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Irrational Baroque Thought: Violence, Lovesickness and the Supernatural in *Tales of Disillusion* (1647) by María de Zayas

ABSTRACT. There has been no time in which the irrational has had such a grip on customs and social practices as in the Spanish Baroque. In her collection of novellas, *Tales of Disillusion* (1647), María de Zayas depicts a world of violence, cruelty, irrationality, false honor, and superstition in which women, either betrothed or on the point of being so, end up violently killed or tucked away in a convent for life. Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz approaches the irrational by proposing an anti-irrational thinking based on objective, provable phenomena which can be intersubjectively conveyed and comprehended. In a case in which art imitates life, Zayas's novellas reflect a world in crisis, besieged by chaos and undermined by a pervasive irrationality that is reflected in the paroxysms of everyday life. Excess, trances and exaltation are the common currency of a society given over to gambling, infidelity, appearances and a curiously heightened mysticism and belief in the supernatural. A world in which nothing is what it appears to be and all cognition is based on the irrational, suggests a world that sees chaos and irrational thinking as ways to avoid facing the reality of its own existential and cognitive failures. In order to exemplify this irrationalism, by means of tracing certain themes in the novels such as insanity and sickness caused by love, magic and the supernatural, uncontrolled hate, anger and jealousy, an uninhibited obsession for violence, and the frenzied fixation on gambling and womanizing, this work will illustrate that the Baroque was a period dominated by irrationalism as exemplified by María de Zayas's stories which the narrators insist are true. Art imitates life and depicts a world riveted by the Habsburg political ineptitude and the nobility not rising to the occasion to help keep the country morally and economically afloat. If Zayas depicts ravaging violence it is only a reflection of an era marked by excess violence, censorship, mystical excesses and an increase in crime.

KEY WORDS: María de Zayas, Baroque, Ajdukiewicz, irrationality, violence

Introduction

Very little is known about the life of María de Zayas except that she was from Madrid and lived in the first half of the seventeenth century. For what we find in her texts, she must have had noble origins and she miraculously was included to a certain extent in the intellectual writing scene of her times. Evidence of this is the fact that she managed to publish two collections of novellas, a play and she participated in writing celebratory verse for the publications of other writers' texts. She was lauded by Lope de Vega in his famous work, *Laurel de Apolo* (1630), which was a veritable who's who of the Golden Age literary world. She was also part of the elite literary group invited to contribute poems for the poetic commemorative edition (1636) marking the death of Lope de Vega [Yllera, 1993, pp. 11–14].

In striking contrast to her first collection of novellas, *Exemplary Tales of Love* [1637], is the gatherings of novellas published in *Tales of Disillusion* [1647] which like no other single text in the Golden Age reflects the irrationality of the Spanish Baroque. Nothing is known of María de Zayas after 1647 so she too might have died or gone to a convent just as the female protagonists in the collection. She shatters the conventional "happy ending" that is found in the novellas of her times and prefers to show the predominantly dangerous liaisons that marriage offers, often leading to extreme violence or even death. She crystallizes society's discontentment in her version of married life and, in general, male-female relations and shows that it is part of the chaotic, illogical *Weltanschauung* of the Baroque.

Very few periods were as psychologically and socially tumultuous as the seventeenth-century Spanish Baroque. If the Polish philosopher, Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz were thinking of a social group to which he could apply his anti-irrationalism thought, Habsburg Spain would be the ideal place. The era was so steeped in irrationalism that it is said to be a time of generalized crisis. Besides the period's chronicles, there are certain authors that document the era's chaos through fiction that tends to describe the customs and mentality that dominated daily life. Very little is known about Maria de Zayas, a rare case of a female excelling at fiction writing in the

seventeenth century, but her collection of novellas, *Tales of Disillusion*, published in 1647, concentrates on the culmination of misogynist irrational thought and practices in Early Modern Spain. Modeled as a frame story, ten tales are told in three nights to while the time away as Lisis waits for her wedding to Juan. By means of the ten tales, Zayas displays the irrational mentality and comportment that had taken hold of Spanish society. Throughout the framework, the narrators insist that the stories are true and in many cases give names and dates to prove the historical veracity of the deeds. In order to exemplify this irrationalism, by means of tracing certain themes in the novels such as insanity and sickness caused by love, magic and the supernatural, uncontrolled hate, anger and jealousy, an uninhibited obsession for violence, and the frenzied fixation on gambling and womanizing, this work will illustrate that the Baroque was a period dominated by irrationalism as exemplified by Maria de Zayas's stories which the narrators insist are true. Indeed, the majority of critics declare that the content of the tales is realistic, and professes a "belief that Zayas is describing seventeenth-century life in Spain with high fidelity" [Rhodes, 2011, p. 83]:

On the surface, literal readings appear to be supported by historical evidence that women were in fact endangered and killed for questions of honor [...] and Gil's tables of petitions for divorce brought to the diocesan tribunal of Barcelona from 1564 to 1654, in which women plaintiffs who accused their husband of cruelty and/or physical abuse, death threats, or attempted murder account for 70 per cent of all cases. [Rhodes, 2011, pp. 84–85]

In fact, researchers have carefully documented Zayas's fiction as a reflection of early modern domestic violence.

The Baroque is a period marked by irrationality which one author has even characterized as "a shape-shifting monster, a reality pertaining to anti-hierarchical and even rhizomatic knowledge" [Pérez-Magallón, 2012, p. 2]. In fact, writers such as Cervantes and Zayas recognized and embraced a reality that was inherently subjective and imbued with polysemy. The baroque mentality conceived of the world as a conglomeration of amorphous and mutable appearances seen not only in baroque art but in the sharply contradictory seventeenth-century society [Mújica, 2004, p. 132].

A nobility clinging to the lasts glints of its glorious past, an overprotective government that was bankrupt, not only because of a voluptuous lifestyle but because it had been mired in wars, were some of the reasons that pushed the seventeenth-century Spanish psyche into crisis. The constant wars could hardly be supported by a tax system that privileged the aristocracy with exemptions and overburdened the already impoverished masses and “the income from the New World was smaller than that collected by the Castilian peasantry” [Ruiz, 2001, p. 26]. The *hidalgos*, one of the lowest noble groups, had to plow land in order to survive. Nonetheless, they jealously clung to their last shreds of nobility by hanging up their “formidable shields of arms” on their “humble village houses” [Ruiz, 2001, pp. 74–75] and they certainly “safeguarded their lofty, if meaningless, status against encroachment by non-nobles” [Ruiz, 2001, p. 75]. In fact, Zayas’s nobility is the middling aspirational nobility that represents the majority. Only 2.9% of the nobility were from “the uppermost class” [Rhodes, 2011, pp. 28]. This is only part of the creation of a fanatical society that was incredibly violent, superstitious, given to spiritual excesses which they ostentatiously displayed. Families, and in particular males, obsessively dwelled on “honor” as their delicate caste system was eroding away. Part of the crisis was purportedly caused by a decadent, middle of the road nobility: “Irresponsible actions by the degenerate nobility against both the perfect and the imperfect victims produces a deficit in the textual economics of responsibility” [Rhodes, 2011, p. 31].

The Spanish Counter-Reformation was marginal to modernity and thinkers such as Bacon and Descartes or any type of tendency towards empiricism or rationalism were not part of its mentality: the “grand narrative of modernity offered no room for the Baroque (Gothicism), a defining feature of superstitious, barbaric, uncivilized peoples incapable of reason” [Pérez-Magallán, 2012, p. 12]. Irrationality was the new normal mindset and it manifested itself in many ways. All spheres of community life were carried away by irrational forces, by rampant violence, increase in crime, moral depravation, overzealous spiritual manifestations, superstition and white magic that were not considered aberrations even by the strictest of

social standards [Maravall, 1998, p. 128]. Witchcraft, miracles and excesses of all kinds were just another sign of the irrational way of living and a very harmful *Weltanschauung* [Maravall, 1998, p. 463]. A maladapted nobility vehemently chased economic gains wherever they could find them without lifting a finger. There were widespread mutinies, social unrest and violent rebellions that show the underlying maladies and decadence of the age [Maravall, 1998, p. 108]. The nobility abandoned their lands and free-loaded off the court. Several times in the seventeenth century, the royal advisors pleaded for the king to send the noblemen back to mind their lands: the court simply couldn't support so many idle people living off the impoverished government. Another sign of irrationality is the widespread addiction to gambling. Houses, families and dowries were squandered and destroyed by gambling. And finally, the historians speak about pervasive insanity and the obsession for mystical manifestations such as enchantment, enthrallment, trances and frenzy.

In this framework, Maria de Zayas wrote her collection of novellas, *Tales of Disillusion*, in 1647. In 1637, the author had published *Exemplary Tales of Love* and in her framed narrative promised to continue the tales in a sequel. It took her 10 years to publish the next collection and her tone had radically changed. The next tome is called *Tales of Disillusion* and documents a society in which "virtuous wives are sought out and abused by a decadent society determined to do away with them, their bodies mutilated and their lives ended literally in death, or figuratively as they enter the convent after insurmountable tribulation in the world" [Rhodes, 2011, p. 4]. Marriage is a dangerous endeavor in Zayas's world: "Seven out of the nine virtuous wives meet violent ends, six at the hands of their husbands, and the two wives who do not die barely survive their husbands' and families' assaults, one due to the miraculous intervention of the Virgen Mary" [Rhodes, 2011, p. 35].

Maria de Zayas's novellas of seventeenth century customs and manners clearly portray a world that is awry, irrational and out of control. It is a society dominated by what Ajdukiewicz would call irrational thinking. Revelations, fortune telling, white magic, witchcraft, crystal balls, mystical

ecstasy, and subjective certainty are all characteristics of the irrational and duly critiqued in Zayas [Otero, 2005, p. 536]. A premium is placed on excesses of emotion, suspense, furor, and all types of extremes, whether they be of violence, jealousy, honor, or magical thinking.

Insanity and love sickness

Although lauded in poetry, love is quite noxious for the ladies in *Tales of Disillusion*. In one tale, Diego falls insanelly in love at first sight with Ines, a woman he doesn't even know. At that moment, Ines's woes commenced because Diego began to love her with insane desperation and became irrational, obsessively stalking her every move. In the seventeenth century, this could be quite dangerous because even though Ines was innocent of these attentions, she could be maligned by society and maybe even tortured by her husband for giving the wrong impression in public. Diego's life became hell and he went around all day bewildered, confused and desolated because he didn't know how to declare his love to the married woman. At a certain point, he was delirious and bedridden and became seriously ill because of his lovesickness.

Don Federico falls grievously in love at first sight with his new sister-in-law Beatriz. Unable to rationally come to terms with the fact that it is the wife of his beloved brother, he became lifeless, nauseated, and melancholic and walked around like a ghost. He felt lost and could barely control his violent desires. After a while, he was losing his soul and his libidinous fury started to create evil and chaotic cravings. Famous doctors from all over came to try to cure him because his extreme melancholy had turned him into skin and bones and he was always exhausted. When he wasn't numb to the world he went into furious fits and in a crazed manner, he said that he would kill her.

In *Tales of Disillusion*, love is not a pleasant sentiment. It is markedly irrational and is not controlled by the person affected. It is normally at first sight and it also pushes the individual to commit irrational acts and have irrational thoughts. It comes as a warning to the females in the text of

love's dangers. The insanity caused by unrequited love is also associated with requited love. In certain scenes, the personages are insanely or crazily happy. Love's irrationality comes out of nowhere and wracks havoc on the lives of all involved. This affective disorder goes along with how Bolívar Echeverría embodies the era: "baroque behavior begins with desperation and ends with vertigo" [cited in Pérez-Magallán, 2012, p. 15].

Magic and the supernatural

Just as the type of love described above would be eschewed by Ajdukiewicz so would the Baroque view of magic and the supernatural:

the voice of the rationalist is a sound social reaction, is an act of self-defense by society against the danger of being dominated by uncontrollable forces among which may be both a saint proclaiming a revelation as well as a madman affirming the products of his sick imagination and finally a fraud who wants to convert others to his views for the sake of his egoistic and unworthy purpose. It is better to rely on the safe but modest nourishment or reason than, in fear of missing the voice of the Truth, to let oneself be fed with all sorts of uncontrollable nourishment which may more often be poisonous than healthy and beneficial. [cited in Otero, 2005, 537]

Magic and belief in the supernatural was widespread in Counter-Reformation Spain:

necromancers, conjurers, tricksters and scam artists plied their trade in sixteenth-century rural New Castile and elsewhere throughout the land. [...] many were members of the clergy or religious orders, claiming the ability to chase hail-bearing clouds [...] persecution of women in general, and of old women in particular, was articulated through the witch craze [...] between 80,000 and 100,000 people, mostly women, were executed for witchcraft. [Ruiz, 2001, pp. 109–110]

The Baroque saw the last manifestations of magical Renaissance thinking. In fact, what would appear as unorthodox to us today, was perfectly accepted and assumed by Baroque society. Zayas's stories reflect a very superstitious society that believed in magic and supernatural manifesta-

tions. In one tale, a man cruelly poisons his innocent wife. As a physical expression of his guilt, his wife did not die for several months but she swelled up like a balloon with her legs and arms inflating like huge columns and her stomach floating above her by more than a meter. Her face stayed beautiful and she started preaching like an apostle.

In one particularly macabre and cruel tale, a man who is insanely in love with a married woman goes to a magician to get help to have his way with her. The Muslim magician makes a one half meter tall doll in the exact image of Ines, the woman he is sickly in love with. It is so identical to her that he almost fell in love with the figurine and forgot about the flesh and blood woman. On top of the model's head a candle was entrenched. The figure was nude and its hands were grabbing at a golden arrow that had pierced its heart. All the insane lover had to do was to light the candle when he wanted Ines to come to his bed. At that moment, she would enter into a trance and walk hypnotized to his house and go to his bed with him. After a while, the candle would go out by itself and she would walk dazedly back to her own house and bed and not remember having been with him.

In another, Mencía is cruelly stabbed to death by her brother for fear of being seen in a bad light for some imagined offense to his honor. Her beloved Enrique goes to visit her and encounters a supernatural scene. He peers into her antechamber and sees an eerie light illuminating a platform on which his cherished Mencía is lying dead, her body deformed and drenched in blood. Even though she had been dead for many hours, blood still poured from her wounds forming a lake at the bottom of the platform. A small voice came from her cadaver telling him that he must look for her in the afterworld. After she has spoken, the windows slam shut. Enrique is so overcome with grief that he becomes a Franciscan monk and starts to remodel the convent and chapel where Mencía's cadaver is kept. After a year of work, the chapel is finished and Mencía's body is put on display where fresh blood still seeped abundantly from her wounds. Very similar to this is Ana who is cruelly decapitated by her husband and a friend and her head is buried. When the law catches up with them, the friend digs up the head for the soldiers and they find that it is as fresh and undamaged as when she was alive.

The tale with the most supernatural elements is the story about Beatriz. She is viciously pursued by her brother-in-law whose illicit love for her had turned into hate. Her husband believes the lies that his brother told him about Beatriz and he has her eyes gouged out and she is taken to a forest to be eaten by wild animals. In the forest, Beatriz meets a mysterious woman who, unbeknownst to her, is the Virgin Mary. When Beatriz tells her about her eyes, the Virgin immediately cures her. In another of her adventures, Federico has found Beatriz and is ready to have his way with her when she is suddenly saved and swept away: Federico finds a wild, ravenous lion in her place. Later on, Beatriz has been deceived by Federico and a magician and is taken out of harm's way and placed in a type of Garden of Eden to be kept safe. There are other miracles such as the revival of a dead prince and other supernatural acts that the narrator insists are true.

Magic and supernatural acts are an important part of the stories. Throughout the collection, exact dates are given, famous and historic personages are mentioned, and exact places are identified to prove that the stories are true. It is quite ironic that whereas historical facts are a composite part of rational cognition, in the novellas they bear witness to what Ajdukiewicz would call "cognition stemming from supernatural resources" [cit. in Woleński, n.d., 8]. Indeed, rationalism that is based on empiricism such as historical data is undermined when it is paired with its antithesis which is characterized by Ajdukiewicz as "cognition referring to revelation, any intuition, clairvoyance, magic, prophesies, etc." [cit in Woleński, n.d., 8]. That the audience believed much of the stories shouldn't surprise us. The seventeenth century had countless hagiographies that were filled with miracles and other incredible acts that were assimilated into the collective belief system of the time.

Uncontrolled hate, anger and jealousy

Part of the irrational thought process is expressed by an uncontrolled manifestation of hate, anger and jealousy. Again, these feelings spring out of nowhere and seem to control the subject's whole being. Male infatuation

and love are short lived and when the men tire of their wives, they begin to hate them. When the women take note of the sudden change, they are fearful and anxious because they know it will lead to violence. Carlos is the henchman of two women: Octavia and Camila. When Carlos tires of his wife, he becomes obsessed with Camila. When he feels that his honor has been tainted by Camila, the devil takes control of him until he kills her. Francisco is also fearful that his honor is in question for a trick that was played on his innocent wife and he shows her a loving exterior while his heart is spewing venom and he is planning a cruel end to her. Blanca is hated by her father-in-law because she hasn't a large dowry, by her husband because he agrees with everything his father thinks, and by her husband's gay lover, Arnesto. All three of them plan Blanca's death filled with a lethal fury that puffs up their chests with cruelty. In case after case, the male protagonists are described as having deadly ire, diabolic fury, being blind with an uncontrollable rage, insane with anger, etc.

The aristocracy was holding on to a very fragile nobility system which created an exaggerated honor system based on appearances. Jealousy and envy were part of this system and the women suffered the brunt of it. The nobility was impoverished and their sense of worth was determined by popular opinion. Rape seems to be a common action taken for retaliation. In some stories, women are raped to take revenge on their husbands. After that has been carried out, the husband is propelled to murder the wife so as not to have his honor questioned. In all, it is a structure based on an irrational value system in which the back and forth of popular opinion determines the conduct of its citizens.

Uninhibited obsession for violence

One of the most notable examples of irrationality is the everyday violence present in the tales. This is even more disconcerting if we realize it was widespread:

violence 'was part of the discourse of early modern interpersonal relations' [...] it was particularly prevalent in Madrid during the years Zayas was working on the

[tales] [...] Tomás y Valiente cites chronicles indicating that the incidence of homicide in Madrid rose annually from 1620 to 1639, making it one of the age's most intense periods of criminal activity. [...] As Wardropper indicates in reference to the theatre, authors writing against a background of such normalized violence were hard pressed to find ways to horrify their public. [Rhodes, 2011, p. 47]

It is constant, easily provoked, practically never accompanied by remorse and there appears to be an obsession for the cruel practices used to carry it out. Rape is one of the most benign and constant types of violence depicted in the stories. It is used for many reasons. Sometimes, the antagonist can't resist raping the object of his unrequited love. In other cases, rape is used to spoil the honor of the woman and her family members. Many times the woman is innocent but is raped to retaliate against her male relatives. The repercussions of the rape are normally the murder of the innocent woman. Sometimes, the rapist plans to spread the news through the city so that the victim and her family will suffer even more.

Poison is a common weapon in the epoch. Another type of violence that is documented in the literature and is also difficult to detect, is the medical practice of bleeding a patient and then carrying it to an extreme until they bleed to death. The tales describe some cases of bleeding in which the murderers intervene to take off the bandages and let the victim bleed to death. In other cases, the victims are locked in small rooms and starved to death. Ines is closed up in a space that is so small that she can't even sit down. After six years she is found and she is blind because she has been locked in the dark room for so much time. Her hair is completely white even though she is young and it is filled with insects. Her emaciated legs are covered with worm filled sores because her own excrement ate away at her skin.

Very vivid descriptions of great cruelty fill the supposedly true stories. Laurela is innocent of any offense, but her husband sends her to sit by a very thick, heavy brick wall that he has previously had weakened and readied to cave in. While she is sitting in church next to the tampered with wall, her husband gives orders for the workers to push it from the other side and she is buried alive and crushed under tons of stones and dirt. Leonor's husband sneaks up behind her and wraps her beautiful hair around

her neck and chokes her to death. After that, he poisons their little son. Marietta's husband used a cudgel to smash her head in. Mencía is stabbed to death and while Ana eats a turnover, her husband sneaks up behind her and slices off her head. He stashes her body in a well and buries her head near the piers. The tales only get worse and worse. Dionis was only supposed to kill his wife so that he could run away with her sister but when he enters her rooms, he goes into a fury and ends up slaughtering more than twenty in the household before killing himself. While swearing that all of the stories are true, the implicit author is only holding up a mirror to reflect a violent and irrational society.

Frenzied fixation on gambling and womanizing

Gambling is based on luck and is very hard to control. It is another example of the chaos that reigned in Baroque society. If a certain sector of Spanish society lived off the court and had no personal gainful earnings, they had a great deal of free time to idle away. Historical writings document the problem gambling created and female writers such as Mariana de Carvajal and Maria de Zayas include it as a vice in many of their characters. To squander the small fortune of a family playing games of luck is a scourge in the seventeenth century and comprises another side of irrational thought and behavior.

If man is seen as dangerous in the tales, a conglomeration of men is seen as lethal in *Tales of Disillusion*. The game clubs, sometimes called "conversation clubs" in Zayas's stories are where men gathered to carry out dissolute activities such as squandering money, drinking and womanizing. It seems as though the male Baroque psyche is particularly fickle and can only obtain adrenaline from risky or new activities. Gambling, looking for new romances and drinking are what these men seem to thrive on. In more than a dozen instances, the male characters are involved in gambling and it is specifically mentioned. Gambling and extramarital romancing are normally associated with the males who are also involved in violence, cruelty and other dishonest schemes. The private men's clubs are also

where gossiping takes place and question of honor come up. It is a dangerous place where macabre plans are hatched and men seem to turn into worse versions of themselves. There were also brothels that “served an important function in the social life of the community” [Ruiz, 2001, p. 110].

Conclusions

Ajdukiewicz professes a “cult of intellect as opposed to emotion” [cit. in Woleński, n.d., 8] which would not embrace a baroque world imbibed in frenzy, excesses, superstition, and a whole series of passions that became an aesthetic form for life and art. The baroque art of life based on appearances, public opinion and a bereft, devalued, chivalry system that was outdated and highly symbolic goes against rational thinking in which the world should be a place that lends itself to a literal interpretation. Ajdukiewicz would find the Baroque world to be a very dangerous world indeed:

Rationalism claims that one shall be entitled to propagate one’s beliefs and demand that they be generally acknowledged if a belief can be precisely verbalized and if anyone can (at least in principle) verify its truth or falsity. What is at stake is first, protection of societies against being dominated by unintelligible platitude which can still have strong emotional repercussions and thereby affect the behavior of individuals and whole social groups, and second, prevention of uncritical acceptance of ideas propagated by their supporters with the full force of deep belief but unverifiable by others and thus at least potentially false. Thus, what is at stake is protection of society against nonsense and deceit [cit. in Woleński, n.d., 8].

Baroque society was mired in a world that was a mirage. Ajdukiewicz wrote of protecting society through a sort of adherence to anti-irrationalism. Spain paid a high price for their Baroque exuberance: modernity.

Counter-Reformation Spain was intellectually isolated in many ways from the full instauration of the history of modern Europe. Everyday life was stilled in strange practices and reflected in some works of fiction. Ma-

ria de Zayas's *Tales of Disillusion* have long perplexed readers because of the extreme violence displayed, the chaotic social practices portrayed and the supernatural and magical belief system embraced by the general population. Irrational thought seems to have permeated all areas of life. A deprived, barely hanging on, nobility class that makes itself heard above the rest and a population that lives its life by the dictates of popular opinion, all coincide to forge a society that many have described as bizarre. All social threads are frayed and the sovereignty can hardly keep control. The female subject is the symbolic *other* throttled by an illogical hegemonic thought process. Zayas has documented the demise of the *other* and the ascent of the baroque monster marked by irrationalism.

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