesthetic treatment made possible the elaboration of a sensual, experiential drama that was willingly scandalous and literary in conception. Galdós seems to solidify this nihilist tendency to dramatize the moral void opened by rationalism a century before, whereas in other plays he openly attacks the Church and its proxies, furthering the European Enlightenment tradition of individualism as in *La de San Quintín*, *Realidad*'s skepticism, and *Electra*'s positivism. A genealogy of nihilist tragedy in Spain, beginning with Galdós, Benavente, and Valle-Inclán allows us to see a synthetic style that allowed for an opening in the dramatic arts that made possible Jacinto Grau's pursuit of theatricality, Alberti's revival of the *auto de fe*, and García Lorca's Andalusian tragedy, among other fruitful developments of cultural nihilism and the rise of aestheticism.



### **III. Typology of Ascetic, Aesthetic, and Political Tragedy**

Continuities and differences with the earlier works by Galdós and Valle emerge in the later tragedy of Spanish avant-garde drama. The drama of the first three decades of the twentieth century in Spain had taken a decidedly theatrical turn and embraced the aesthetics of expressionism, which placed the genius of the author and director at the fore of the theatrical endeavor. This total art of expressionist writing and directing was sometimes even carried out into acting, as we can see in the cases of Valle and García Lorca, authors who also performed. But beginning in 1936, before the Civil War, the marginality of the artistic theater and the playwright's return to tragedy still shape the Spanish stage. The declaration of the short-lived Second Spanish Republic (1931-1939) allowed for some space from censorship in the dramatic arts, but largely continued national and continental trends in place at the turn of the century. The tragedies of Unamuno, Grau, García Lorca, and Alberti continue the aesthetic momentum established by Galdós, Benavente, and Valle, in which elevated works sensually arouse consciousness in the spectator. This tragic aestheticism distinguished such drama from the popular skits, cinema, operetta, and comedy by means of a forced encounter with the classical and chaotic. Hellenic tragedy returned to the Spanish stage as it combined the ancient will to form with European epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics of the last two millennia in a transvaluation of the nineteenth century will to truth. Western nihilism and modern transvaluation were by the twentieth century self-evident to the artistic and intellectual elites,

although its interpretation by them varied and produced different aesthetic visions of drama on the Iberian Peninsula.

The successors of Galdós, Valle, and Unamuno were all proponents of the genre that forced a reencounter with tragic knowledge through ritual performance, thereby launching an experimental drama that also heralded a uniquely traditional avant-garde in Spain.<sup>22</sup> An Aristotelian poetic balance in tragedy was still the norm despite the changes initiated by the encounter between realism and aestheticism; meanwhile the matter of justice prevailed in these tragedies as the modes of Hellenism and pessimism represented different conceptions of the just. The aesthetics of symbolism, expressionism, and surrealism were responsible for the crafting of the affective styles of Hellenism and pessimism, which differed little from the original dialectic of the Apollonian and Dionysian in Attic tragedy. Aestheticism was the movement that launched modern tragedy and activated new forms of European nihilism that can be traced back to the challenges naturalist melodrama and symbolist myth presented onstage at the turn of the century. The possibility of public scandal, or intentional scandalizing of the public by the author, had already been established by Galdós's and Valle's drama. The incorporation of deep elements of the public body, including sexual repression and other repressed sectors of society, vitiated this process carried out on the marginalized aesthetic proscenium.<sup>23</sup> Inconsistencies, anomalies, and injustices were matters for tragic transvaluation onstage in Spain, from Galdós's *Realidad* (1892)

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<sup>22</sup> Andrew A. Anderson notes how "la forma tradicional del teatro todavía no se ha desacreditado" ("Los dramaturgos españoles y el surrealismo francés, 1924-1936" 24). It is worth recalling Spain's unique place in European dramaturgy and how the so-called Golden Age weighed on the turn of the century playwright here and throughout. Spanish avant-garde drama was not backwards, but enriched by the tradition, which is why the past persisted into the tragedies studied here. We also see this in avant-garde poetry, where traditional and novel tendencies were balanced, most especially in the resurgence of *gongorismo* and the renewed interest in Baroque poetry.

<sup>23</sup> Stanton B. Garner Jr. in his essay "Physiologies of the Modern" observes that "Naturalism's fascination with the rivalry between biological and technological modes of generating persons and things is reflected in the range of practices and discourses that sought to coordinate body and machine" (*Modern Drama* 78). This naturalist fascination with modern scientific discourse was best seen in Galdós's dramaturgy, but also served as a matrix for the experimentation carried over into the avant-garde.

to García Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (1936). Galicia, Andalusia, Madrid, and other places in Spain were productive in their backdrops for modern tragedy; meanwhile, modernism as an aesthetic panacea was manifest in bourgeois cultural spheres, from the cafe, cabaret, cinema, and music halls that were by now competing with the theater. A genealogy of European nihilism in Spanish drama reveals its movement and manifestation through aestheticism and the multifarious avant-gardes, while the unique national response of the Spanish dramaturge signaled a return to tragedy as a genre capable of revitalizing the stage and imparting the tragic knowledge of nihilism. Consequently, Aristotelian poetics were revived in twentieth century stagecraft to codify the expressionism of artistic genius, and the dramaturge's pact with traditional symbolism that saw art as counter to the modern world. Avant-garde theatricality exposed conventional drama to its political, religious, and artistic bases while the process of aesthetic transvaluation through modern tragedy emerged as a prospective reconciliation in the movement of the dramatic arts; this movement, however, proved contentious with the onset of war in the 30s.

Unamuno's *La esfinge* is significant for being his first dramatic work, published in the monumental year of 1898. It is a work that charts the rest of his dramatic production as well, most of which is notably tragic. The sphinx is an obvious allusion to Sophocles's tragedy *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC), and the philologist-dramatist references ancient Indian and Greek proverbs, along with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1602), to orient his reader-spectator in their reception of his play. The action, however, is not at court, but rather "una casa de familia regularmente acomodada" (7). Unamuno's mix of the political and the familial follows thematically his referenced predecessors in spite of their stylistic differences. Despite his conservative faith in Christianity, he follows Nietzsche who never ignored the power of dogma

to subdue. The same subjugation occurs in Unamuno's *La esfinge* where Ángel devotes himself to Christ, and divorces himself from the world of radical politics. This affirmation of faith costs him his life and his wife. He is assassinated as a traitor by the political party he once led, and then left by his wife for someone else worldlier, a successful doctor unbothered with metaphysics. Eufemia, his wife, chooses a modern professional over her once activist, now monkish, effeminate spouse. Already in the First Act we can sense this transformation in her spouse, as words like "unción" and "sermón" are iterated alongside of "revolución" (8). Ángel's comrades reprimand him for this change in rhetoric, a sure sign of his change of heart and mind. Increasingly angelic and Christ like, he ponders "¿Conque tú crees que debo sacrificarme por el pobre pueblo?" (8). His comrades do not doubt that he should, but they still do not know the nature of his sacrifice, and how akin it will be to the crucifixion of the son of God. He knows that the people want without end, without knowing what they want; while he wants freedom of want (9). To this renunciation of the world Eufemia bids him fill the void in his soul with glory, to have faith in himself and her (13). Through the character's crisis of conscience he states in a baroque metaphysic, "me paso la vida contemplándome, hecho teatro de mí mismo" (14). This introspection is characteristic of his tragic dilemma, which he wills toward his nihilist destiny. Ángel's socialist political ideals turn religious and genealogically return to their source in Christianity; although we can logically infer that his inevitable Catholic upbringing also inspired his socialist political convictions. "¡No soy nada!" he professes in a nihilistic act of faith (15). Tía Ramona, the wife's aunt that lives with the couple, is the first to put him in his place, "¡Puerco espín!" she cries out to him (18). She is a simple, but wise woman, incapable of tolerating his other worldly excesses; following her common sense, life is not only a stage for the discontent, but a game too (19). Ángel's depression alienates him from his friends and family,

and leads us to believe that his malaise is why he has not had children with his wife, whom he sees as without maternal instincts (21). Instead of having children, he wants to be her child; his infantilism is the desire for a holy father and a fleshy mother. Unamuno's character study is seemingly in line with turn of the century psychoanalytic theory based on mythopoetic narrative and clinical confession. Unamuno artistically lets the reader/spectator play the role of judge and conclude whether his protagonist is damned or saved according to our conscience. Poignantly, the prefix "eu" is found in both Eusebio and Eufemia, who will conjugally link in the end. This comes from the meaning true, real, or genuine in Greek, yet something always apparent and up to judgment. Later in the play the wavering love object thwarts the doctor's advances as she calls him "Satanás" (35). Would Unamuno have us believe the man of science is now the devil, in contrast to the suffering angel? Ángel's words of withdrawal signal the end of his deeds in this play that increasingly focuses on the end of his life. He embraces his martyrdom and mortality, but paradoxically thinks he is paying for the crimes of his ancestors, "estoy expiando algún crimen de antes de que naciera" (37). The wording here is interesting as it renders his birth in the hypothetical past subjunctive, an indication that he might expiate the sins of his dead forbearers as he endures his life of suffering. This generational explanation of his demise is plausible, although it also contributes to his characteristic delusions of grandeur and self-persecution. An obsession haunts him, that "nada terrible" that comes to him on closing his eyes, "Es una oquedad inmensa" (37). Throughout the pain and pining he forsakes the tragic role of active sin and its worldly mechanism of transgression; rather, he wants the illusion of simplicity (39). In this condition he disdains company and has reduced his wife to a slaving nurse. He is perceived as lacking "voluntad" and "virilidad" and wants to return to the "arroyo de mi niñez" (41-42). Another friend of his, Teodoro, admonishes him to practice poetry because "El arte es el único

consuelo de la vida” (43). A dialectical metaphor is established here by Unamuno in which life is war and death peace. By the third act Ángel rests assured in his transformation away from society with his friend Felipe and his children in a provincial town. This is a place where proverbs are still spoken and God means “saber,” “poder,” “mandar” (51). He realizes that love for him was always an intellectual rather than emotional force in his life (56). He concludes in this solipsism that Eve, archetype of worldly love, only wished to intoxicate him with glory, hence man’s error (57). As a mob is on its way to make him answer for his treason against the party, Felipe, his Christian friend, bids him stay calm and accept what comes, but what comes is a bullet; even though “La sangre redime” (64). On his death bed he has become infantile in his martyrdom, “Si volviese a nacer..., si volviese a nacer..., si fuese otro” (65). This idea of returning and being born again, being born another, being other than oneself is carried out by Unamuno’s messianic character. His wife has become his “madrecita” (65), so his oedipal wish is essentially fulfilled. His last audible words are torn between damning his ego and wishing to hear a nursery rhyme (66). At his death one friend damns the revolution while another, the Christian, wishes for peace. This tragedy is an example of what Sobejano calls his “antirracionalismo” (568). Ángel never dies a decent death like Hamlet, finally taking vengeance and claiming victory; rather, he dies quivering, shot by a mob, by nobody in particular, for no real reason, but the tragic ending is left open to interpretation. This recourse to affective cycles of human behavior is itself potentially debilitating and not at all uplifting in the sense of tragic justice and catharsis initiated by the ancients and recuperated by the Baroque. Humanity vacillates between the grandiose and the morose, and Ángel is the epitome of this valence. Unamuno has no higher solace than this, and proffers nothing else in this modern Christian tragedy that renews the problematic of nihilism onstage.

What is the sphinx according to Unamuno? Is it modern Christianity, or any other way of approaching the world that perplexes and ends in the paradox of self-annihilation? Unamuno is certainly not systematic in his heterodoxy as he assimilates Nietzsche's philosophy to his Christian faith. As can be seen in Unamuno's later dramatic works, he never leaves the sphinx behind, but rather pursues its riddle further. For this reason, according to Orringer, Unamuno can be counted among the traditional philosopher-poets; as Orringer points out, Unamuno's intention with the illustration of his most profound thought on tragedy, *Fedra* was to expose the Spaniard to the specter of the sphinx, symbol of fatality and mystery ("Philosophy and Tragedy" 551). However, it was on these shaky grounds that Unamuno's theater of passion might combat Benavente's theater of resignation (Orringer 551). *La esfinge* is a revival of the Christian morality play seen throughout the Spanish avant-garde, but as Sobejano explains, this does not negate Nietzsche's philosophical import: "Es que Unamuno se forja un cristiano nietzscheano: un portador de fe que interprete el Evangelio libre de sombrías concepciones de siervos o señores de siervos" (285). Orringer explains that Unamuno's *Fedra* was written while correcting proofs of his *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (549). The scholar highlights the significance of the two analogous projects, noting that criticism has been indifferent towards the play. From Racine's *Phèdre* (1677) Unamuno learned simplicity, what he calls in his prologue, nudity (554). This aesthetic of modern Christian sobriety is what defines Unamuno's sense of tragedy. This is not to say, however, that reason overcomes passion, or vice versa, but that Unamuno maintains a continuity of faith in the play. Orringer explains, referencing Unamuno's biography, that this art form derived from Unamuno's sympathy with French Protestant writers such as Pascal (555), a figure with whom Nietzsche was also fascinated. It can be assumed that, as Orringer characterizes him, Unamuno's Hipólito contrasts with his predecessors because of his chastity.

Another important change in Unamuno's work is the replacement of the grand Theseus with an ordinary Pedro (557). Unamuno does maintain the element of heredity, important in Euripides's *Hippolytus* from the fifth century BC, but instead of Pasiphae's bestiality and birth of the Minotaur, we have Fedra's dead mother a simple woman of ill repute (557-58). This is completely in line with Unamuno's simultaneous Christianizing and modernizing tendencies. Orringer concludes his essay with an exhortation to "monographic treatment" of "Unamuno as a Hellenist," that is, as a philosopher and a playwright (563). But in what sense is Unamuno to be considered a Hellenist in his sanitized vision of classical tragedy? As Orringer states, a more detailed comparison of his theoretical and dramatic works on tragedy and the tragic sentiment is a worthwhile endeavor, especially in the context of his contemporaries.

Unamuno's tendency to prologue and epilogue in his tragic plays has classical antecedents, but in reality shares much more with the authorial control of the realist and romantic playwright who attempted to intervene in every detail of reception and interpretation of their play. As a backdrop his *Fedra* makes use of a simple blank sheet, chairs and table, with his actors in ordinary garb (214), which best symbolize Unamuno's drama of ideas. This should better reveal the "expresión del carácter que simboliza" as opposed to the actor's charisma or elegance (214). Ornamentation should be avoided as it obscures the classical drama, "su primitiva severidad" (214). Unamuno defends this position reminding us of his philological background and familiarity with ancient Greek and the classics. The tragic play he constructs is more efficient and less distracting, "Es poesía y no oratoria dramática lo que he pretendido hacer" he tells us (215). However, this declamatory poetry is void of rhyme and superfluity, while the poetic serves as an indictment of the passions. The forbidden is the object of desire as Phaedra wants her stepson Hippolytus; her passion breaks up the family rather than bind it



together. Fatefully, “se miran a los ojos bajo los ojos de la Esfinge” (215). This reference to Sophocles’s Sphinx of Thebes is a clear allusion to Unamuno’s first play of the same name. It is part of Unamuno’s mystery doctrine and his insistence on faith as the only resolution to what rationality supposedly leaves us with, the void. This affirmation against nothingness, or belief in God instead of abject nihilism, is what Unamuno professes in his plays. The Sphinx is something posited in the place of nothingness; meanwhile Phaedra’s love is beautiful and admirable, but so was Lucifer (216). Unamuno who will not allow us the indulgence of excess and idolatry criticizes such insufficiency of appearances; instead we are left with an affirmation of providence and patriarchy. Unamuno knows we are moved by our desires, but he wants us to direct this power to the love of a supernatural being. It is the inhibition of role-playing in which everyman saves us from the worldly chaos of nihilism. Phaedra must die because passion dominated her, hence the fatalism of her suicide; her demise was timely and necessarily just within the Christian tragedy Unamuno crafted. It was equally necessary that Hippolytus should reject his stepmother’s passion for him, and that he would show no sexual interest in her at his father’s home. But, we can ask ourselves, what if all this were reversed? Unamuno’s tragedy is chaste and pedagogical, yet limited in scope for the reason that his work never engages the transgressive power of active sin. The three acts are governed by a belief Unamuno harbors, “hay un cristianismo de antes de Cristo, del Cristo eterno” (“Autocrítica” 218). This self-indulgence and prejudice dooms Phaedra to the role of a passive heroine, unlike Galdós’s Augusta or García Lorca’s tragic heroines. Like Euripides’s plebeian new Attic comedy, Unamuno will bring to the stage “personas como vosotros y como el autor, no personajes, ni menos de papel, personas de carne y hueso, y sangre y de alma” (“Autocrítica” 219). The “dream myth” is gone, and so are the Dionysian chorus and orgiastic dithyramb; staring at his Euripidean double on stage, the

everyman “rejoiced that he could talk so well,” while reveling in his civic mediocrity (*The Birth of Tragedy* 75-77). Nietzsche’s genealogy outlines the development of Unamuno’s Christian tragedies as “The dying Socrates became the new ideal, never seen before, of noble Greek youths” (89). Just as Sophocles replaced the chorus with characters, Euripides completed the destruction of the same as he favored dialogue over music (92). Unamuno replicates this age old new style as he insists on dialogue and character through his “Palabra viva, ¡claro!, con gesto, palabra con calor de sangre, palabra en carne” (“Autocrítica” 219). In *Fedra* he employs the same pedagogical dialogue, his so called living word, as an end to his ascetic morality. Song and music are at odds with Unamuno’s austere version of Phaedra. To complete the lesson we must participate with him, “colaborad con pureza de intención con ellos y con el autor; y entre todos crearemos una vez más esta tragedia” (220). Unamuno’s project of religious revival through tragedy resonates with García Lorca’s own dramatic project, but if Unamuno was less compromised and more independent in his drama than the mainstream, he falls short of the theatricality outlined by Nietzsche, practiced in the first phase of Greek tragedy, and revived at other times in the modern period.

In Grau’s *El Conde Alarcos: tragedia romancesca en tres actos* (1917) and *El señor de Pigmalión: farsa tragicómica de hombres y muñecos en tres actos y un prólogo* (1928) we see a return to tragic myths from the medieval and ancient periods respectively. Indeed, Grau is playing with what Nietzsche called an original hero, be it Promethean, Oedipal, or Christian in which active sin drives the tragic plot towards a renewed awareness of the world. The clash between nihilism and modernism is poignant in Grau’s avant-garde dramas, which have internalized cyclical structures of time that challenge the linear development of rational plots from the nineteenth century. Grau’s count, princess, automatons, and Pygmalion are now

archetypes of fate, passion, and power, not psychological character sketches of the mannerist or realist era. Similarly, the ethical and political works of Alberti, Altolaguirre, and Hernández advance this avant-garde search for a just existence as the tragedy of nihilism takes place in more contemporary, familiar settings outside the antiquity and fantasy of Grau's works. Alberti's use of the *auto sacramental* in *El hombre deshabitado* (1931) is, however, a distinguishing factor in the poetic drama of his career and picks up on Grau's interest in the *romance*, which Alberti also used in his *Fermin Galán* (1930). A peaceable place for being with one another among Spaniards on the national stage had now become a geopolitical question with the progressive, combative theater of this first group at odds with the conservative theater of their predecessors in Eugenio D'Ors and Ramiro de Maeztu. Although the Second Spanish Republic had been declared, political matters on stage survived Galdós's republicanism in the late nineteenth century. Another strategy in the avant-garde drama was to escape the battle of nihilistic ideologies through innovations in ritualistic play as seen in Unamuno's Christian metaphysical tragedies and García Lorca's occult, hermetic, symbolism and orgiastic expressionism. Again we see the dialectic of Apollonian form and Dionysian chaos emerge in twentieth century Spanish tragedy, but these two possibilities were always interrelated, making it difficult and sometimes arbitrary to signal one or the other as a dominant. Jacinto Grau stands apart from the early turn of the century dramatists in this typology, although he could be considered a successor of Valle for his willingness and ability to synchronize different times and techniques into his tragedy. He goes beyond Valle in this aesthetic endeavor because he does not stop at a critique of modernism, as in the latter's first *esperpento*, *Luces de Bohemia*, but assimilates this progressive culture of the bourgeoisie through the alternate spectrums of medieval romance and science fiction. John W. Kronik, in his essay on the epistolary relationship between Antonio Buero Vallejo and the post-

Civil War emigrant Jacinto Grau, relates how the latter's drama stood to "contrarrestar la práctica del naturalismo" ("Puntos de contacto dramático" 469), that is, through a return to theatricality. Grau, who was even more marginalized by the public as he pushed forward the avant-garde project in Spain, took up the supernatural, not unlike the specters and encounters with death found in Galdós and Valle before him. The avant-garde movement in drama was actually a confrontation with Hegelian modernism, Western subjectivity, and European identity by means of depersonifying characters and recentering primordial plot structures (Kruger 81). The retelling of medieval legend and foretelling of a mechanized future by Grau onstage are indices of this urgency to revitalize the stage in Spain as a means of encountering nihilism. The avant-garde drama's overcoming of naturalism in the arts as a supreme sublimation of technology and society, the empirical sciences, and their pretense to universal knowledge through the revelation of reality was mainly achieved through changes in tragic plot structure, that is, theatrical time and space. In the avant-garde theater tragic justice was relativized and endings were left untied. As Jeff Malpas states in his essay "Nihilism and the Thinking of Place," "The devaluing of even the highest values that Nietzsche identifies as characteristic of nihilism is itself a consequence of the reduction of the human to mere subject and of the world to object" (121). Nihilism was a prime factor in leading Grau toward the medieval symbol and the futurist robot in *El Conde Alarcos* and *El Señor de Pigmalión*. Ackerman and Puchner's findings on avant-garde drama corroborate this view of nihilism: "This creative destruction of the subject and the human actor was vital, in particular, to the project of symbolism" (8). Their study of continental drama serves to corroborate Grau's often forgotten importance within the Spanish avant-garde, the imperative of reevaluating his dramaturgy for the movement, while signaling how theatricality and tragedy combine in an aesthetic confrontation with nihilism.

In Grau's treatment of *El Conde Alarcos* the medieval romance ends in suspense, as opposed to a traditional good versus evil morality play. An interrogation of two competing world views, –sinister will represented by the diabolical Infanta versus the vengeful resentment of the Moorish witch Nodriza–, are vitally intertwined by way of the wet nurse's venomous lactation in the princess. The tragedy is set in early spring, a tumultuous time, which Nietzsche equates with the Dionysian and "the annihilation of the veil of *māyā*" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 40). Desire and will to power drive the action and supporting symbolism in Grau's tragedy regarding the active sin of lust. As the editor of Grau's work makes clear, the playwright was well aware of Nietzsche's account of tragedy (Luciano García Lorenzo "Introducción" 33). The tragic affair of the Infanta and the Conde is that they were both bewitched before they were united in the crime of the murdered Condesa. The sinister Nodriza, a type of sorceress, stands in as a Greek fury capable of charting the destiny of other tragic heroes. The Infanta's rebellion against her surrogate mother, intent on her destruction, parallels her own embrace of the diabolical, anti-Christ, rejection of God and eternal salvation. Instead the princess openly and willingly condemns herself by fulfilling her desire for the Count. This tragic love is equally carnal and spiritual, an all-consuming loss of self, an affliction willed by her wet nurse that is ultimately met by hellish punishment for her sacrilege. The moral choice in *El Conde Alarcos* is about desire, and the willing of "nada" and "todo" (Grau 206), which transvaluates Unamuno's *Todo* as immortality in heaven and salvation from sin. Symbolizing the reactive and active forms of nihilism, the Nodriza affirms the former while the Infanta professes the latter. The play goes beyond an exploration of modernism and forebodes the tragic knowledge of twentieth century nihilism; the women in opposition tragically embody this symbolic tension between nihilist forces and different ways of being. Must we condemn the Infanta's passion and violent actions

for an idealistic, self-sacrificing morality seen in the Condesa? Perhaps the vengeful occultism of the Nodriza offers another nihilist interpretation? Interestingly, the men in this play offer no alternatives, as the king submits to his daughter's bidding to have the countess killed, while the count blindly obeys the monarch, thereby fulfilling the will of the princess and the fate set in motion by the wet nurse. Powerfully diabolical and Dionysian in the same breath, the last lines of the play are pronounced heroically by the princess, "¡Al infierno, si allí se ama!" (206). Tragedy climaxes here as Grau leaves us with the knowledge that women are protagonists of nihilist transvaluation; accordingly, his heroine follows in the line of Galdós's Augusta and differs markedly from the passive subjects found in Valle's barbaric comedies. While Grau allows us to witness the anguish of these lovers whose souls are condemned to eternal damnation, the author still hints at their conjugal ecstasy in hell, their tragic affirmation of suffering in life and resignation to death. The princess forces the count to possess her, as she is possessed by him, and recollects promises he made to her as a young man, "¡Yo, sola ya, tuya en vida y en muerte... y en el castigo! ¡Tuya!... ¡Tuya!... ¡Tuya!" (203). She does not care about pardon or penitence, as his consciousness gnaws at his weary soul: she demands the reckoning of an unfulfilled promise. United in their criminal love, the rest of the court sees them as illuminated specters in the ruddy dawn light, but the devilish Infanta revels in these "nubes de escarlata," sweetening and softening the scene in an Oriental ambience of luxury (200-201). Vernon A. Chamberlin acknowledges the innovation of this tragic piece, which surpasses even Schlegel's interpretation of the theme, noting the following examples of Grau's ingenious treatment of the medieval romance, 1) substitution of a resolute king for a submissive one; 2) a new, willingly murderous count; 3) a sensual princess; 4) the addition of a malevolent Moore servant (521). He recognizes another, even more important merit of Grau's work, the specific "stage directions, the lighting,

the costumes, and the color symbolism” that contribute to the gothic ambience of the play (521). Grau goes beyond the Renaissance understanding of the legend, and even surpasses the Romantic interpretation through his nihilist adaptation. This aesthetic treatment of the legendary topic advances the Spanish avant-garde drama as the ethical tensions of a medieval romance are reworked in modern tragedy. The result is an erotic symbolism that advances beyond Galdós’s syncretism and Valle’s escapist, pessimistic tragedies.

Like Grau’s medieval court of discord, Galdós’s decadent social sketch, and Valle’s analysis of feudalism, Alberti situates his tragedy *El hombre deshabitado* in a dysfunctional ambience of spousal infidelity and murder. Beginning with Galdós’s *Realidad* and the schism between husband (Orozco) and wife (Augusta), the family tragedy continues onstage well into the twentieth century. *El hombre deshabitado* is Alberti’s most theatrical and critically successful dramatic work, and follows this thematic, albeit with stylistic nuances that further the aesthetics of the avant-garde and introduce surrealism to the national stage. At the same time aestheticism was becoming ever more experimental, since aesthetes perceived a need of differentiating their movement as distinct from popular culture. The same problem becomes a stimulus in the dramatic career of Alberti who was tempted to create accessible works as in the popular poetics of *Fermín Galán*, his romance sung by a blind street performer, or the slapstick farce *Auto de fe*, aimed at Ortega y Gasset and his entourage. But it is *El hombre deshabitado* that stands apart for its marriage of traditional structures with modern nihilism. If one counts the prologue and epilogue, the work is a three-act play that adheres to an Aristotelian unity of time and place. The scenes of the prologue and epilogue, reminiscent of the medieval morality play or auto sacramental, are set in a modern wasteland or industrial hell with leaky pipes, eroded iron, broken cables, flickering lights, and uneven pavers. Nihilism, chaos, and stasis construct this

uninhabitable place. The all-knowing and all-powerful Vigilante Nocturno guides the inert Hombre Deshabitado through this purgatory while showing him the procession of souls “Carrusel triste, silencioso, sin orden” (189). This dystopian wheel of misfortune is replaced by the Arcadian paradise of the single act where the supreme deity transforms the Adamic character into a gentleman, endowing him with his five senses, and marrying him to a prelapsarian Eve. Before leaving, however, the Vigilante warns the Hombre to distrust his new senses as they hold the key to his salvation or perdition. With the impending tragedy set from the start, the man is doomed to the course of events that have been predetermined through the power of temptation and the weakness of the human will. In this piece the Christianity of a medieval morality play judges the fortitude of an innocent heathen. In this vein, Orozco’s inquisition of Augusta in Galdós’s *Realidad*, Unamuno’s vision of everyman, and the Hell that engulfs the lovers in Grau’s *El Conde Alarcos*, recall elements of Christian and classical justice in tragic drama. The metamorphosis from the prologue to the act in Alberti’s play resonates with an original fall from grace, and signals the tragedy that unfolds from Arcadian beginnings. The naïve couple mirthfully plays in their eternal springtime while the five senses watch ominously. The impending tragedy is heightened when the personified Gusto kills the fish the other senses have caught; soon after the Hombre hears a commotion and cry next to the ocean and calls for his servants to help him investigate the noise.<sup>24</sup> They find an adolescent girl, much like the woman was in the prologue, “sola, descalza, desgñada y medio desnuda, una muchacha: La Tentación.

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<sup>24</sup> In Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* the prophetess Cassandra tells of the Furies that haunt the house with their singing, “unlovely in tone,” because the Atreidae have “drunk human blood for greater boldness,” and the “hymn they sing as they besiege the house is to its sinful folly from the very start” (1190). Alberti’s Senses dialogue like a chorus of Greek Furies who recount the tragic bloodshed, its uncontrolled eternal return, resolution through ritual sacrifice, and catharsis. In line with Litvak’s comments on *Salome*, the Cassandra character was essential to modern Spanish tragedy, from Galdós’s 1910 adaptation of her, to García Lorca’s heroines who suffer tragedy.



Es muy bella” (205). Man’s lust will thus undo him from this point on. She presents him with an ultimatum:

Y tendrás que matarme, que arrastrarme después de muerta hasta la playa. Y aun así no te verás libre de mi persona, de este cuerpo macizo que tú aún no conoces: el mar y el viento volverán a arrojarne contra los muros de tu alcoba, contra la misma cabecera de tu cama. Si me echas, te quedarás sin sueño, te lo juro. Muerta, continuaré presente en todos tus instantes. (206)

Like the fateful lovers in Grau’s work the attraction of temptation consumes the body and soul of the Hombre as he is rendered powerless. It is Gusto, lust and pleasure, which undoes him and ruins his innocent tranquility. When it comes to Christian salvation, one must be tempted before gaining access to God’s glory (214). Similar to Grau’s Count killing the Countess for the Princess, as well as other turn of the century Spanish tragedies, Alberti’s everyman stabs his wife in the heart to enjoy the young body of the seductress, but not without the blind vengeance of the resurrected wife who fulfills the will of God by shooting him as he touches the body of Tentación. After this providential *deus ex machina* the epilogue returns to the infernal darkness of the prologue in which souls are sorted out on a factory line to be condemned in the eternal fires of Hell or saved to enjoy God’s glory. In this modern wasteland crimes are punished as order is restored and chaos overcome. Man blames his creator while the author of all things condemns his body and soul to burn. An impassioned dialogue to this effect is played out and constitutes a reflection on the tragic action of the single act. This return to tragedy through the likes of everymen that parallel Marlowe’s Elizabethan Faustus, Goethe’s Romantic Faust, Zorrilla’s nineteenth century Don Juan, and Valle’s twentieth, is carried out by the anti-heroine Tentación in the fiery depths of Hell who calls for the condemned man, his last sheepish words

“Ella tuvo la culpa” (227). As nihilism becomes more nuanced onstage, modern man becomes the puppet of an unjust God that utilizes woman as a means of testing souls, reiterating the ancient motif of man’s tragic existence as victim of a conniving Clytemnestra, vengeful Phaedra, or unknowing Eve.<sup>25</sup>

Alberti’s best dramatic work could be considered an example of Spanish surrealism, but his fascination with the ambiguities of the supernatural and subconscious was eventually outmoded for a more pragmatic and direct approach to communicating onstage. Alberti’s communist comrade, Manuel Altolaguirre, followed the same aesthetic path by pushing avant-garde drama into the realm of paradox. In his *Entre dos públicos* (1933), a piece rediscovered in the Soviet archives after the Cold War by Carlos Flores Pazos; in his introduction to the piece, the investigator chronicles the miscommunication between cultural cadres from Moscow to Madrid while the author was in London during the year of 1933. Altolaguirre sets up another Everyman character, Mr. X, as a symbol of bourgeois egoism and mysticism. Just as Job and Jesus resisted diabolical temptation and perdition, reiterating a tragic fate seen in Alberti’s *El hombre deshabitado*, Mr. X dramatizes the Mephistophelian logic of modernism as an alternative salvation to twentieth century horrors. Mr. X in his fickle sophistry actually echoes another important character in Altolaguirre’s tragedy, the woman, or simply the Mujer, who mimes Alberti’s dark, immoral, temptress, and becomes an allegory herself. That the moral residue of Christianity should find its way into leftist theater should come as no surprise as these political pieces attempted to appeal to the Spanish public’s imagination.

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<sup>25</sup> It is worth recalling the twentieth century drama’s affinity for dark comedy, and similarities with seventeenth century tragedy: “We have seen thin little Everyman grow dramatically robust in his passage to Faustus and Hamlet, and on to Peter Gynt and even Jimmy Porter” (Styan 287). The political tragedians, Alberti and Altolaguirre, have not strayed too far from the Everyman mold, while Unamuno’s ascetic tragedy embraces his original frailty.

Altolaguirre's worker, Obrero, is the antithesis of moral uncertainty and is, rather, the symbol of filial duty as he takes care of his widowed mother and sister, along with the latter's four children. He is unemployed and unwilling to work in the mines because his brother-in-law was just killed; all the while the unions prepare to strike. The parallel plot to the proletarian scenes is the bourgeois one, that of the lawyer, whose business it is to settle real estate transactions between *campesinos* and *terratenientes*, consult for the *director de las minas*, and pacify his rebellious wife who does not care for their sick son. She has an affair with the director of mines, leaves her husband, sends their child to a sanatorium and never sees him until his death. The work is unique because it is an early Spanish example of socialist realism. The avant-garde in this case solidified into a formulaic style tending toward moralism at the expense of experimentalism. *Entre dos públicos* can therefore be interpreted as a practical attempt to appeal to the public through allegory and critique the parliamentary politics of the Second Spanish Republic, which was not immune to Left-Right politics. The socialist realism of the work symbolizes the radicalism of a 1933 Left response to a shift to the political Right, while in 1934 the Asturian miners' strike and its brutal repression by the military were subsequent events, which in turn led to a new Leftist coalition that won the elections of February 1936.

Patriarchal idealism skews Altolaguirre's *Mujer* and Alberti's *Tentación*, both of which embody nihilism as villains that attempt to engulf man and endanger the possibility of a just world. This chauvinism is seen from the allegoric Everyman to the heroic worker, which James McCarthy describes as the quintessential plot structure in the *teatro de urgencia*, as "duty impelled by faith" (53). The nauseating technique of a revolving door with a single actor playing the director of mines, banker, landowner, and Señor X, is an adaptation of the personification of death, and the characterization of the fascist as devil (McCarthy 54). Another element of this

exemplary propaganda piece is revealed through the dizzying monologue of catechism addressed to the audience (56). Before the third act the mother has tragically repented of her ways and mourns the loss of her dead child. The author, in his hastily moralizing conclusion, wraps things up by killing off Mr. X and speeding up twenty years of revolutionary time. In an act of divine justice the lawyer and worker are friendly comrades, and both feel younger with grey hair than in their twenties (68). They recount the marvelous construction of a new city in which all have homes, wives, big kitchens, kids, soccer fields, and men's clubs (69). In this idealized suburban fantasy, there is also a free performance hall where the workers sit on the front rows (69). Not only is communism represented as a humanitarian belief similar to Christianity, but it is also reminiscent of advanced capitalism. McCarthy reminds us "Marxism and Christianity offer adherents an afterlife, although in the case of the former this is a certainty existing in a temporal future rather than a spiritual utopia beyond the material world" (50). Altolaguirre's *Entre dos públicos* is a testament to the same historical promise. Due to its socialist realism and demonstration of Soviet penetration, the work merits a unique place in Spanish literary history as the piece's overt approach to communicate and indoctrinate reverberates with the late avant-garde. The main stylistic nuance is the character of Mr. X who proliferates fantastically, chimerically, and must be dealt with violently as he menaces the possibility of political sublimation through utopian catharsis. Does he still, nevertheless, hide among the ranks of the new society constructed at the end of the play? In fact, we might say that *Entre dos públicos* is a dissonant, incomplete tragedy that upholds a political vision over the aesthetic requirements of a unified tragic work.

The political intensity in drama was at a height in the thirties as ideological demands exhausted the aesthetic momentum of the avant-garde on the continent and the Peninsula.

Spanish drama exemplified this tendency with comparative alacrity as it turned away from surrealism and favored socialist realism. Gregorio Torres Nebrera describes Altolaguirre's dramatic work as an example of agit prop, "despojada absolutamente de cualquier recurso surrealista" (*El posible/imposible teatro del 27* 108). Access to and analysis of the supernatural and subconscious in the theater that was born of naturalism before the turn of the century and continued into the twenties and thirties of the next, but was met with the politicization of nihilist ideologies from Left to Right. Andrew Anderson finds that French surrealism is generally lacking on the Peninsula since it was rejected from a creative and receptive standpoint by the Spanish dramatists for the more approachable aesthetics of symbolism and expressionism (24). While I generally agree with this observation, I still think that we can speak of a Spanish surrealist drama that coalesces around the performance of Alberti's *El hombre deshabitado* in 1931, but also includes the literary dramas of García Lorca's unrepresentable works, and some of his contemporaries like Max Aub's interpretation of *Narciso* and Luis Buñuel's *Hamlet*.

On the political Right, the Nationalist Eugenio D'Ors's *Guillermo Tell* (1926) offers a resolutely tragic character in the person of William Tell, the Swiss hunter-soldier turned monk. The tragedy, which largely echoes Unamuno's *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, recounts how humanity can never truly know anything with certainty, and must maintain a benevolent faith instead of the search for forbidden knowledge. D'Ors's version of William Tell ends in total resignation, Buddhistic nihilism, Schopenhauerian self-abnegation, and Christian love. In this way, D'Ors's William Tell is the epitome of what Nietzsche described as the demi-man. As Gonzalo Sobejano points out, "El complejo ético-social de ideas que tiene por fundamento la voluntad de dominio y por coronación el superhombre produjo en la mente de D'Ors un efecto más bien reactivo" (571). Why write another William Tell after his romanticization in Schiller's

play and Rossini's opera? Why recreate it for a Spanish public in the twentieth century? It is in Switzerland, hotbed of Calvinism, that Catholicism encountered a frontier. What this Alpine confederacy represents in the European imagination and culture of nihilism is significant here: as the birthplace of Rousseau and liberalism, Switzerland offered the prospect of a contractual secular society based on democratic capitalism and a citizenry easily subjected. That Protestantism could reinforce Catholicism and vice versa is not without reason since an ultimately Christian Europe was to form a new order after the decline of the Roman Empire. In this recreation of a Holy Roman legend, there is no transgressive lust or luxury in *Guillermo Tell* that is not eventually punished by God's providential will. Guessler, the original tyrant against whom William Tell rebels, commands the hero to shoot the apple off his son's head, but is in turn killed by the protagonist with the same weapon. Bucardo, the Confederate head who replaces the imperial governor, enjoys the same misery that accompanies tyranny, and must prosecute endless wars against the Emperor and persecute his own discontent countrymen. The only solace found in the play lies in the father-son duo that the Tells enact within the sanctuary of the monastery. Not unlike Valle's *Divinas palabras* and Unamuno's naked tragedy, D'Ors offers us the monastic life as the only peaceful possibility. The tragedy here is that we are doomed to repeat the biblical offenses of Cain and Judas, while a lesson against patricide concludes the play. The final confrontation between the Emperor and William Tell is controlled by this moral fatality, "la infamia de los parricidios" (211). In fact, the two take on a parallel father-son relationship, as the dying Emperor caresses his rebellious subject turned pacifist. They confess to each other, and chant The Lord's Prayer (212). As the Emperor remarks, accepting his mortal injury, "¡El Emperador y el rebelde, tan viejos como el mismo mundo!" (213). The tyrant's demise at the hands of rebels is cyclical, hence the renewal of a patriarchal nihilism

already seen in Valle's tragic allegory of the *Comedias bárbaras*. In D'Ors's ideological tragedy, his defense of authority in the Emperor finally subdues the unruly subject, his prodigal son, "Y, ¿qué recibimos en pago de esta solicitud paternal?" and "Los hombres de tu país fueron siempre, Guillermo, esquivos y dudosos para nosotros" (214). William Tell admits this and renews the cycle through his monastic commitment and renunciation of the world. The Swiss peasant community is at odds with their cosmopolitan rulers from Vienna, but D'Ors opts to have his hero prostrate himself like Valle's Montenegro patriarch before Viana del Prior. This weaker form of tragedy, stylistically inferior to Valle and more akin to Altolaguirre's *Entre dos públicos*, shares the political commitment at the expense of tragedy, what Diaz-Plaja refers to as "perplejidad detectable" and "una formulación mixta de autoritarismo y sindicalismo" (275). This Nationalist play of resentment and reaction upholds traditional morality of the Church-State dichotomy, while perpetuating the nihilist ideologies of the twentieth century by accommodating modern hierarchies in a sublimated avoidance of tragedy.

Ramiro de Maeztu, D'Ors's cohort in the literary world of the Falange, wrote *El sindicato de las esmeraldas* during his stay in London (1908), and, indeed, the play is an essay on British imperial culture and its interests in the fictitious, young, corrupt, undeveloped, now revolutionary *República Andina* represented by three characters: Iznaga, fiery creole revolutionary leader, and his loyal friends, who are of mixed Spanish and Andean ancestry, the siblings, Siboney and Guarina, the former an ingenious engineer and the latter a wise and humble young woman. These modern archetypes of the Western stage represent a twentieth century geopolitical perspective of the periphery from a decadent European worldview in Spain. Maeztu features an archetype from Greek tragedy, Helena, and resorts to Western mythology to renovate modern Spanish tragedy. Maeztu's Helena is worldly like Galdós's Augusta; she declares in the first act "Hay que hacerse

a los tiempos. Convengamos en que las cosas han cambiado” (348). As a flirtatious social butterfly from the upper strata of the bourgeoisie she symbolizes social change, the promise of modernism, and the complexity of nihilism. She at least feigns interest in the Andean culture the three ambassadors represent on their mission to procure arms and adjust their debt with creditors in Europe, but comments “Su escala de pesas y medidas está al revés de la nuestra” (348). Such assertions about the possibility of alternative evaluations and the relativity of culture could, however, be understood as a sort of orientalist or primitivist fascination. Outright prejudice, and more direct remarks, come from the likes of her mother, Mrs. Miller, who says at one point “La verdadera causa de que recibamos a gente de nombres raros y narices diversas es, en realidad, muy sencilla y prosaica: negocios, negocios y negocios” (349). At least she is candid enough to admit that “el lujo nos devora” (349). Note that their surname hints at an agrarian past of milling grain. Such distressing comments in this play are astutely countered by other forms of positivism and utilitarianism, along with defenses of British imperialism. For instance, with respect to the luxurious expenses that consume the rich and feed the poor, Mrs. Selton disingenuously claims this waste “Da de comer a los pobres” (349). The same matriarch reiterates such hierarchical moralism, “Guárdate, Helena, de los hombres de tipo aristocrático con ideas demócratas” (349). Guarina anchors this imperial cosmopolitanism with observations like “Ves en nosotros los representantes de una Arcadia desvanecida por la que os figuráis haber pasado vosotros hace ya treinta siglos. Suspiráis y sonreís al mirarnos como si evocaseis recuerdos de vuestra niñez” (351). Maeztu endows her with the knowledge and courage to defend herself from the belittling remarks of the English. She and Siboney are “de raza medio española,” whereas Iznaga “desciende directamente de los conquistadores” (353). As evinced by the character sketch above, all of them are allegorical types. Beside Helena, the prudish Mrs. Selton, the middling Millers,



the heroic mestizos, the conflicted creole, and the sage Indian, can be found the aristocrat Selbourne, the capitalist Weinthal, the philanthropist patriarch Mr. Miller, and the industrialist spouse Walton.

Maeztu's *El sindicato de las esmeraldas* is remarkably one of the most anti-theatrical works of the Spanish avant-garde, but its realist pretenses forebode the socialist realism of leftist drama that concluded the avant-garde experiment in theatricality. Maeztu's intransigent, mannerist representation of the English upper class, the Spanish American creole, and the Andean are not only reflections of literary form, but value judgments of life possibilities: "Form is the highest judge of life: the tragedy which finds expression in history is not completely pure tragedy, and no dramatic technique can wholly disguise its metaphysical dissonance; insoluble technical problems are bound to spring up at every point of the drama" (Lukács "The Metaphysics of Tragedy" 172). With politics at the fore and a drama of customs as an aesthetic principle Maeztu wrote a conservative piece that sought to mirror an idealized social milieu. Maeztu's experiment in tragedy is an imperialist apology that represents what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as "the hierarchy of instances and the eminence of the sovereign" (*Kafka* 50). Iznaga, an Achilles/Paris character is Helena's "romántico, loco, absurdo, imposible y adorable" (404), and also draws from Shakespearian and Golden Age characters. She is his little enchanting devil and he grotesquely wants to kiss her "pezuña" (404). The injection of risqué banter and acting alleviates some of the allusions to the Trojan maritime tragedy in an attempt at modernization and comic relief. Iznaga refers to Helena's overwhelming power over him as "La movilidad inerte de la mujer, como la del mar, suele ser más fuerte que la fuerza" (405). She later refers to him as her "polichinela," or Italian marionette, whom she can pull by his whiskers (406). Iznaga's jealousy over Lord Selbourne, the aristocrat who woos Helena, is also

reminiscent of Shakespeare's Othello. As Guarina, the righteous heroine pronounces, "Ten cuidado, Iznaga. Los celos enflaquecen, porque muerden y no comen" (407). The lady of dual descent proceeds to assert her moral understanding of him as a creole, and his new distraction, by criticizing him, "no haces lo que debes y la conciencia te remuerde" (407). He is weakening as a person in the two Andeans' eyes because he evades his duty to their country and succumbs to the same temptation seen in Alberti's *El hombre deshabitado*. This is his time to decide, to act, or be overwhelmed by the tide that Helena represents. His dilemma reminds us of the wayward noble, from Aeschylus to Shakespeare, and Calderón, who must finally act and seek vengeance to right a wrong. In Guarina's words, "te dejas dominar por las dudas, te degradas en la inacción y al verte degradado, te entristeces" (408). Guarina means for him to conform to their nation's destiny, and in her heroic discourse she reminds him of "nuestro trágico continente," where for centuries their national soul has been buried, "el alma hierática de Oriente. ¡Desenterrémosla! ¡Desenterrémosla!" (408). She invokes his past as a creole conqueror and calls him an indignant hypocrite, and Helena a petty bourgeois. She resents that for years he has only thought of her as his "perra fiel" (409). The tension rises as Helena enters and confronts them, accusing her rival, "trataría de persuadirle de que lo mismo da besar una piel morena que blanca" (410). Guarina professes her love for Iznaga, a love gone unfulfilled for ten years, and then asks what Iznaga would do in London if he continued his affair with Helena. She responds, "Que trabaje, como todo el mundo," that is, she wants to reabsorb him into the cosmopolitan white world order of business (411). Guarina knows that city life would never satisfy him, or help him "completar la obra de su vida" (413). The noble mestiza even suggests Helena come back to the República Andina with them, where their people would idolize her, but the temptress flatly rejects that proposal, in spite of her love for Iznaga (413). The drama of this romantic triangle is broken

though at the futurist explosion of Siboney's test torpedo, and the successful report of the plane's remote-controlled flight. The engineer and her sister decide to go back home to assess the political turmoil of their country, and attend to its future, but not before they are contested over the copyrights of the machine that was fabricated in Walton's plant. Weinthal announces the dissolution of the Syndicate, and the creation of a larger agglomeration, "la Compañía Anglo-Americana del Valle de las Esmeraldas," financed in partnership with New York capital, further frustrating Iznaga's revolutionary political ideals (422). Walton, the industrialist husband of Helena, rightly characterizes Iznaga's predicamento, "Es imposible que un don Juan se convierta en asceta de la noche a la mañana" (422). Iznaga the idealist is finally defeated by the capitalists and decides to pack up and leave London with his two compatriots, but not without confessing his undying love for Helena, "cuando mi obra esté realizada, tu imagen volverá a obsesionarme, porque tu cuerpo tiene las líneas que yo quiero... Y entonces volveré. ¿Me serás fiel?" (425). This fatal attraction is a nihilist specter the creole could not satisfy in the Andes, expressing how Helena "es esa forma que me alucina" (425). This Hellenic mythology is woven into the tradition of Western nihilism because of its reiteration. Her persistence as an apparition of nihilism is revealed in the last stage direction for Iznaga in which he kisses her brutally. Maeztu's *El Sindicato de las Esmeraldas* navigates the romantic and realist continuum that survived through Benavente, all the while renovating the Hellenic ideal of Western nihilism. Apart from this tragic romance and imperfect justice, the drama centers on emerging geopolitical power relations in a globalized world, all of which Maeztu remembered from the last years of Spain's colony in Cuba, where he was born. Modern Spain for Maeztu was a tragic cultural chaos in need of a new order, somewhere in between Britain and the Andes. According to the tragic allegory he wrote about the lost prowess of the Spanish nation with respect to Europe's centers of power and

periphery, the Peninsula as a secondary center could capitalize on its own differences with the continent to afford Spain a unique relation to the rest of the Atlantic world. That realism was another modern aesthetic ideal, albeit subsumed to various ideological motives, is evidenced by the Left-Right dramas of the period.

Beginning with *Bodas de sangre* (1933), continuing with *Yerma* (1934), and ending with *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (1936), García Lorca's work demonstrates how national, classical, and continental aesthetics could be reconciled in a manner appropriate to the unique place of Andalusia. Sumner Greenfield states that, in contrast to the moral tragedies of Unamuno, the theater of customs in Benavente, and the political plays written by authors such as D'Ors and Maeztu, "The conventional theater-going public of Madrid and Barcelona could scarcely see a mirror-image of themselves in these plays, for García Lorca is indifferent to both their tastes and mores and offers them neither philosophical balm nor direct criticism" (*García Lorca, Valle-Inclán y las estéticas de la disidencia* 155). García Lorca's first tragedy, *Bodas de sangre*, derives its power from a heightened theatricality in the final tragic act in which an expressionistic symbolism prevails. The choral Leñadores echo the tragic climax of the protagonists in *Bodas de Sangre*, which also resonate with the Lavanderas in *Yerma* and the Segadores of *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*. Fatal attraction is the result of the desire for fulfillment and enhancement in García Lorca's characters as they incarnate archetypes with deficiencies and qualities that must be exercised and performed. García Lorca's lovers symbolize and express the lack of outlet in European nihilism, while *Bodas de Sangre* represents the most theatrical of García Lorca's tragedies, preferring symbolic expressionism to personality in his characters's actions. This Lorquian symbolism is adapted to tragedy and played out through the creative tension of vital problems and their aesthetic abstraction. It is in this play that the vivid and lurid

combine in a deceptively mimetic exposition with the action broken by a climax in which honor is avenged through the tragic deaths of two young men competing for the love of the Novia. Rural Andalusia is transformed through the symbolic power of García Lorca's expressionism, and otherwise seems common except for allusions and intimations of rural symbolism like the knife and horse. As he states himself, theorizing his own tragic poetics:

La cuchilla y la rueda del carro, y la navaja y las barbas pinchosas de los pastores,  
y la luna pelada, y la mosca, y las alacenas húmedas, y los derribos, y los santos  
cubiertos de encaje, y la cal, y la línea hiriente de aleros y miradores tienen en  
España diminutas hierbas de muerte, alusiones y voces perceptibles para un  
espíritu alerta, que nos llama la memoria con el aire yerto de nuestro propio  
tránsito. ("Teoría y juego del duende" 115)

It would be difficult to exhaust the significance of such agrarian objects as expressionistic symbols in *Bodas de Sangre*: creatively destructive, the farm landscape, tools, and household items recover their vital significance, mainly through references to the flow of blood, and the spilling of the same, and form an accessory to the impending tragedy of the blood wedding. Life and death combine in the archetypes in this play in which there is little need for personality or psychology, only the movement of visceral passions that begin, sustain, and end life. The Third Act is a drastic scenic mutation from the former two: from the sterile deserts of Andalusia we are transported to the fertility of a humid forest where woodsmen compose a tragic chorus about the power of blood and its constant force and flow. This time and place of flux contrasts with the static world of custom and gentility represented earlier among the relatively affluent Andalusian farming community. In this parallel continuum of the third act the moon appears as a feminine, lunatic, blood thirsty, deity, not too unlike the demonic anti-heroines in Grau's *Infanta* or

Alberti's *Tentación*, and demands the warmth and depth of someone's open chest, singing in verse and heightening the tragic climax. The Novio is destined to die like his ancestors; the Mendiga echoes the moon's thirst and guides him to his brutal demise. Sensuality, physicality, vitality, and mortality are paramount here as the fated lovers behave like animals. In fact, the Novia compares herself to a loyal bitch at the feet of her master Leonardo (156). Somewhat like Valle's barbaric couple Cara de Plata and La Pichona, and Alberti's *El hombre deshabitado* in which he stages his fornicating couple in the barn, García Lorca alludes to their animal instincts as the renegade couple in *Bodas* attempt to couple in this supernatural world that also frames their death. The irrationality of their impossible sexual union is expressed in the quick cadence of trimeter, "Clavos de luna nos funden / mi cintura y tus caderas" (157). This conjuring up of primordial tragedy through verse culminates in the release of catharsis in which the rivals kill each other and the Mendiga proclaims "Era lo justo" (163). Tragedy and justice are deeply intertwined in the spectacle of singing and acting, the end being a balance of relative static equality according to impartiality. The family feud is ended through the extinction of progeny such that peace is restored through violence. In fact, this creative destruction, the logic of tragedy, comes to define the avant-garde itself.

Despite its tendency toward apparent dysfunction, avant-garde drama is ultimately reincorporated into the Western literary tradition, as witnessed by the rise of tragedy and the internal movements of nihilism. *Bodas de sangre* functions similarly in that the Novia returns to the community as she accepts her paradoxical status as a widow that was never married. This return through mourning is fateful: although the Novia exhorts the Madre to kill her, such an outcome would fall outside of tragic justice and result in continued chaos and the displacement

of catharsis. The Novia's tragic wisdom is expressed openly in this statement to her mother-in-law:

Y yo corría con tu hijo que era como un niño de agua fría y el otro me mandaba  
cientos de pájaros que me impedían el andar... el brazo del otro me arrastró como  
un golpe de mar, como la cabezada de un mulo, y me hubiera arrastrado siempre,  
siempre, aunque hubiera sido vieja y todos los hijos de tu hijo me hubiesen  
agarrado de los cabellos. (165-66)

The mourning women revert back to song as they scream, cry, pray and face the tragic truth of their painful loss and woeful state. Like Grau before, here the medieval cycle of fortune and fall reveal themselves in García Lorca's avant-garde tragedy that recuperates the irrational, mythological, visceral legends of the past and adapts them to an always ripe present. Yet, why is it that in García Lorca's drama female characters suffer tragedy, while male ones are extirpated from the family line and the stage? As a parallel, "Mueren Agamenón y Clitemestra, adúlteros los dos como los personajes de *Bodas*; también Egisto, el amante de ella, y Casandra, la de él" (Greenfield "Las tragedias" 59). Genealogy is also a determining factor here as the Novio, of "buena simiente," and Leonardo, from "mala ralea," fall to the same fate as their forebears (135-136). Just so, the reason why the mother consents to her son's marriage is that she does not know, or ignores, how the Novia's mother was according to local gossip (99-101). There are other signs of ignorance and contradiction in the beginning that forebode the tragic end: she is older than he, she has already been courted, and her lands are not as good as his, but he is also characterized as somewhat weak and servile. The popular songs that resonate throughout the play speak to the ineluctability of tragic fate: "La sangre corría / más fuerte que el agua" and "Giraba, / giraba la rueda / y el agua pasaba" (103, 133). Water is cleansing but no replacement for blood,

which is much more precious and powerful. García Lorca resorts to Aristotelian tragic poetics, which utilize dialogue and song as resources to move the tragic action of the play; tragedy is a form of mimesis, while its medium is language and rhythm (diction and song), its objects are people and actions (plot, character, and thought), and it is performed rather than narrated as spectacle (Potolsky 39). Following this rubric, in García Lorca the Andalusian lands are left barren and the women childless as the symbolism of fertility and sterility remain constants in García Lorca's tragedies.

*Yerma* and *La casa de Bernarda Alba* repeat the thematic, although they stylize the problem of frustrated sexuality somewhat differently. According to Greenfield's interpretation, "in each of the three plays the definitive event is the elimination of the male who would have, or might have, brought the integrity and fulfillment that are each woman's right" ("García Lorca's Tragedies" 4). The unfruitful and futile is, it should be remembered, are central aspects of nihilist tragedy, from Galdós's *Realidad* to Alberti's *El hombre deshabitado*. As we have seen, from tragic farce to tragedy, avant-garde theater in Spain operates through theatricality itself to craft the tragic work according to authorial intent and creative genius. The avant-garde shows how creativity works on a feedback loop of expended and recovered energies, where strength and time compel one to work and create "the infinite outside" (Foucault, *Language* 94). The finalization at work here differs depending on the respective author's reasons for writing, whether they are inclined to aesthetic, ascetic or political ends. Each author studied in this chapter utilizes realistic detail and symbolic abstraction, which results in a creative integrity dissonant or consonant with avant-garde theatricality.

Symbolism is a creative destruction of the traditional role of the nineteenth century actor who romantically or realistically portrayed a character's personality or psychology. By the



thirties, before the Civil War, the Spanish stage is a place of authorial and directorial expressionism in line with aesthetic events of the European avant-garde. The Salome heroine proliferates in turn of the century Spanish drama, morphing through Valle's rural tragicomedy, while making similar but more conflicted and controversial appearances in the works of Grau, Alberti, and García Lorca. The heroine in nihilist Spanish drama at the turn of the century was an amalgam of the spinster and temptress; the flexibility and complexity of this motif was celebrated by García Lorca's rural trilogy, which incorporated the entrapped Yerma and Adela. Brian C. Morris, in *Son of Andalusia*, reminds the reader of the main compositional difference between the tragedies that distinguish García Lorca's intention and our interpretation, namely that there are no songs, revelries, lullabies, marriage hymns, or funeral dirges in *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* (142). We only hear the reapers in the distance, carrying out their work of harvesting wheat, separated from the interiority of the familial residence that suffocates Adela and her sisters. Francisco Rodríguez Adrados's study of García Lorca's tragedies in comparison to their Greek antecedents finds a point of commonality with respect to Unamuno's treatment of a classic when he observes that "Fedra y Yerma sufren, pero se mantienen castas; y ambas matan" (61). Phaedra and Yerma maintain their chastity despite their suffering, yet resort to murder in order to protect their honor; Bernarda Alba does the same, but sacrifices her vivacious daughter Adela in order to regain authority over her household. Similarly, Alberti's *Tentación* bids the uninhabited man kill his wife for her, while Grau's *Infanta* is poisoned by the *Nodriza* and has the Count kill his wife in exchange for her body and soul. But hell awaits these characters in Alberti and Grau's morality plays, while grief and nothingness conclude García Lorca's Andalusian tragedies of injustice.

Within the nihilist framework figures like the activist, the ascetic, and the aesthete emerge in a typology that conceptualizes the relationship between writer, work, and public. The dramatists of the Spanish avant-garde shared several characteristics: their penchant for the tragic, their desire to arrive at a cultural transvaluation through dramaturgy, and their reliance on gendered archetypes. Unamuno's ascetic visions of tragedy, García Lorca's tragic poetics of desire, and the politics of realism, from Maeztu to Alberti, typify the Spanish avant-garde drama of nihilism. The aesthetic continuity of this period from the 1890s to the 1930s in Spanish drama charts the aesthetics of naturalism to surrealism in which melodrama endures, and the national traditions of *costumbrismo* and *nuevoromanticismo* survive. That socialist realism and nationalist drama assimilated these melodramatic communicative strategies to their own political ends bears out the aesthetic problems established by Aristotelian poetics and the centrality of mimesis. Referring specifically to Valle's aesthetic opening in drama, Greenfield finds that "la mimesis tradicional se somete definitivamente a una multitud de construcciones y reconstrucciones artísticas, y el arte mismo llega a ser, una vez tras otra, el tema del arte" (*García Lorca, Valle-Inclán* 49). While Unamuno pushed the bounds of theory and theology in art, Grau and García Lorca continued Valle's aestheticism and pushed nihilist tragedy to its historical limits; alternately, the Left-Right dichotomy wrestled with the political in art as Galdós did before them in his nascent republicanism. Sobejano considers Unamuno among the secondary "nietzscheanos" of the Generation of 98 (136), but says of the subsequent literary generations that "los representantes consagrados de las generaciones de 1927 y 1939 no se pueden calificar de 'nietzscheístas,' como los de 1898 o, en medida algo menor, los de 1914" (640). Unamuno explicitly confronted and diametrically opposed the German philologist's philosophy of nihilism in *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, while Grau and García Lorca were moved by it through

aestheticism. The differential drama of the ascetic and activist was also based on the renovation of tragedy in Spain and the incorporation of nihilist compositional elements that related opposite worldview approaches. Avant-garde Spanish drama constitutes a return to tragedy, and Jacinto Grau played a fundamental role in repeating and renewing styles and themes inscribed since antiquity.

If we see something of a breakthrough in the meta-theatrical mode, most often staged as tragic farce, then the traditional forms recur and tend to dominate in the 30s before the Spanish Civil War. Tragedy is ultimately revived in an array of works that recognize the constitutive principle of their audiences: Alberti wrote short works framed to appeal to his public; García Lorca wrote lyrically about his native land; Unamuno similarly attempted to transcend high and low cultural spheres through an amalgam of old and new forms. That is, the tragic avant-garde piece is depersonalized and explores problems reminiscent of the rich dramatic tradition from antiquity. This process of accommodation to the literary canon possibly saved the craft of playwriting from complete irrelevance in the early twentieth century. It is only the violence of the Spanish Civil War that silenced this art form, yet not completely, as it continued through the 1930s in the form of propaganda. The violence perpetrated in García Lorca's trilogy arises from the accumulation of injustices that is genealogically traced in the bodies of his characters. In the Spanish drama I analyze in this dissertation, catharsis functions to upend the super-sensuous interpretation of the world and forward "an understanding of the newly inscribed being of the sensuous world" (Blond 127). An understanding of nihilism justifies Federico García Lorca's privileged aesthetic position in the avant-garde movement, and warrants the typology presented here. Genealogy traces "the emergence of different interpretations" that "must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process" (Foucault, *Language* 151-52). Unamuno's naked

tragedy, the Left-Right political drama, and García Lorca's Andalusian pieces are integral to this analysis and form the basis for a typology of nihilism in the Spanish theater. Despite their differences of approach and organization, the three types of nihilist drama are innovative in their radical transvaluation of dramaturgy, either bringing theatricality back to the fore of drama, or inserting theology and politics as a formal principle. Unlike Unamuno who went back through Western drama to craft a work that reflected his Christian ideals of chastity and hierarchy, García Lorca pushed forward the dramatic arts, to their aesthetic limits, and staged pieces that puzzled the public through a unique mimetic conception of theater, which took the art form itself as a compositional element, and injected lifeblood into his works that only appeared simple.

What we gather from García Lorca's tragedies after their exposition through peripeteia, climax, and catharsis, is a lesson in the discipline of the tragedian and the demands of the tragic work on the author and receptor. Avant-garde catharsis reverts back to the ancient understanding of the term, etymologically derived from the horticultural practice of pruning for increased produce, from which the medical practice of purging and its tragic application come from (Potolsky 45-46). Those dramatists that incorporated theatricality purged their drama of external, moral pressures, and successfully composed pieces of memorable artistic value that showed forth as a sufficient whole, enhancing the aesthetics and hermeneutics of life, work, and world. Perhaps the only other dramatist as accomplished as García Lorca in the realm of tragedy was Jacinto Grau, who was largely overlooked by his peers and still somewhat forgotten by scholars. Grau's tragedy *El Conde Alarcos*, and tragic farce, *El Señor de Pigmalión*, laid the foundations for an overcoming of modern subjectivity established by the romantic and realist period of the nineteenth century; he also actively pursued the tragic elements of active sin, an exploration of archetype, revival of myth, and the characterization of strong heroines, all of which reverberated

in the works of García Lorca. Still, the tragic poetics of the Granadan were not immune to the persistence of realist and romantic paradigms; Lorca, instead, reformed them throughout his dramatic career as he simultaneously ridiculed and utilized melodrama in his plays. His use of the lyric was different than his contemporaries and predecessors, however, as he rooted his plays in a terrestrial sexuality with unique problematics all their own. This localization was a focusing technique that incorporated poetic imagery and had a photographic effect that elevated his tragedies above the political and religious idealizations seen in other dramatists. Consequently, his Andalusian tragedies and tragic farce exemplify the productivity of European nihilism and offer tragic insight regarding human communication and cooperation beyond the stage.

## Conclusion

Conceptualizing Spanish drama through European nihilism elicits new ways of appreciating and approaching these performance texts. The tragedies studied here offer different ways of thinking tragically about the world as they inform us of how we might relate to other beings and things more justly. Nihilism explains how the ancient tragedian was an integral functionary of cathartic, ritualistic ceremonies, while the modern incarnation of that social servant became an estranged, extravagant outsider. How to remember the history of nihilism and reevaluate the works it produced is the task of the literary genealogist who lumbers through texts and concepts. This hermeneutic activity empowers the interpreter and enriches the work, as connections are made and new explanations attempted. As we reread the avant-garde, despite its codification and commercialization, we reactivate the transvaluation initiated in this aesthetic movement.

In Miguel Hernández's *El Labrador de más aire* (1937) the last heroine of Spanish avant-garde drama is witnessed in the ubiquitous Encarnación, paralleled by the stock Juan, who stands in contrast to García Lorca's oppressive Everyman in *Yerma*. Similar to Galdós's *Electra*, Hernández's characters point to heroic redemption through terrestrial eroticism that transvaluates idealistic pathos. An environment of communitarian revelry marks the May rains and bountiful harvest in rustic Castilla-La Mancha, but it is Encarnación's passion that takes center stage and overwhelms Juan's heroic exploits, alluded to by imagery of the iconic bull. She states, "sufro

sola, sangro sola / al compás de la amapola, / y estoy a gusto en mi herida” (531-33). Hernández dramatizes the power of resentment through men with Carmelo the alcoholic, Quintín the nymphomaniac, and Don Augusto a sedentary squire, all of whom oppose Juan and Encarnación’s union. In this last rebellious drama of active and passive nihilism the Nietzschean ethos of the hero is sacrificed to conserve the law of resentful hierarchy. Allowed to become rabid, the resentful criminal Alonso murders Juan in the fields where they once worked together. Encarnación, whom the active and reactive jockeyed for, exhibits tragic love and knowledge, reiterating the symbol of the circle in her verses which conjure up the flow of blood, “Huele a sangre corrompida / el aire que me rodea, / y me trastorna la vida / una sangrienta marea (901-904).<sup>26</sup> As Juan expires and the bloody moon shines in the distance, echoing García Lorca’s blood wedding, Hernández, another victim of Spain’s Civil War, expresses the tragic pain of future possibilities extinguished by reactive fatalism and the triumph of hierarchical resentment.

In the Spanish avant-garde theater, we see a return to the Aristotelian poetics of tragedy through the Lorquian lyrical tradition and the Calderonian *auto*, which were aesthetically removed from the *modernismo* of Darío’s eternal blue and blood of Christ (*Cantos de vida y esperanza* 305, 365). Zafir in Benavente’s 1892 *Cuento de primavera* also resists this conciliatory *modernismo*, announcing the death of another year, and “otra enamorada pareja como nosotros, del mismo sentimiento atraída, en este mismo sitio, con las mismas palabras, entonará la misma cantinela de amor” (186). The echoing of the *same* distills a present from the past and future that is cyclically anti-modern. Valle-Inclán’s *Luces de Bohemia* was the first tragic piece to analyze this juncture in the European culture of nihilism, as his protagonist

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<sup>26</sup> Díez de Revenga, in his article “El teatro social,” states that “*El labrador* es de una calidad muy superior tanto por su construcción, en la que los ingredientes poéticos están utilizados con medida, y sabiduría, como por su planteamiento y desarrollo como drama” (26). The same scholar speaks to the discreet simplicity of Hernández’s “décimas, quintillas y cuartetas, aparecen romances hexasílabos y octosílabos, seguidillas, etc.” (27).

navigated violent injustice through a modern Madrid and the confines of the fatalist *esperpento*. These tragic works of the Spanish avant-garde represent the eternal return of nihilism, and the logic of affective intensities that revolve around the chaotic form of tragedy.

Archetypes, animals and automatons shape the asymmetric interpersonal spaces created by these nihilist playwrights in whose characters tragic decisions are made regarding justice, within the traditional framework of ancient myth and modern melodrama. The heightened responsibility of these tragically heroic characters is reflected in an elevated theatricality. Identities are annihilated in these works, which reflect the cyclical movement of nihilism and the repetition of suffering. In Grau's *El Señor de Pigmalión* the puppet master parodies the plight of the modern dramatist, and does not work himself, but earns income from the work of his dolls; we are also provided the information that Pigmalión had commercial success in the United States. In this play the Duque is astonished at how he has created the artificial human, a sure "portento" of things to come in the short term of the play, regarding their rebellion, and the long term of genetic and bionic manipulation (478). The Duke is an intermediary between the businessmen, who lack the knowledge of the merchandise they traffic, art, and the master of the automatons. The love-hate, master-slave relationship is explored through the romance of Pigmalión and Pomponina, his beloved doll. A Promethean pessimism of civilized discontent conditions the fatality of the play's futurist dystopia. Grau's science fiction is rare in the Spanish theater, but points toward Azorín's *superrealismo* and Alberti's surrealism. Pigmalión's life-size dolls represent "una humanidad futura, sin los defectos de la actual" (500). The most complicated, intelligent, and malignant of his dramatists is Urdemalas who proves necessary to farce, "Yo soy necesario en las farsas. Sin mí no sería posible ni el teatro, ni este mundo nuestro, ni el tuyo, ni el otro que dices que hay. Soy, pues, algo preciso, indispensable (511-512). This



metatheatricality of evil in the terrestrial and celestial worlds, along with the microcosm of the stage, signals the ineluctability of resentment in human affairs, and its transformative power in European nihilism. In the Second Act passion, deception, and duplicity among the *muñecos* arises to conform an interior drama, which incites their own rebellion and escape.

The life size puppet Pomponina evades her master Pigmalión, by becoming the fugitive of the Duque, but her improprieties enrage him, as she wants to undress and display her beauty to the public. Valle introduced the Spanish audience to the grotesque, while Grau attempted to show them the bizarre; again, similar to Valle, “Grau hizo escasas concesiones al público para y contra quien escribió” (Kronik, “Puntos de contacto dramático” 468). The duke’s wife, Julia, follows them jealously, but on discovering them the other dolls assault her; Pigmalión is right behind her and attempts to discipline them with a whip and restore order, reminiscent of García Lorca’s Director and Caballos from *El público*, but the resentful Urdemalas finds a firearm and murders his authoritarian creator. With their owner and exploiter dead, the dolls rally around Urdemalas’s hatred of the strong, seeking vengeance for “los débiles astutos” (573-574). The villain elaborates a theory of evil, perpetrated through heredity, progeny, and community. Yet Pigmalión is not dead, but mortally wounded, with the *coup de grace* given by his first, simple, inarticulate, Everyman doll, Juan, who bludgeons him with the butt of the musket fired by his new master.

This dissertation is also about what could have been, as many of these works were never performed or published in their time, and much of the criticism on modernism has not heeded their historical significance. In García Lorca’s posthumous sketches of the early to mid thirties, collected in the anthology edited by Agustín Muñoz-Alonso, we see what lay beneath and before his Andalusian tragedies. In “La doncella, el marinero y el estudiante” the mariner admires the

young lady's physique and they quip about riding bikes and dolphins for fitness and sport; the student, however, is worried about the fleeting of time, the century, the year, while the maiden bids him stay and drink milk from her white breasts. She does not entertain him for long, however, as she contemplates jumping from her balcony into the depths of the ocean; on deciding to do so, the famous poets from Málaga Emilio Prados and Manuel Altolaguirre save her in a metatheatrical, *deus ex machina* trick. These two writers were influential in the last years of the Second Spanish Republic and continued their work after its fall: but is García Lorca's referencing them in this fashion to jibe at their humanitarianism?

In "El paseo de Buster Keaton," the American comedian of the moving image bludgeons his children to death, insolently marked by the crowing of a rooster. He counts their corpses on the ground out loud, and leaves them on his bicycle, another indication of the motif of time, metrics, and the mediated modern world. In the background a black man eats his straw hat among discarded rubber tires and drums of gasoline, dramatically recounting what García Lorca communicated about the problematic American dreams in *Poeta en Nueva York*. On meeting the statuesque Filadelfia he imagines himself a forlorn swan caressing her feet and footwear. Innocence and violence are intertwined as Buster Keaton marked the shift from vaudeville to silent film during the teens and twenties, and was famous for his stoic comedies. García Lorca's iconoclasm points to a keen understanding of the social mechanics of such naïve performances in the nascent American entertainment industry. The short play is cinematic and pays tribute to Keaton's famous lack of expression, or stoic-comic interaction with the strange modern world around him. A Joven then enters on her own bike, and, realizing who he is, faints and quivers as he cannot resist the temptation of kissing her still, young body. The play ends with an accompaniment of disparate sights and sounds, highlighting the tragic irony of the farce, the

most notable of which is the police siren. As we can see, the dreams and desires embodied in the United States are for García Lorca a house of mirrors, an illusive mirage, summed up best by the film industry which subjects the citizens to the power of the repressive state. The police enforce the rules of this playground whose rules are that of the entertainment industry; meanwhile, García Lorca picks this up through farce, thereby exposing the cruel, tragic destiny of modernism.

In García Lorca's sketch "Quimera" the Viejo, old man, is afraid of horses, but not trains; the young man is like the frenetic student outlined earlier, followed by six indistinct children that enter, clamoring for their dad, fighting over pets and toys. The men, who also mirror each other, exit and leave us with a lone woman, undressing in bed, yearning in a soliloquy: "Me duele un poco la espalda. ¡Ah! ¡Si me pudiera despreciar! Yo quiero que él me desprecie... y me ame. Yo quiero huir y que me alcance. Yo quiero que me queme... que me queme" (123). García Lorca, like Grau's automaton Pomponina and noblewoman Princesa, with antecedents in Galdós's *Augusta* and Benavente's *Acacia*, transvaluates the chivalric-romantic legacy of the gentleman through a sexually charged woman that upends the bourgeois culture of modernism; the conceit of the temptress who must be caught and subdued is played with here on stage through violent metaphors of sexual consummation, personal disintegration, and bestial digestion, "Ahora te podría tragar como si fueras un botón" (123). Impelled by social empowerment and sexual fulfillment, she could drink him like a button! Is this not a rare glimpse at how great avant-garde drama is conceived? Through symbolic juxtaposition of incongruent imagery, García Lorca assembled tragedies and tragic farce that recreate and represent the anxieties of nihilism. At the same time, these sketches also historicize the uneasy tension between dramatist and audience at the turn of the century.

The movement of becoming and the emergence of being formed a theoretical and practical basis for ethical selection, creation, and the aesthetic composition to undo political and theological reactions and affirm the dynamics of being through a conscious willing of the eternal return. Gonzalo, El Hombre 1, from García Lorca's *El público* announces the "verdadero teatro, el teatro bajo la arena," which is interred and submerged because of the "cobardía de todos" (123). Perhaps alluding to Benavente's fantastic theater, or the tradition of transvestites and dissimulation established by Shakespeare, the men dress as women while Helena, dressed as a Greek goddess, accuses them of being gay and narcissistic. The homoerotic scenes that follow are violent, and play with desire and the despicable, signaling the modernism of pornography. Sex, sport, and spectacle are combined in a love-fight by two figures before the Emperor and Centurion, but the immortalization of their encounter was impossible because of their anuses, "Dos semidioses si no tuvieran ano" (141-42). García Lorca's men are terrestrial in contrast to the marble statues that surround their vicious encounter. Meanwhile, is Elena still a mythic figure that incites tragedy and theatricality? Was she deformed through the lusty Shakespearian Juliet? What does a passive, feminine role mean? And when she does act?

García Lorca's Julieta is a further distortion of this role in which her origins are deformed through bestiality with horses; but it turns out, she was likely a young man all along! Significantly, the Director is rehabilitated at the end of the spectacle, in which he loves and fights with Gonzalo, explaining the rarity of his selection accordingly, "Pude haber elegido el Edipo o el Otelo. En cambio, si hubiera levantado el telón con la verdad original, se habrían manchado de sangre las butacas desde las primeras escenas" (182). García Lorca's metadrama reminds us that the avant-garde theater took place backstage and off, and that the aestheticism he embraced implied a vitalist ethics of transvaluation. The avant-garde poet-playwright from Granada

utilized strong imagery, which he explained as the subjective and objective interpenetration of the “cosa o acto a la cámara oscura de su cerebro y de allí salen transformados para dar el gran salto sobre el otro mundo con que se funden” (73). This leap from image to world was achieved through the tragic poetics of mimesis, and the avant-garde entrenchment of theatricality. While there are many ways to trace the genealogy of nihilist drama in Spain, –and what has been said so far of modernist drama can augment this angle of approach– there is no denying the persistence of bloodshed, with sexual and social violence that define the tragedies outlined in this dissertation. Such imagery signals the difficult task of transposing nihilism in dramaturgy at the turn of the century; meanwhile, the mimetic movement of this transposition of intensities and imagery ceased with the outbreak of war.

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