**ESPERPENTO**

A term used by the Spanish modernist playwright, novelist, and poet Ramón María del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936), the esperpento is a literary style that grotesquely deforms conventional views of reality through the use of absurd images and colloquial language. As defined in his 1924 play *Luces de bohemia* [Bohemian Lights], the *esperpento* is a satirical mix of tragedy and comedy. This drama is the first of four works that the writer characterized as “esperpentos”. The others—*La hija del capitán* [The Captain’s Daughter]*, Las galas del difunto* [The Dead Man’s Finery],and *Los cuernos de Don Fríolera* [Don Friolera’s Horns]—were all published in the 1930 trilogy *Martes de Carnaval. Esperpentos.*

Writing in the early twentieth century, Valle-Inclán believed that during the period of the Restoration (*Restauración borbónica,* 1874-1931), Spanish society had reached a deplorable state of degradation that impeded the development of the country’s literary and artistic culture and turned it into a grotesque deformation of European civilization. In *Luces de bohemia* the main character, the blind and destitute poet Max Estrella, strolls through the streets of Madrid at nighttime accompanied by his friend Don Latino de Hispalis. On their walk they have encounter several characters (including the greedy and eccentric bookstore keeper Zaratustra, who rips Max off) and witness tragic and absurd events (such as the death of an infant caused by a stray bullet) that show the ravenous, inhumane, and false nature of Spanish society.

At one point, Max and Don Latino catch a glimpse of their distorted reflections in some mirrors located inside a shop on a street called the Callejón del Gato, an event that prompts Max to issue his own—and by extension, Valle-Inclán’s—aesthetic theory: “Classical heroes reflected in concave mirrors yield the Grotesque [*Esperpento*]. The tragic sense of Spanish life can be rendered only through an aesthetic that is systematically deformed… In a concave mirror, even the most beautiful images are absurd… But deformation stops being deformation when subjected to a perfect mathematic. My present aesthetic approach is to transform all classical norms with the mathematics of the concave mirror. (183)]

Max Estrella goes on to attribute the invention of the *esperpento* to the Spanish painter Francisco Goya (1746-1828), and critics commonly cite the Black Paintings of Goya’s later years as the most direct precedent for this aesthetics of deformation. While the origin of the term itself is unknown, the Royal Spanish Academy Dictionary (DRAE) cites two meanings: a) a grotesque act and b) colloquially, a person in disarray. Although the term existed before Valle-Inclán borrowed it to name a specific literary genre, it has subsequently become synonymous with the writer’s name. Given the association of the esperpento with the grotesque, it can be compared to other contemporaneous styles such as the Italian grottesco and the Argentine grotesco criollo.

**References and further reading**

Valle-Inclán, R. (1924) *Luces de bohemia. Esperpento. Bohemian Lights.* Trans. Anthony N. Zahareas and Gerard Gillespie, Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1976.

Almeida, D. (2000) *The esperpento tradition in the works of Ramón del Valle-Inclán and Luis Buñuel*, Lewiston: E. Mellen Press.

Cardona, R. and Zahareas, A. (1982) *Visión del esperpento: teoría y práctica en los esperpentos de Valle-Inclán*,Madrid: Castalia.

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**IMAGES**

**Image 1:**



From a 1984 staging of *Luces de bohemia.* The main character Max Estrella (left) is accompanied by Don Latino de Hispalis (right), who distorts his face in wild laughter. Available at Centro de Documentación Teatral’s online database:

<http://teatro.es/en/catalogues/integrated-catalogue#2resultspointer>

**Image 2:**



Image from a 1987 staging of *Los cuernos de Don Fríolera.* The faces of the lieutenants are visibly distorted in the manner of the esperpento. Available at Centro de Documentación Teatral’s online database:

<http://teatro.es/en/catalogues/integrated-catalogue#2resultspointer>