CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Ramón María del Valle-Inclán

Tyrant Banderas

Tirano Banderas: Novela de tierra caliente

Presented by: Filip Kučeković

The Spanish playwright and novelist Ramón del Valle-Inclán lived and worked at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and belonged to the group of writers, philosophers, and essayists known as the Generación del 98, which emerged during the Spanish-American War of 1898 and introduced Modernism into Spanish literature. Valle-Inclán developed his own distinctive style, known as *esperpento*, characterized by absurd and cruel satire based on the extreme distortion of characters. He applied this style in his 1926 novel *Tyrant Banderas*, in which he portrays the grotesque figure of a Latin American dictator.

The novel is set in the fictional Latin American country of Santa Fe de Tierra Firme, ruled by Santos Banderas, a native who has adopted colonial methods of governing and of treating his fellow countrymen. The novel begins with preparations for a peasant uprising that will develop into a revolution in which Banderas will be overthrown. By presenting fragments from the lives of the country's inhabitants and rulers, the novel provides a cross-section of society and depicts the dynamics between authoritarian power, colonial representatives, the military, and the predominantly peasant population, upon whom the dictator's irrational power is ultimately imposed.

The aforementioned grotesque caricaturization spares none of the characters, beginning with the tyrant Banderas, who is a bizarrely cruel and comically faint-hearted dictator, constantly on the verge of resigning from his position yet ultimately persisting in it through his generals and aides. It extends to the Spanish ambassador, who is more interested in his dog, and to the rebellious peasants, among whom the most prominent is Zacarías San José, known as the Crusader. He loses his mind and joins the revolutionaries after his son is mauled to death by dogs because his wife was taken away by the Tyrant's soldiers while she was attempting to sell a ring that had belonged to the Tyrant's fugitive general, who had given it to her because she had enabled him to escape. He then takes the body of his dead son and, believing that it is an amulet that will protect him from misfortune, embarks on a merciless campaign of revenge against everyone who supports the tyrant. From the very beginning, it is clear that corruption and moral decay lie at the center of Banderas's regime. Yet madness and extravagance are also present among those who oppose the tyrant, which is why the revolutionaries are not idealized but rather portrayed as another component of the political madness unfolding in the Latin American state.

For this reason, the only thing distributed democratically throughout the novel is *esperpento* itself, a specific way of representing reality that renders both the characters of cruel tyrants and their victims equally grotesque and excessively human. In doing so, it introduces a balance that suits none of the characters, and therefore the text requires a revolution, foreshadowed from the very beginning of

the novel, which will further intensify the political circumstances. The characters can escape from a balance that suits none of them only through the imbalance established by shifting the center of gravity within the novel's actantial structure. Namely, revolution occurs in the literary text when the last of Banderas's supporters decides to cross the vertical axis of Greimas's actantial model and become his opponent. This is the political moment at which the structure of the novel collapses, and it is marked by the defection of Major Abilio del Valle, one of Banderas's most loyal men, to the side of the revolutionaries. Through this decision, Major del Valle establishes himself as the central point of the story, the one who organizes the action, unlike Banderas, who is only nominally the dictator within the narrative. Instead, Major del Valle, whose name is not coincidentally the same as the author's, is the dictator of the narrative—the one who possesses enough power to provoke a revolutionary upheaval within the narrative itself and alter the course of events.

Through this novel, Ramón del Valle-Inclán establishes his own authorial politics, according to which the author assumes the characteristics of a dictator, inscribes himself into the text through his characters, and structures the text by exploiting the ambivalence of their names. The figure who is called the dictator in the title of the novel turns out to be dependent on his subjects, generals, and servants, causing his name to betray its own meaning. On the other hand, the character named after the author, although a minor figure, is the one who possesses the ability to alter the narrative and provoke the revolution.

LANGUAGE: Spanish / Español

CENSORSHIP STATUS: