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“This festering wound”: Negotiating Spanishness in Galician Cultural Discourse¹

When the Galician novelist and journalist Manuel Rivas, in an essay on his countryman, the novelist and playwright Ramón del Valle-Inclán, declared that “O asunto do idioma rexorde [...] como unha cicatriz aberta” “the question of language recurs [...] like a festering wound”,² he was homing in on one of the key, but largely unarticulated, problems in contemporary Galician cultural discourse. The controversy over whether the Galician-born Valle-Inclán, whose works were written almost exclusively in Spanish, could be considered a “Galician writer”, has run for nearly a century, ever since the Galician avant-garde poet Manoel Antonio launched his passionate denunciation of Valle’s “betrayal” of his Galician background, back in the 1920s. Manuel Rivas himself, of course, attracted similar accusations of betrayal more than eighty years later, over the decision to shoot the film adaptation of his bestselling novel *O lapis do carpinteiro* (The Carpenter’s Pencil) in Spanish rather than Galician.³

Both of these controversies, nearly a century apart, are underpinned by the same key question, which is the way that language choice has come to function in Galician cultural discourse as a cipher for discussions of what appears to be a widespread taboo: the

¹ Preprint of article published in Cristina Sánchez-Conejero, ed., *Spanishness in the Spanish Novel and Film*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars’ Press, 2007.

² Rivas, Manuel. “Xaz onde quixo xacer,” in *Toxos e Flores* (Vigo, Xerais, 1992), 104.

³ See, for example, the denunciation of Rivas and the film’s director, Antón Reixa, published by the pressure group Redes Escarlata four days after the film’s premier on April 21 2003. Redes Escarlata. “*El lapis del carpintero*. Denuncio dunha mentira.” Redes Escarlata. <http://www.redesescarlata.org/index.php?sec=2> (Accessed 14 May 2007). Reixa’s response, in which he absolves Rivas of any blame for the decision to shoot in Spanish, is posted immediately below: Antón Reixa. “Resposta de Antón Reixa”. Redes Escarlata. <http://www.redesescarlata.org/index.php?sec=2> (Accessed 14 May 2007).

problematic (or, more controversially, in some cases not so problematic) tension between Galician and Spanish identities in Galicia today. Valle-Inclán is an emblematic figure in exploring this question, partly because the *fin de siècle*, the period in which he was writing is a crucial period in the formation of modern Iberian identities, and partly because the ongoing debates about his “Galicianness” or “Spanishness” so clearly reveal the terms of the debate as currently enacted.

My focus on language choice as a means of talking about identity is part of a wider project to examine, and to relativize, the fundamental assumptions of cultural nationalism in Galicia.⁴ The connection between language, culture and identity is what Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic*, called the “fatal junction” of culture and nationality.⁵ It has until recently been largely unexamined not only in Galicia, but also – as Silvia Bermúdez, Mario Santana and others have reminded us – in Spain.⁶ In the case of Galicia, it is essential to recognize just how much is at stake in the connection between language and identity, which has become the centrepiece of the debate about how to define and delimit Galician culture and identity in the context of Galicia’s ambiguous status as a *nacionalidade histórica* within Spain. It is a question that has proved contentious to scholars and practitioners of Galician literature and culture throughout the 20th century, and it remains crucial at the start of the 21st.⁷ Even

⁴ The theoretical basis for this project is outlined in my recent study “Novas cartografías nos estudos galegos: nacionalismo literario, literatura nacional, lecturas posnacionais,” *Anuario de Estudos Literarios Galegos* 2005 (2006): 64-73. English version: “New Cartographies in Galician Studies: from Literary Nationalism to Postnational Readings,” in *Reading Iberia: Theory, History, Identity*, ed. Helena Buffery, Stuart Davis and Kirsty Hooper (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007): 125-142.

⁵ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 2.

⁶ Silvia Bermúdez, “De patriotas constitucionales, neoconservadores y periféricos: ¿Qué hace una España como tú en un entre siglos como éste?,” *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 37 (2003): 341-355; Mario Santana, “Mapping National Literatures: Some Observations on Contemporary Hispanism,” in *Spain Beyond Spain: Modernity, Literary History, and National Identity*, ed. Bradley S Epps and Luis Fernández Cifuentes (Associated University Presses, 2005): 109-126.

⁷ For a fascinating indication of the range of responses to the question “What makes a Galician Writer?” given by Galician writers, artists, politicians and academics, see Kirsty Hooper (ed and trans.), “Forum,” in “New Spaces, New Voices: Notes on Contemporary Galician Studies,” special issue of *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 7.2 (July 2006): 103-22.

now, discussions of the subject, at least in Galicia, always seem to come back to the question of language “choice” (and I use the term “choice” advisedly). The official doctrine of the right-wing, centralist Fraga administration that governed Galicia for fifteen years up to summer 2005 was one of “*bilinüismo harmónico*” – harmonious bilingualism – which understood the Spanish and Galician languages to co-exist peacefully within Galician territory. This policy, which deliberately neutralized questions of power and relative influence, stands in direct opposition to the nationalist concept of the *criterio filolóxico*, or “language factor,” which delimits the monolingual concept of Galician identity that underpins Galician cultural nationalist discourse.⁸

The tension between “*bilinüismo harmónico*” and the “*criterio filolóxico*” clearly functions as a means of addressing the problematic issues surrounding questions of identity in Galicia. Given Galicia’s ambiguous political and institutional position, it is hardly surprising that theorizations of Galician cultural nationalism have depended for survival on repression of the Spanish “other”. However, this repression – while understandable and perhaps even desirable in institutional terms – does not easily translate from theory into practice. The effect of the conflict is to place ever higher stakes on language choice, thus creating an ever-increasing gulf between the institutionalized culture for which language has become a key element in identity-definition, and the lived reality of most Galicians, which involves a constant balancing act between Galician and Spanish cultures, languages, and identities. In a provocative article analysing the ideological underpinnings of language policies in Galicia, José Del Valle observes that “the main plot of the linguistic history of Galicia from the fifteenth century onwards is one of conflict between the two main

⁸ See, for example, Xoán González Millán, “O criterio filolóxico e a configuración dunha literatura nacional: achegas a un novo marco de reflexión,” *Cadernos de Lingua* 17 (1998): 5-24.

characters of the story: a victim and an aggressor, Galician and Spanish”.⁹ He goes on to argue, with reference to extensive empirical evidence drawn from sociolinguistic studies of the use of Galician and Spanish in contemporary Galicia, that despite the institutionalised hegemonic (centralist) and non-hegemonic (Galician nationalist) positions that require identification either with Spanishness or Galicianness, “the language attitudes and linguistic behaviour of Galicians are grounded in the linguistic culture of heteroglossia”.¹⁰ That is, that “Galicians do not want to choose between identity A and B and their associated linguistic reflexes”.¹¹

The very real problem that arises from the taboo on discussion of the symbiotic relationship between Spanishness and Galicianness is that the gap between institutionalized and lived cultures in contemporary Galicia continues to grow. Both the centralist language policy that seeks to retain Spanish as the language of power while allotting Galician the role of “domestic” language, and the nationalist language policy that demands a choice between “Spanish” and “Galician,” reflect a wider dualist tendency that is translated into cultural terms through what Mario Santana has characterized (referring to Spanish) as an “exclusive vision of literary citizenship”.¹² To apply Santana’s thesis to Galician literature itself, and at risk of horribly over-stretching the metaphor, we might argue that the “criterio filológico” means use of the Galician language functions as the passport to “Galician literary citizenship,” while use of Spanish, according to the precepts of “bilinguismo harmónico,” provides a tourist visa at best. Some of the writers who have found themselves held up at

⁹ Del Valle, José, “Monoglossic policies for a heteroglossic culture: misinterpreted monolingualism in modern Galicia,” *Language & Communication* 20 (2000): 121.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 130.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 128.

¹² Mario Santana, “Mapping National Literatures” (2005): 120. Interestingly, the example Santana chooses to illustrate his thesis is the Galician poet Rosalía de Castro, whose Galician-language poetry, he argues, is often excised from Spanish literary history, because scholars cannot accept that it could ever be part of two literary histories.

passport control, in that their commitment to the Galician language and thus the Galician nation has been held up to question, are also some of Spain's most canonical figures: Emilia Pardo Bazán, Camilo José Cela, Gonzalo Torrente Ballester and of course, Ramón del Valle-Inclán. More recently, the novelists Luisa Castro, Marta Rivera de la Cruz,¹³ Marina Mayoral and Alfredo Conde have been the focus of similar scrutiny.¹⁴

Of all of these writers, however, the one who has attracted the most debate is Valle-Inclán, with nearly a century of what the Galician nationalist writer and polemicist Suso de Toro refers to as “[o] conflicto de Valle con Galiza e da Galiza con Valle”.¹⁵ Galician hostility to Valle goes back at least as far as the 1920s, when he became a kind of cultural bogeyman for the emergent nationalist group known as the *Xeración Nós* and for cultural *galeguistas* such as the avant-garde poet Manoel Antonio. Manoel Antonio, author of the classic poem *De catro a catro*, was also a passionate polemicist who in 1922 produced a manifesto *Máis alá* (“Further Still”) that proposed a new, committed, experimental future for Galician literature, rejecting in no uncertain terms the bilingual, modernist literature of Valle and his school:

Comezaremos invocando a Valle-Inclán [...] o que quixeramos conseguir da súa incensada personalidade sería que intensificase a campaña castelanizante porque nos arrepía o pensamento de que eles se cresen chamados por estas nosas verbas

¹³ Rivera de la Cruz, a native of Lugo and native Galician speaker who has nevertheless published all her literary work to date in Spanish, has frequently gone on record to express her opposition to orthodox linguistic policy, defending her position as a “Galician writer” and the existence of Galician literatures in both Galician and Spanish. During the press rounds after her novel *En tempo de prodixios* was awarded the runner-up prize in Spain's prestigious Premio Planeta 2006, Rivera de la Cruz wondered aloud whether she had been “vetada” in Galicia because of her opposition to the institutionalized language policy. See, for example, *Galicia Hoxe* (17.10.2006) http://www.galicia-hoxe.com/index_2.php?idMenu=130&idNoticia=94220; *El Mundo* (29.11.2006) <http://www.elmundo.es/encuentros/invitados/2006/11/2266/>.

¹⁴ The predominance of female names in this list is especially striking given the relative paucity of female novelists in Galicia. For more detailed discussion of this question, see my essay “Girl, Interrupted: The Distinctive History of Galician Women's Narrative,” *Romance Studies*, 21/2 (2003): 101-114.

¹⁵ Suso de Toro, “O asunto Valle,” in *Parado na tormenta*, 192 (Vigo: Galaxia, 1996).

de mocidade e chegase algún a desertar de la lengua de Cervantes para vir a baldeirar na nosa Fala as produccións do seu serrín encefálico

Let's start with Valle-Inclán ... all we want from him is an intensification of his Castilianizing campaign, because we are horrified by the thought that he and his followers might think they have been called by our youthful words and that one of them might desert the language of Cervantes to come and empty into our [Galician] Language the products of his encephalic brain.¹⁶

Even at this early stage, it is evident that hostility to Valle is channelled through the question of language – Manoel Antonio refers to his “Castilianizing campaign” and hopes he will stick to Castilian rather than “infecting” the Galician language with his ideas. The accusation is a strange one, given that the Galician nationalist magazine *A Nosa Terra* had published some of Valle's short stories in Galician translation, with Valle's permission and to great fanfare, just three years earlier. I think we have to read the accusation not only in literal, or biographical terms, but also in terms of the momentous shift then taking place in Galician cultural theory. For Manoel Antonio, Valle's insistence on writing and publishing in Castilian is constructed as a direct attack on the Galician language, which itself stands for the emergent Galician cultural system: that is, the younger author conflates Galician language and culture, setting them up in opposition to Spanish language and culture, in a way that in 1922 was still new and radical.

Reading Manoel Antonio's condemnation of Valle in this way, we might see it as the result of a Bloomian anxiety of influence. That is, it is not only Valle himself that the younger poet rejects, but the cultural system he stands for, in which language is not the only marker of identity, and the “fatal junction” of language and culture had not yet taken

¹⁶ Manoel Antonio and Álvaro Cebreiro, “Máis alá”, *Alborada* (1922): II, “Pollitos bien”.

precedence. Until the 1920s – when Galician cultural identity was theorized for the first time as nationalism, by the *Xeración Nós* – it was accepted without question that a majority of Galician writers not only spoke, but regularly published in both languages. This is not to say that language was not seen as a defining characteristic, or that there was no sense of difference between the two cultural spheres, but that the boundaries between them were simply more porous. Manoel Antonio’s manifesto is thus the first step in rejecting the *fin de siècle / siglo*, that crucial period in the formation of modern Galician – not to mention Iberian – identities, between the 1880s and the 1920s, bounded at one end by the publication of the first Galician-language novel (*Maxina*, in 1880) and at the other by the publication of the first theorization of Galician nationalism, Vicente Risco’s *Teoría do nacionalismo galego* (1920).

As I have argued elsewhere, the *fin de siècle* forms a key battleground in the struggle for definitions of Galician identity;¹⁷ my proposal today is that Valle, identified as its bodily representative as early as 1922, also functions as a site for playing out this struggle, so that the debates about his “literary citizenship” (to go back to Santana’s phrase) take on a broader significance in the context of Galician cultural theory. In an article collected in his 1993 anthology *Parado na tormenta*, the nationalist writer and commentator Suso de Toro identifies the “asunto Valle,” as he calls the controversy over how far Valle-Inclán can be considered part of the Galician cultural narrative, as a symbol of Galicia’s search for identity.

Questioning what kind of a nation has no place for a writer like Valle, Toro, a firm believer in the pre-eminence of the Galician language, nevertheless argues that “Se non aceptamos esa cara de nós mesmos non nos coñeceremos [...] Valle é [...] a pedra de toque para saber qué Galiza queremos, ¿unha sociedade uniformizada ou complexa e diversa?” “If we don’t

¹⁷ See Kirsty Hooper, “Girl, Interrupted,” especially pp. 104-108. See also Kirsty Hooper, “New Cartographies in Galician Studies,” especially pp. 128-129.

accept this facet of ourselves, we can't know ourselves... Valle is the touchstone to find out what kind of Galicia we want, a uniform society, or one that is complex and diverse?"¹⁸

Toro's challenge to see Valle-Inclán as the symbol of a Galicia that is complex and diverse, in cultural, ideological, and – crucially – linguistic terms is radical, and remains largely unanswered. Five years after he published *Parado na tormenta*, the symbolic capital of Valle's life and work – and the difficulty of reconciling his ambiguous “literary citizenship” – were graphically demonstrated in a public row that lasted for several months and crossed the boundaries between cultural, linguistic and political debate. In the spring of 1998, Manuel Guede, director of the Galician national theatre company – the Centro Dramático Galego – took the decision to stage four of Valle's plays in the original Spanish rather than translate them into Galician. This decision, made for the pragmatic reason that the Valle-Inclán estate then forbade translation of Valle's work into any of the other languages of the Peninsula, was presented as an exception to the general rule that the national theatre company would present plays only in the national language, on the grounds that Valle, in his use of Galician idiom, syntax and setting, was an exceptional case – but it met with immediate and widespread condemnation, led by the nationalist pressure group *Mesa para a Normalización da Lingua Galega*.¹⁹

The ensuing controversy demonstrates very clearly the dualist tendency of cultural discourse in Galicia: in one corner, we had the Valle-Inclán family, led by the writer's son Carlos, who maintained that the writer had left strict instructions that his work was never to be translated into Galician and that it was to be Spanish or nothing (the question of whether these instructions actually exist remains a source of debate). In the opposite corner, were the

¹⁸ Suso de Toro, “O asunto Valle,” 193.

¹⁹ The full text of the MNL manifesto on the subject was published in the group's annual bulletin, together with a brief summary of the campaign: “O CDG en español,” *ReMesa* 32 (Primavera-Verán 98): 4. Archived at <http://www.amesanl.org/quefacemos/boletins/Bltn0298.pdf>.

leading lights of Galician art and culture, including the writers Manuel Rivas and Suso de Toro, the critic Dolores Vilavedra, the actors Cándido Pazó and Lino Braxe, and the great revolutionary writer Xosé Méndez Ferrín, who argued for the CDG's obligation, as a public-funded national body, to stage works only in the national language, Galician. In the middle was the CDG itself, trying to negotiate with both sides. In the end, the CDG did stage the plays, in Spanish, but its production was shadowed – even overshadowed – by a parallel, unauthorized performance of the plays in Galician, translated by a collective of artists and writers and staged in unofficial venues as close to the CDG venues as possible.²⁰

The performance of what the Galician news website *Vieiros* referred to as “Valle-Inclán paralelos” graphically demonstrates the gulf between the nationalist position defined by the “criterio filolóxico” and the centralist position informed by “bilingüismo harmónico”.²¹ The key issue at stake, perhaps somewhat eclipsed by the focus on the language question, was the nature of the connection between language, culture and identity – not only in terms of the struggle over Valle-Inclán's “literary citizenship”, but also of the connection between “national” and “public” identity. The national question in itself is relatively straightforward, since the nation, in Galicia, has historically been legitimized principally by means of language and culture, in the absence of institutions of state, but when the public sphere is brought into the mix, the tensions become more evident. The controversy over the CDG is a graphic illustration of the tension between the nationalist desire to conflate the national and public spheres, and the official, Fraga-ist policy to keep them separate as far as possible: the CDG, as a publicly-funded national institution, therefore provides a battleground for the struggle over control of the Galician public sphere

²⁰ A report, with photographs, of the Galician readings was published in the MNL bulletin: “Comedia bárbara. Maratón de lectura de Valle-Inclán en galego,” *ReMesa* 33 (outono-inverno 98): 3. Archived at: <http://www.amesanl.org/quefacemos/boletins/Bltn0398.pdf>

²¹ “Valle-Inclán paralelos,” *Vieiros* (16 Sep 1998). <http://vello.vieiros.com/artigos/cdg.html>.

in much the same way as the *fin de século* (and by extension, Valle) provides the battleground for control over the Galician cultural sphere.²²

To conclude, it is my argument that the issue of language choice has come to stand for a diverse range of debates related to the question of how to define and delimit Galician culture and identity in the context of Galicia's ambiguous status as a *nacionalidade histórica* within Spain. As language has become the central, institutionalised marker of Galician difference from Spain, so cultural critics on the one hand have tried to neutralize that difference through recourse to the official policy of "bilingüismo harmónico", while those on the other side have sought to legitimise the "fatal junction" between Galician identity and the Galician language, by rewriting cultural history through the erasure of Spanish-language voices. In this context, Valle-Inclán and his works can be seen, in Toro's words, as the touchstone for conflicting views of Galicia, although as the debates continue to resurface in the press with some regularity, the conflict does not look to be resolved any time soon.²³ In the meantime, as long as the "fatal junction" of language, culture, and identity in Galicia and in Spain remains unexamined, the "cicatriz aberta" so graphically evoked by Rivas will continue to fester, painful and unhealed.

²² The question arose again, in reverse, when in 2002 the CDG announced its intention to take a Spanish-language version of Castelao's play *Os vellos non deben namorarse* on tour throughout Spain. For the MNL response to this decision, see Carlos Manuel Callón, "As responsabilidades do CDG" (10 July 2002) [originally published in *El Correo Gallego / O Correo Galego*]. Archived at: http://www.amesanl.org/noticias/noticia_tipo.asp?IDNOTICIA=160.

²³ Despite the recent reform to Spain's intellectual property laws, the Valle-Inclán estate has decided to exploit a loophole in the law which extends its remit for eighty years after the author's death. The upshot of this, as reported in the Galician nationalist periodical *A Nosa Terra*, is that until 2017, Galician will be the only language in the world in which Valle's plays cannot be performed: "Valle-Inclán en galego aínda ten que esperar," *A Nosa Terra* 1257. http://www.anosaterra.com/documentos/central_interior.php?pagina_actual=cultura&numero=1257#1

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