

BRADOMÍN AND THE IRONIES OF EVIL: A RECONSIDERATION OF *SONATA DE PRIMAVERA*

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In the order of composition of the *Sonatas*, Valle-Inclán was guided more by the availability of already published fragments and episodes than by any over-all thematic design. As a result, the four novels came to be written in a reverse seasonal order, beginning with *Sonata de otoño* in 1902¹ and proceeding backwards through summer, spring and, finally, winter. The young Marqués de Bradomín of *Sonata de primavera*, consequently, did not make his appearance until 1904, after the autumn dalliance in Galicia and the summer odyssey through Mexico—a hard act, indeed, to follow, since Bradomín had already achieved his maximum definition. The chronological disadvantage of the *Primavera* is compounded by the choice of theme. Here again Valle-Inclán is guilty, if that is the right word, of exploiting his own thematics: the superstitions, witchcraft and exorcisms of a world still inclined to perceiving the ancient struggle between Good and Evil as a visible and tangible reality. He had reworked these and similar themes many times prior to the *Primavera* and would continue to do so even as late as 1913. To what extent could this new elaboration of old themes contribute to the unity of the *Sonatas* and heighten our perceptions of Bradomín after the memorable “summer” and “autumn”? The answer offered in this study is mixed. On the one hand, the *Primavera* is the most disquieting and least cohesive segment of the tetralogy, primarily because of its ill-chosen thematics. On the other hand, despite its somewhat anomalous and “unspringlike” character, it does, of course, succeed in sustaining the remarkable unity of the whole, albeit in more subtle and problematical ways than those employed in the other three novels. These elements are, principally, an ironic manipulation of the theme of the satanic, the innate theatricality of the protagonist and those around him, and

the relative immaturity of a young and somewhat insecure Bradomín who at age twenty finds himself in an Italy redolent of the Renaissance and permeated with a somber fanaticism not unlike that of the superstitious world of his native Galicia.

In accordance with musical tradition, each segment of the *Sonatas* is structured with a series of well-defined motifs, each corresponding to the appropriate season. *Sonata de otoño*, for example, is a Galician "September song" of melancholy and fallen leaves, nostalgic recollections of youth, and a labyrinthine garden touched by the chill of winter and age — all of them tonalities which reinforce the theme of the physical degeneration of Concha Bendaña and the slow but inevitable approach of death. In the *Estío*, with Bradomín in the full vigor of his manhood, the motifs are, among other things, the heat of the tropical sun, blood and passion, violence and virility. With the advent of winter, the change is contrapuntally to snow and the cold of Navarre, the white hair of old age, Carlism, and the last gasp of the majesty of aristocratic tradition. In contrast to the foregoing, *Sonata de primavera* is not especially springlike. Despite an occasional apostrophe heralding April or a pictorial recollection like that of a Botticelli spring, Valle-Inclán subordinates seasonal esthetics to the demands of his theme: diabolical forces in conflict with saintliness, or, more simply put, the struggle between Good and Evil. The spring memoirs of Bradomín, consequently, tend to be wrapped in the shadows of twilight or in the darkness of night, with the constant suggestion of the presence of the mysterious unknown. The garden, although not much different from the one in the *Otoño*, is usually lighted by a pale moon and populated by shadowy forms and silhouettes, gusts of wind — *ráfaga* is one of the primary words — and by silence punctuated by sounds in the night, particularly the murmuring of invisible fountains.

Where, then, is the "spring" in the spring *Sonata*? We find it primarily in the young Bradomín himself as he goes through a process of personality formation under the impact of an Italian environment which stimulates in him recollections of Machiavelli, Aretino, the Borgias and the Medicis. If the Renaissance is the symbol of youth and the spring of man's awareness of his secular powers, even while ironically masked by religiosity, it is correspondingly symbolic of the youth of Bradomín, whose innate cynicism and egotistical bent toward perversity are perfectly consonant with

many of the historical commonplaces of Renaissance Italy. When we add to this his unswerving loyalty to the image of Casanova, it becomes even more logical that Bradomín at twenty find himself in this Italianate context and that the springtime segment of his memoirs be composed with Renaissance images which help shape his budding personality.²

Bradomín's egotism is the primary filter through which everything passes in the *Sonatas*, sabotaging in its wake those monumental aspects of life which normally move us to react with unrelieved solemnity. Like Valle-Inclán himself, Bradomín may take certain things seriously, but he will rarely react solemnly to anything, unless it is the creation or re-creation of himself as legend, the legend of the poetic lie which he apostrophizes in *Sonata de invierno*.³ The root of the Bradomín legend is his hyperbolic egotism and its interrelated characteristics, not the least of which is his ingrained sense of theatre. Bradomín from the beginning is an actor, a master of postures and a connoisseur of the charade and the poetic lie. Moreover, he sees the world in these same terms, as a theatrical game played by actors like himself, equally given to ironic posturing and the charade. With a handful of exceptions, virtually all the characters in the *Sonatas* are participants in this game of pretense. The most theatrical of them all, and the most like Bradomín himself, are the clerics, both in the *Sonatas* and throughout Valle-Inclán's works. More often than not, the identity of the Valle-Inclán priest is reduced to mere façade, so that his *persona* is little more than an ecclesiastical mask. Some of these clerics are astute ironists in the Machiavellian tradition; others are fatuous nonentities; many are theological "doctors" especially skilled in the vacuous cliché; all of them are at least a little bit pompous and ambitious, and, like Bradomín, plagued by vanity. Bradomín's initial contact with the old Italian world of the *Primavera* is an assortment of these clerics, all of them actors in varying degrees. The element of theatricality is then sustained as a crucial factor in the elaboration of the novel.

In their innocence, the Princess Gaetani and her daughters have no cause initially to view Bradomín other than as what he seems to be. However, to the ecclesiastical types who surround them, things are rarely as they seem, so that the early segments of this *Sonata*, despite their dazzling esthetics, are given to sizing up the young stranger. Needless to say, Bradomín responds in kind, and

his attitude is one of cynicism and ironic disdain. The descriptive emphasis is for the most part on their eyes. One of the retinue addresses the Princess with his eyes half-closed — “the sagacious eyes of an Italian cleric”⁴ —, and with his hands joined “with false beatitude” tells her that Monseñor Gaetani, who is lying there motionless in the throes of death, has in fact been watching Bradomín out of the corner of his eye, fully aware of the latter’s arrival (pp. 15-16). When the dying prelate prepares to make his confession, his familiars lower their eyes, wherein “they all feigned great sorrow and seemed to be edified by that confession even before it was uttered” (p. 18). Two of these ecclesiastical actors have a special impact on the novel’s turn of events. One is Polonio, the steward of the Gaetani palace and a would-be connoisseur of Renaissance painting. He sports a persistent “vague doctoral smile” and is given to fawning adulation, a fact which prompts Bradomín’s ironic comment that he is “astute like a Roman Cardinal” (pp. 21-22). Polonio is a naive fool, albeit a dangerous one. The other influential cleric is a far better actor than Polonio. He is the astute Monseñor Antonelli, whose role in the novel is minimal but especially significant, since it is he who initially stirs up the young Bradomín’s *donjuanismo*. The eyes of Antonelli are rapid and shrewd; his voice is rich and mellifluous, with a special effect on his female listeners: he never fails to fill them with admiration. Both he and Bradomín are masters of pretense, and they understand each other perfectly even though they have never met before. For example, when they express their regrets over the death of Monseñor Gaetani, each knows full well that the other is lying, so that Bradomín is able to write: “We looked each other straight in the eye, with the deep conviction that one was dissembling as much as the other” (p. 29).⁵ Antonelli inspires in Bradomín a raging jealousy of the cleric’s influence over women, provoking the recollection of “all of the gallant influence of Roman prelates, and I recalled the legend of their amorous fortunes” (p. 28). Bradomín’s initial donjuanist aggression against the saintly María Rosario stems more from jealousy and envy of this theatrical “Roman prelate” than from any other source.

Bradomín’s first overture to María Rosario is an idle exhibition of mustache-twirling braggadocio which earns him nothing but cold disdain. As the authenticity of the girl’s saintliness becomes more and more apparent, the young don Juan grows progressively less

sure of himself. He engages in mystical romanticizing and goes about still twirling his juvenile mustache, but he is shaken. He feels himself the victim of a special kind of melancholy, "that vague and romantic sadness that bewitches juvenile love affairs," subject to the incurable wounds of love as well as to the illusory dreams of surpassing every other star-crossed lover in history (pp. 45-46). The young Bradomín, in short, is suffering from a classic case of romanticism, even going so far as to envision himself as another Werther. This self-image is intensified by the sight of María Rosario dressed for the first time in the white habit of a nun. The girl's fearfulness of his presence provokes his pride and petulance, yet despite the swaggering posture, he is plunged into still greater uncertainty and even more romanticism: a pale moon, wandering clouds, sadness, remorse, solitude, and a very un-Bradomín-like pair of questions: "What are her feelings? . . . What are her feelings toward me?" (p. 55). As he composes his memoirs, an older and infinitely more cynical Bradomín can smile and reflect in retrospect that "these romantic attitudes were never anything more than a drop of perfume on the love affairs of my youth. A delicate, fleeting madness which lasted only a few hours" (p. 46). For the young Marqués, however, this romanticism, although fleeting and bookish, is authentic and, to be sure, springlike.

The croaking of a frog diverts him from these romantic meditations and sets in motion the thematics of satanism, leading the novel in its irregular and disconcerting way to its unhappy conclusion. Bradomín does not know what prompted him to leap impetuously into María Rosario's room. It might have been diabolical temptation, he meditates, or the boldness he recalls having seen in the face of Raphael's Cesare Borgia. In any event, despite the serious implications of profanation in this reckless action, nothing much really happens. The sudden presence of Bradomín causes the girl to faint; he lifts her on to her bed without otherwise touching her, extinguishes the candles, and makes his way through the shadows to the terrace where he is stabbed by Polonio who has witnessed the whole affair.⁶ The episode (pp. 57-59) is wrapped in melodramatic chiaroscuro and donjuanesque romanticism.

Up to the point of the stabbing, the posturing of Bradomín has been spasmodic and insecure. The game has been his own, without opposition, and his attitude one of restless indecision. However, the moment he learns that the Princess Gaetani knows about the

attack and is clearly his adversary, he tells us that he stopped doubting and was no longer afraid. The gauntlet is now down, and he accepts the challenge with all the theatrical *machismo* of a would-be disciple of Satan. In short, he adopts the posture, and the rhetoric, of a "devilish" villain (pp. 60-62). Bradomín the actor is again at work. With a smile on his lips, he once more twists his mustache and boldly confronts his outraged hostess. The silence of the room whirls about like "a malevolent bat." His voice gains a quality of "feline amiability"; his words carry a "satanic aura"; his pride rises in him "in gusts" (that "diabolically" suggestive word that Valle-Inclán constantly overplays in this novel). The confrontation is one of will against will, and for the moment it results in a stalemate. To the Italian princess and her superstitious steward, Bradomín is indeed a satanic force. For Bradomín himself, it is a game, a matter of egotistical gratification, of knowing how to smile and of not being intimidated. After all, as he tells us when he decides not to leave the palace, pride has always been his greatest virtue.

The feeling of exhilaration, however, is only momentary. Mere posturing is not enough. His will weakens, and he is now more than ready to pack up and leave. Without some form of reinforcement the game is over. The reinforcement does come, and it comes out of nowhere. A mysterious benefactor in the guise of a Capuchin monk intervenes to assist in breaking the hex initiated by the Gaetanis to exorcise Bradomín's perversity. The episode (pp. 63-65) is a capital masquerade.⁷ Visually speaking, this unknown ally cuts a figure of eerie unworldliness. His entrance is made with the melodramatic gesture of a hand lifting a curtain. His long silvery beard glows when he smiles, to quote Bradomín, "his grave and humble smile of the saints." The saintly smile, however, is only a mask, and his eyes give him away. They convey incorporeality and transparency, even under the cadaverous veil of his yellowish eyelids: "The globes of his eyes were virtually transparent in their sunken hollows under the fleshless, yellowish veil of his eyelids."⁸ The language of the Capuchin is elliptical, ambiguous and consistently defensive. Bradomín must say nothing about his visit; he must ask no questions and must do exactly what the visitor says: "You cannot consider my words and my faith suspect, since I come to you unmotivated by any base interest. Only a powerful inspiration

guides me, and I have no doubt but that it is your Angel who is making use of me to save your life because he is unable to communicate with you." Bradomín unquestioningly swears to follow his advice: "Yes, Reverend Father, I shall follow the inspiration of the Angel who brought you." Who is this protective Angel whose interest can be served only by a Bradomín with his sexual powers intact? The message of the knowledgeable Capuchin is limited to exposing the procedure for removing the hex. There is no moral admonition, no mention of God, no advice to flee the palace, nothing, in short, that does *not* support the contention that the Angel in question is the Angel of Darkness and that the Capuchin and Bradomín, the one quite consciously, the other unwittingly, are the Devil's surrogates. The prize is María Rosario. The objective: prevent her from entering the Carmelites and following the route to sainthood. Satan has intervened, and Bradomín is his pawn.⁹

One is struck by Bradomín's lack of intellectual curiosity. He does not reflect on the visit and message of the mysterious Capuchin. He simply follows instructions and is genuinely surprised to find that he has been directed to a sorceress. Only after the episode is completed does he wonder at all about his night visitor and how the latter could have had such detailed knowledge about the whole affair (p. 74). One suspects that Valle-Inclán deliberately avoids any rationalizing in order to sustain the mysterious tenor of this ironic manipulation of the theme of the diabolical. His ring recovered and the spell broken, the young Bradomín is still plagued by doubt and indecision over his stay in the palace. He senses the presence of strange, agitating forces within him, but he can neither explain nor control them: "With a dark foreboding I felt that my evil was incurable and that my will was powerless to overcome the irreparable temptation to do something audacious. It was like the vertigo of damnation!" (p. 76). It is as if he half-knows that the "Angel" working within him is Satan himself. Meanwhile, around him hover more gusts of wind, a black sky, and a cold ashen rain which disrupts the Holy Week procession and ruins Polonio's representation of the Passion (p. 77). The affair of the ridiculous steward is an example of that remarkable Valle-Inclán inclination to keep us off-balance and not allow us to take the entire matter as seriously as we otherwise might. For Polonio, the rain is proof enough that Bradomín is an instrument of the

Devil, who, tradition has it, is allowed to run loose¹⁰ and wreak his havoc during Holy Week.

The *Primavera* ends in a series of crushing ironies, with Bradomín sustaining his egotistical posture of devilishness, unaware that he is being manipulated in a transcendent confrontation between Good and Evil. His departure for Rome is foiled by the curious and very ironical fact that Polonio has put both his position and his manservant into a drunken stupor. This makes possible Bradomín's final psychological attack against María Rosario, which in turn leads to the *coup de grâce*. It is the last day before the girl is to enter the convent.¹¹ Bradomín's role requires no premeditation other than to put into play his natural perversity and torment the girl with pseudo-mystical sensuality and temptations of pride. If this don Juan is to lose the erotic battle, he is determined to do so with a decadent bang, not with a whimper, "tasting — as he says — the dolorous but supreme pleasure of the executioner" (p. 87). Besides, what sweeter pyrrhic victory than to have his own personal saint carry him and his mundane cult into the convent with her and glorify his status as a sinner by permitting him to intrude into the realm of mystical love? The petulant vanity of Bradomín takes its psychological toll on María Rosario. Out of fear of his impieties, she insists that her youngest sister enter the room and stay with her, so she will not be alone with her relentless torturer. By the time she picks up the child, she has become so enervated by Bradomín's verbal onslaught that she lacks the strength to hold her and sets her down on the windowsill. It is then that the authentic forces of Evil take over from the posturing surrogate. The window opens mysteriously behind the motionless child, and she falls to her death just as the arms of her sister are about to touch her.¹²

Evil conquers Good in *Sonata de primavera*. The haunting *estribillo* of the conclusion of the novel — "¡Fue Satanás!"¹³ — echoes into the future of a terrorized María Rosario who in fact never enters the convent for which she was destined. She lives the rest of her life as a shadow of sanctity-that-might-have-been, wandering through the halls of the palace with the diabolical refrain on her lips: "¡Fue Satanás!" It was indeed Satan. Bradomín has been used, although the irony of this truth is inevitably lost on him. It is more than enough that the legend go forth that Bradomín

alone was the demonic adversary who brought down the future saint. Truth impugns legend, and the *Sonatas*, after all, are a triumph of the poetic lie.

NOTES

¹ Segments of *Sonata de estío* date from 1892. The momentum toward the *Otoño* was also generated in the 1890's, particularly in those articles and short stories set in Galicia. At the turn of the century there were signs that the *Otoño* was to be the first *Sonata*: the plot line of the play *Cenizas* (1899) is quite similar to it; moreover, preliminary fragments began to appear in 1901. Valle-Inclán's propensity for republication is well known. In those early days of hardship the reprintings contributed to both his economic and literary subsistence. The sources for details of the period are varied. See, for example, Obdulia Guerrero, *Valle-Inclán y el novecientos* (Madrid: Editorial Magisterio Español, 1977), J. Rubia Barcia, *A Biobibliography and Iconography of Valle-Inclán (1866-1936)* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), and the indispensable biography of Melchor Fernández Almagro, *Vida y Literatura de Valle-Inclán*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Taurus, 1966).

² Joaquín Casaldueiro analyses the springtime characteristics of the work from an impressionistic point of view in "Elementos funcionales en las *Sonatas*," *Estudios de literatura española* (Madrid: Gredos, 1962), pp. 207-11.

³ "Oh, winged, jovial lie, when will the world finally become convinced of the need for you to triumph! When will they learn that souls in which only the light of truth exists are sad, tortured, grim spirits that converse in silence with death and spread a layer of ashes over their lives? Hail to your smile, oh, lie, bird of light whose song is like the song of hope!" (Colección Austral, 6th ed., [Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1969], pp. 95-96.)

⁴ Colección Austral, 3rd ed. (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1949), p. 18. All quotations are taken from this edition of the *Primavera*; page numbers subsequently will be indicated at the end of the passages cited.

⁵ The act of mourning for the death of the Monseñor is a charade also for his sister-in-law, the Princess Gaetani. On being told the news, she faints with a studied slowness ("she was in the process of fainting") and conveniently reaches a divan as she falls. Alonso Zamora Vicente elaborates on this and other aspects of Valle-Inclán's sense of theatrical scenography in the *Sonatas* in *Las Sonatas de Valle-Inclán*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Gredos, 1966), pp. 125-35.

⁶ Gerard Cox Flynn holds that Bradomín "tries to violate" her but is discovered and wounded "before he can work his will" ("The Adversary: Bradomín," *Hispanic Review*, 29 [1961], 124). This contradicts not only the text but the very nature of Bradomín's personality and his way of viewing himself and the world around him. As we shall note from time to time, Flynn's reading of the *Primavera* can at times be very perceptive, but it suffers from a serious incomprehension of irony. He takes Bradomín and his "diabolism" far too seriously, going so far as to see him as the Devil incarnate. As an antidote, the reader should consult José Alberich's "Ambigüedad y humorismo en las *Sonatas* de Valle-Inclán," *Hispanic Review*, 33 (1965),

360-82, one of the best studies to date on the totality of the *Sonatas*. Daniel Gulstad offers a refutation of Flynn's arguments in "Parody in Valle-Inclán's *Sonata de otoño*," *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 36 (1970-71), 28-30.

⁷ As the world knows, the raw material for this episode is one of the multiple adventures of Casanova in volume VIII, chapter 7 of his *Mémoires*. But what is merely one more uninspired bit of intrigue in the mass of episodes in Casanova's life becomes in Valle-Inclán a dramatic event charged with irony and chilling plasticity, and manipulated so as to be esthetically consonant with the ambience and thematics of the *Primavera*, as well as with the personality of Bradomín. For the verbal similarities, see Julio Casares, *Crítica profana*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Renacimiento, n. d.), pp. 101-06. Valle-Inclán's irrepressible propensity for interweaving in his works elements from other authors and sometimes even from himself is by now a critical commonplace and needs no additional comment here.

⁸ An analogous masquerade occurs in "Mi hermana Antonia" (chapters X and XII). In that case Satan's surrogate takes the form of a long-time acquaintance of Antonia's family, a Franciscan friar named Padre Bernardo, whom Valle-Inclán models after the sculptured saints of the Pórtico de la Gloria of the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela: he is old and small and has a large bald head. He is otherwise identified by his voice only, although when he leaves it is in the form of a black cat. Some commentators include "Mi hermana Antonia" among the stories of *Jardín umbrío* (1903), which would make it an antecedent of the *Primavera*. It apparently appeared for the first time, however, in 1909 in the collection *Cofre de sándalo*, well after the publication of the four *Sonatas*. See the already cited books of Guerrero and Rubia Barcia, pp. 182 and 14, respectively.

⁹ Flynn perceives a diabolical presence in the Capuchin but offers no particular explanation of his appearance or his motives (*op. cit.*, pp. 128-29).

¹⁰ Henry Pérez, "La estética satánica en las *Sonatas* de Valle-Inclán" (unpublished article), p. 10.

¹¹ Flynn maintains that the *Primavera* takes place over a five-day period (*op. cit.*, p. 121). If so, it all happens during Holy Week, and a very eventful week it proves to be for the Gaetanis, beginning and ending as it does with a death in the family. This suggests the possibility that Valle-Inclán may have already been experimenting in 1904 with the technique of telescoping or condensing time, which will become a capital dimension, of *Lucas de Bohemia*, *La Reina Castiza* and *Cara de Plata* in the 1920's. Be all that as it may, we do know that the affair of Polonio's paintings occurs during Holy Week, probably on Good Friday. If the continuity of events is immediate from that point on, María Rosario is to enter the convent on Easter Sunday, so that the intervention of the Devil is strategically timed for the very last moment before the renewal of the Resurrection when he traditionally ceases to run loose.

¹² Flynn recognizes that there is "an added diabolical touch" in the opening of the window (*op. cit.*, p. 133). Gulstad mistakenly considers the fall of the child to be an accident caused by María Rosario's negligence. On the basis of the text, three things are certain: the window opens by itself, the child does not move, and María Rosario does not touch her (p. 88). The sun is setting directly behind the child, and there is no wind.

¹³ "It was Satan!"