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The Systemic Approach and Valle-Inclán, Semiotics: A Review Article of New Work by Iglesias Santos and de Toro

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A. Robert LAUER

The Systemic Approach and Valle-Inclán, Semiotics: A Review Article of New Work by Iglesias Santos and de Toro

Montserrat Iglesias Santos's *Canonización y público. El teatro de Valle-Inclán* (Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 1998. 240 pages) and Alfonso de Toro's *De las similitudes y diferencias. Honor y drama de los siglos XVI y XVII en Italia y España* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 1998. 686 pages) are unique critical works which together help the reader to place a Spanish writer and a national literary genre within an ampler European canon. By doing so, they demonstrate both the uniqueness of the individual dramatist (Valle-Inclán) and dramatic genre (the Spanish Comedia) as well as their universality when placed in appropriate (European) traditions: Modernism in the first instance, the Renaissance and the Baroque in the second. Iglesias Santos's superb and concise study of the theater of Ramón María del Valle-Inclán, indeed the most important playwright of twentieth-century Spain, is unique for three reasons: 1) its ideological positioning, 2) its literary and sociological completeness, and 3) its comparative analysis. For the first point, the author uses the cultural work on taste done by Pierre Bourdieu, as well as the sociological work on polysystems done by Itamar Even-Zohar. This enables the author to analyze and contextualize the dramatic work of Valle-Inclán (and also Federico García Lorca, Jacinto Grau, and Max Aub) within the appropriate camp of the modern, innovative, and avant-guard theater, as well as to distinguish its characteristics from the popular and commercial drama of Carlos Arniches, the Álvarez Quintero brothers, Jacinto Benavente, Linares, and Pedro Muñoz Seca. To do this, Iglesias Santos relies on the dramatic works themselves but also on theater receipts and prices, cultural practices of the time (Madrid between 1920-36), interviews with the dramatists or with theater impresarios of the period, the preferred methods of acting, the expectations of the sundry social classes, newspaper accounts and reviews, and the historical moment of Spain as it moved from a weak monarchy and a military dictatorship to a revolutionary republic and a belligerent civil war. In addition, Iglesias Santos finishes her work with a comparative analysis of Valle-Inclán's written practices and those of other Europeans like Alfred Jarry, Pirandello, Antonin Artaud, D'Annunzio, and many more. This final component creates a vigorous and healthy work that positions Valle-Inclán not only as the master dramatist of Moderninst Spain but also as one of the most original and innovative authors of Europe at large.

The second book under review, de Toro's voluminous work on the so-called Spanish "honor plays" is generally text-centered and uses as modus operandi a semiotic-structuralist model to illuminate its main thesis, that (Baroque) changes occurred in the representation of the honor plays even though at one time there were many similarities between them in Renaissance Spain and Italy. This cautiously stated thesis is demonstrated by means of extensively documented legal and theological tracts, some dating back to the Roman period (like the lex Julia); a refurbishing of aesthetic terms to suit the author's copious use of structural categories (tragicomedy with a happy ending, tragicomedy with an unhappy ending, tragicomedy with a non-happy ending, etc.); and a heroic albeit necessarily light analysis of the basic fabula of 97 plays (42 Italian and 55 Spanish). In spite of this Gargantuan comparative study, the book's conclusions are surprisingly terse and perhaps even dated for the most part (the author declares on page 11 that nothing was added or changed in this Spanish translation of the original German edition of 1993, *Von den Ähnlichkeiten und Differenzen. Ehre und Drama des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts in Italien und Spanien* (Frankfurt: Vervuert). It also contains surprising and mostly unsubstantiated claims that the honor plays and, for that matter, all but three Spanish Golden Age plays -- Calderón's *Life is a Dream*, *The Constant Prince*, and *The Mayor of Zalamea*) are "buffoon pieces" (*piezas bufonas* or *närrische Stücke* in the original German 539) which, unlike Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, lack universality (540). The reviewer wonders why then so many pages were used (and trees cut) to make a point which, even if valid, would not advance our understanding of the Comedia beyond similarly held nineteenth-century views made (im)famous by Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo. Even more perplexing is that Henry W. Sullivan's highly influential 1983 book, *Calderón in the German Lands and the Low Countries: His Reception and Influence, 1654-1980*, which succinctly demonstrates how Calderón and other

lesser known Spanish playwrights (and Cervantes) created a German dramatic tradition, forms part of de Toro's *Teoría y práctica del teatro* series (volume 7), whose publishers (Vervuert and Iberoamericana) subsequently published de Toro's book reviewed here (volume 9).

Iglesias Santos's *Canonización y público* is a model book. It is brief and yet thorough, theoretical and yet solidly substantiated with many forms of evidence (not just textual), modest in intention and yet ultimately profound in conclusions. Were I to choose one of the many excellent points of the book, I would select the introduction, which reduces what would have been a cumbersome theory to a few pages of well defined terms which enable the reader to navigate with ease and perspective through the rest of the book. All critical works should be this clear in intention. The selection of a polysystemic model also enables author and reader to create and assess the material presented in a non-judgmental manner. Hence, one is able to appreciate and understand the many successful works of the commercial theater of pre-Civil War Spain (works generally frowned upon or ignored by critical and literary histories), as well as the canonical works of those authors subsequently privileged for their originality (Valle-Inclán, Lorca, Aub). In addition, Iglesias makes solid observations about how some of the marginal or undervalued genres (vodevil, quisicosa, parodia bufa, melodrama, astracán) and foreign traditions like the Théâtre du Grand Guignol -- in conjunction with the classical theater of the Comedia -- serve to "invent" the Modernist works that one now acknowledges as canonical like the esperpento or the comedias bárbaras. This in effect is one of the many virtues of this book: The fact that it does not discard the no longer canonical but instead incorporates those elements of the old that served precisely to refurbish and (re)create the new. Also, Iglesias Santos asseverates that only by means of a comparative and systemic analysis one would be able to "liberate" a figure like Valle-Inclán, the creator of the esperpento, from the narrowness of strictly Hispanic scholarship. One could not agree more.

The strong points of de Toro's *De las similitudes y diferencias* are as follows: The systematic analysis of many plays by means of a structuralist model, which is probably the only way to do justice to such an ample sample of works; the inclusion of Renaissance Italian dramas which treat a similar theme; and the thoroughness with which the author reevaluates all previous research on the concept of honor. On these three grounds, this work will remain unsurpassed for many years. One indeed will be forever grateful to de Toro for having excluded nothing previously done and for having included something formerly excluded, namely, the Italian honor tradition. This last component adds to the originality of the work and justifies, like Iglesias Santos's book, the use of comparative literature as a way to arrive at some sort of truth, or at least to a sufficiently thorough knowledge of one's subject matter to avoid falling into clichés based on error or ignorance. Were one to be critical of any aspects of the two books in question, one would probably make the following observations. Iglesias Santos's book at times falls victim of its own ideology. Hence, although Valle-Inclán is certainly peripheral in so far as the sous-champ de grande production is concerned, he remains a canonical figure even among monarchists and Gen. Primo de Rivera, the Dictator appointed to save the ailing Bourbon monarchy from imminent collapse. Likewise, the originality of Valle-Inclán does not explain his ultraconservative Carlist views which, if carried to their logical conclusion, should have made Valle-Inclán into a supporter of bourgeois values (which was not the case). Another problem, perhaps more serious, is how a canonical or sacrosanct genre like the Comedia serves to "invent" works belonging to the sous-champ de production restreinte which serve precisely to defy the works of the sous-champ de grande production. In other words, the polysystemic methodology chosen, although perfectly logical in theory and even in practice for the most part, fails to explain the incomprehensible. Valle-Inclán is an alleged political extremist (first Carlist, then socialist) who writes highly innovative and radical works that attack all social institutions. In spite of his radical positions and dramaturgy, he retains the respect of monarchists and dictators but, ironically, remains a commercial failure among the bourgeois public who supports the monarchy and the Dictatorship. Moreover, the Comedia, Spain's classical theater, which would be pro-monarchical and pro-Catholic, serves precisely the aims of the Republican-allied innovators who defy the commercially successful bourgeois theater which supports the status quo. Hence, although the polysystemic model used by Iglesias Santos is

certainly viable, in the long run, essentially aesthetic values seem to be the final determinants of literary and even social change in this case.

A problem with de Toro's work is perhaps its global aim. On the one hand, it attempts to limit its scope by means of a semiotic-epistemological approach: "Nuestro modo de proceder al respecto no es histórico, sino semiótico-epistemológico" (48), which, as I have stated already, would be the logical method to use under the circumstances. Nevertheless, immediately afterwards it seeks to explain honor on other than semiotic grounds, namely, by a long historical excursus dating from Roman jurisprudence and the Spanish medieval legal tradition to Renaissance tracts on dueling and moral theology. Considering that the honor vengeance, as the author finally declares, is "básicamente un asunto literario" (542), one has to wonder why then one needs the long excursus on history, jurisprudence, and moral theology. Another serious problem is the lack of synthesis of the critical materials presented. Many contradictory views are expounded, as well they should be, since the concept of honor is a thorny subject among Hispanists. But no theory or common denominator emerges out of this critical mass. At times one even wonders if the author is aware that if a view is accepted another one cannot follow logically. For instance, if honor is not a specific Spanish theme, since one finds "honor plays" also in Italy at the same time -- this, I believe is convincingly demonstrated by the author -- it cannot follow that "limpieza de sangre," a specific Spanish practice to keep the nobility "pure" from Jewish or Moslem racial mixtures, would be a factor in Spanish honor plays, for then it would be so in Italian plays, and that is not the case (it is not necessarily the case in Spanish plays either, except for the die-hard followers of critic Américo Castro). Likewise, de Toro's book demonstrates something inadvertently which the author seems to be unaware of. The Italian "honor plays" are called plays of *affetti* or *passioni* perhaps because they are plays of *affetti* or *passioni* instead of honor plays. Spanish "honor" plays, if they exist, have nothing to do with the "vengeance plays" studied in de Toro's book. These are plays of vehement passions, adultery, betrayal, murder, whether acted out by nobles who suspect their allegedly faithful wives or peasants who attempt to kill their daughters or sisters on suspicious grounds of moral turpitude. To claim honor under the circumstances would be tantamount to give credence to a modern day murderer who might claim demonic possession or divine intervention by asseverating that God or the Devil made him do it. The preceding statement, of course, is a personal opinion, a Derridean supplement, as it were.

Having said this, I would be the first to state that Iglesias Santos's *Canonización y público* and de Toro's *De las similitudes y diferencias* are critical works which all Hispanists must read. It would be unthinkable to continue to place Valle-Inclán among the members of the Generation of '98 when he himself stated he did not belong to that group and when Montserrat Iglesias Santos places him firmly among European Modernists. It would also be unsound to continue to read the so-called Spanish "honor" plays without making connections with the Italian works which preceded them in their use of similar (Senecan) honor/vengeance themes. If anything, both authors have demonstrated that national literatures cannot be analyzed independently of each other, forgetting the historical milieu and the cultural practices that made their existence possible. Likewise, no author or literary tradition exists without an antecedent, whether the Comedia in the case of Valle-Inclán, or the Senecan play in the case of the Italian Renaissance and the Spanish Baroque. Finally, no literary study is comprehensible without a sound theoretical methodology, be it polysystemic or semiotic-structuralist as demonstrated in the case of these two books. On these three grounds, one should be most grateful to Iglesias Santos and de Toro for having expanded our understanding of a great author and a great literary tradition.

Reviewer's Profile: A. Robert Lauer works in Spanish literature at the University of Oklahoma. His numerous publications include *Tyrannicide and Drama. Part I. The Tradition of Tyrannicide from Polybius to Suárez. Part II. The Tyrannicide Drama in Spain from 1579 to 1698* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1987) and *The Restoration of Monarchy: "Hados y lados hacen dichosos y desdichados"* (Kassel: Reichenberger, 1997), and he coedited, with Henry W. Sullivan, *Iberian Essays in Honor of Frank P. Casa* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997, Rpt. 1999). In addition, he has authored more than thirty articles on Renaissance and Baroque themes, his most important being "The Comedia and Its Modes," *Hispanic Review* 63.2 (1995): 157-78. At the Univesrity of Oklahoma, he is a member of the Film and Video Studies Program and in film studies he has

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