NOT ESTABLISHING LIMITS: THE WRITING OF ISAAC CHOCRON

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It is rewarding to note recurrent themes or ideas in the works of Isaac Chocrón, but equally challenging to look at techniques used to reflect those ideas or themes. This paper attempts to examine how Chocrón uses situations and structural techniques to convey one particular idea or theme found in his plays and novels. That idea or theme is one of "not establishing limits."

Not establishing limits may be viewed as a philosophical attitude closely related to choice and to options. Certain circumstances or situations open up avenues and create options which lead to the opportunity to make choices. Indeed, freedom to make that choice requires those options. Limits placed on protagonists that would detract from or prevent the exercise of choice are viewed negatively. Circumstances and situations thus present us with choices or with restrictions. For Chocrón, choice is valued, restrictions and limits are not. He supports a literary and theatrical process that offers choice, not only to the protagonists, but to the reader or the audience as well. There is, however, a qualifier. That choice should be a responsible one.

> No creo en un proceso literario o teatral, si no conduce a una elección responsable por parte del lector o del espectador. (*Espejo*, p. 56)

How does Chocrón go about offering "elección responsable"? What techniques are used and situations crafted to make us aware of this factor? The first and perhaps the most obvious is the open ended final scene in which we as an audience are not sure of the outcome.

THE OPEN ENDED FINAL SCENE

Beginning with his first play, *Mónica y el florentino* (Caracas, 1959) and in other works to follow, there is an open ended final scene. Mónica may or may not stay in Florence, may or may not marry her "florentino," may or may not go back to Switzerland with her mother. It is open ended. We can guess, we can hope, we can even choose, but we can not know for certain.

This open ended ending confronts us again in *OK*. It now becomes clear that it is a deliberate technique used to stress the importance of choice or "elección responsable." Miyó Vestrini makes this sagacious observation in a conversation with Chocrón.

> Y es cierto que en su obras, siempre hay una posibilidad de elección. En *OK* por ejemplo, las posiblidades son varias. ¿Supo el muchacho que lo habían vendido? ¿No lo supo? ¿Se quedó con el cheque? ¿No se fue? ¿Se marchó con ella y abandonó la mujer rica? (*Espejo*, p. 56)

In *El quinto infierno*, Betsy fumbles with a box of keys, "llaves que nunca hallaron cerradura," (*El quinto*, p. 73). She turns to her dead brother's crystal wall for answers, but does not get them. We don't know what decisions she will make, but there are many difficult options and, as Trudy tells her, "Escoger siempre es difícil." (Ibid, p. 127) Betsy has already rejected Trudy's "moral lesbiana," (Ibid, p. 73) but she could remain in their new home or she could return to Venezuela. We never know what she will ultimately do, but we know that she will have to make a choice.

In the prologue to *El quinto infierno*, (1961), Lorenzo Batallán may have misinterpreted what Chocrón was doing with choice and with open ended final scenes. Batallán saw the ending as hopeless, (la caja de Pandora ha sido saqueada y en su fondo, no se esconde ni siquiera la esperanza) and Chocrón as a dramatist who abandons his protagonist (cierra las puertas a sus personajes, y los abandona a la duda...) (*El quinto*, prólogo, p. 73). Actually, Chocrón presents Betsy with choices and hopes that she (and the spectator) will make the "elección responsable" that is such a necessary part of this dramatist's "proceso literario o teatral." Chocrón likes to open doors, not close them as Batallán implies (cierra las puertas a sus personajes) and Chocrón does not abandon his protagonists as Batallán says (los abandona a la duda). Chocrón offers them dilemmas and difficult choices instead.

If Chocrón uses the open ended final scene to offer options and to require choices, how does he deal with restrictions or limits on those choices? What techniques and what circumstances seem to thwart individuals and prevent the necessary "elección responsable"? In his discussion of *OK* with Miyó Vestrini, Chocrón gives us some clues.

> — Si yo determinara en *OK* quien se queda, quien se marcha, eso sería como un sermón. Y a mí no me interesan los sermones. Tanto en mi teatro, como en mis novelas, lo importante no es dar respuestas, sino hacer preguntas. (*Espejo*, p. 56)

Significant here is the phrase, "lo importante no es dar respuestas." The reverse of choice is to determine outcomes for others, to make choices for them, to preach (a mí no me interesan los sermones) and to give answers. A character who preaches or who attempts to make choices for others is a character with whom Chocrón has little sympathy.

SERMONEAR Y DAR RESPUESTAS

Unsympathetic characters are not difficult to find in Chocrón's works, now will it escape notice that many of them are preaching and telling others what to do. Herr Hahn (Mr. Cock in German) is a character who is always telling Mónica and others what to do or not do, and why: "¿Puedes decirme hasta cuando piensas continuar todo esto? O contestas las llamadas de tu casa o, mejor aún, llamas y defines la situación." (*Mónica*, p. 27) In *Mónica y el florentino* Hahn is not a sympathetic character. He is arrogant, self-centered, acts superior (A ustedes los del Nuevo Mundo les encanta mi tierra...) (Ibid, p. 24) and ethnocentric about Switzerland (Nuestro gobierno demuestra ese "saber vivir". No funcionaría en muchas otras partes. En Italia, por ejemplo...) (Ibid, p. 24).

Hahn knows all the answers and he takes it upon himself to advise everyone else as well. His life is always played by the rules (En mi país, todo hombre que se juzgue decente debe casarse) (Ibid, p. 46) His engagement was a loveless one of duty and social expectations: "Me fue recomendada como joven de buena familia, de costumbres sanas y honestos sentimientos. Nunca decidimos ser novios." (Ibid, p. 46) Hahn is after Mónica, but will settle for Lucia, the maid, although he is still engaged to his Swiss "joven de buena familia" who writes to him dutifully three times a week. He is the cock of the walk who feels superior and tells everyone else what to do!

The best representative of the idea of limiting choice by giving answers and by preaching is Reverend Lamb in *El quinto infierno*. He is a preacher, and as such is expected to "sermonear." We know from the beginning that Chocrón is creating another situation and another character for us to dislike. The minister has all the answers and is actually a Hahn (Cock) in sheep's clothing (Lamb). He is after the widow Angela and her money, and quick to tell her and others what to do. He feels that he has a right and a duty to give answers, whether asked for or not. When he learns that Betsy will come to visit "his" widow, he coaches her on what to say so that the visit will not be prolonged: "bien, no perdamos tiempo; ¿Cómo le dirás?" Angela does what she is told: "Como me aconsejaste.

Dejaré que llegue, que pasen unos días y que me diga si vino a quedarse o a visitarnos." (*El quinto*, p. 81).

The Reverend Lamb and Miss Betsy are at opposite ends of the continuum of setting limits and making choices. Betsy asks questions (offers choice) and Lamb answers them (limits choice). Betsy does not want answers or solutions. She wants people in New Jersey to feel the need to ask questions and she will not be limited by their reluctance to ask the "whys" she feels are important.

> ...No para concluir ofreciendo una nítida respuesta o solución diagramada, sino para acentuar la necesidad de preguntar ¿por qué? Es verdad que aún sabiendo que aquí reinan las limitactiones, que se distingue a la especialización, no me limité... (*El quinto*, p. 108)

Reverend Lamb not only wants limits but believes it is only human to set limits and make decisions for others (Es humano querer trazar caminos a los demás) (*El quinto*, p. 111). Furthermore, as a minister he feels not only that he should do this, but is arrogant enough to believe that he is seldom wrong: "Siendo pastor, me siento guía, y me inclino a creer que poco me equivoco." (*El quinto*, p. 111).

If, like Hahn, Reverend Lamb has all the answers, Betsy by asking questions requires others to confront options and alternatives. Individuals, in this case North Americans, do not want to be made aware of options or to even ask the questions that lead ultimately to making responsible choices. They want the answers: "aquí no están interesados en quien hace preguntas sino en quien da respuestas." (*El quinto*, p. 108)

TRIANGLES OF CHOICE

Here we find another interesting technique which reflects both not setting limits and requiring choice. Chocrón will often present us with triangular relationships. It is a technique without the usual melodramatic love triangle, although the triangle does deal with love and often somewhat scandalous relationships. In *OK* there are two older women and a man (Angela, Mina and Franco). A choice is required. In *La máxima felicidad*, there are two men, Pablo and Leo, and a pregnant woman, Perla. A choice is required. In *El quinto infierno*, Betsy, Daniel and Diana form the triangle. In *Pájaro de mar por tierra*, the "arreglo" or arrangement is for Frank and Micky to remain lovers by forming a threesome when Micky marries Dr. Tina Miller. (*Pájaro*, p. 116). Triangle relationships are often combined with the open ended ending to underscore lack of limits and the need for choice. We begin to see that this "elección responsable" is a hallmark of Chocrón's style and more than likely also his attitude toward life. He enjoys leaving us up in the air, making our own choices about his works, coming to our own conclusions.

— Siempre me preguntan, y a veces me reclaman por qué mis obras terminan cómo terminan. No hay solución. ¿Y por qué va a haber una solución? Ese señor pagó su entrada, pues ¡que busque él su solución! Pueden haber varias, y a él le va a gustar decidirse por una de ellas. Cada quien, de acuerdo a sus propias circunstancias, puede crearse su obra. Yo no estoy enseñando catecismo. (*Espejo*, p. 146)

DEATH AS A NEW BEGINNING

Many will have recognized death as a recurring theme in Chocrón, but it is also a technique to offer options to others. Death leads to situations and circumstances making choice imperative. Death is an enabler.

It would be easy to say that the terrible earthquake of 1967 and the lives that it claimed made Chocrón more keenly aware of the impact that death can have on the living. It probably did make him more keenly aware and *Rómpase en caso de incendio* focuses on that earthquake. We watch Daniel trying to come to terms with the tragic death of his entire family as he relentlessly travels from Venezuela, to Spain to North Africa, and then from hotel to hotel in search of himself and a new beginning. But it is a new beginning that he finds. It is death used as an enabler of that new beginning which is intriguing. The death of one person, known or even unknown to us, serves as a stimulus to life, to feeling alive and to living more fully. Death is used by Chocrón to offer options to the living and to make life more precious.

> ¿Sabes lo que sentí, Chocrón? Ante esa muerte me sentí lleno de vida. La muerte lo hace a uno valorar la vida, hincharse de ganas de vivir.
>
> (*Rómpase*, p. 341)

After the earthquake in Daniel's life, which obviously mirrors much of what happened in Chocrón's, the protagonist makes this revealing statement: 'Cataplún' empezó todo para mí." (*Rómpase*, p. 268) It didn't all end, it began. Death was also to bring about a new beginning to be valued and to be constructively used in Chocrón's own personal experience. Fiction and real life converge in this assessment of death.

> Fíjate que curioso: de algo tan negativo y trágico como fueron las tres muertes simultáneas de mi familia, yo he sacado algo positivo y elevado: reconocer el valor de la vida, discernir que debo primero y siempre vivir conmigo mismo en honesta armonía.
>
> (*Rómpase*, p. 329)

But it was not the earthquake of 1967 or the shattering loss of his loved ones that prompted Chocrón to use death as an enabler. It was used by him in 1959 in his first play, *Mónica y el florentino*. Hahn met Mónica because she arrived in Florence only to be greeted by a wake in the pension where she was

to stay. As he told her, "Una linda señorita no debe llegar a una casa de duelo", (*Mónica*, p. 28). There was a death, and it prompted her to move to the place where everything which happens in the play will occur. Hahn thinks Mónica is superstitious but he will take her to dinner and help her find a new place and he will move there also.

> Hahn: Por haberse topado con un muerto consideró su llegada una tragedia. La han debido oir esa tarde. ¡Qué de supersticiones! (*Mónica*, p. 28)

Death thus brings about a new beginning for Mónica. She chooses to live in a different place, where she meets her "florentino," Adán, Amanda and the rest. Without her decision to move we would have no play.

Similarly, in *El quinto infierno*, it is the death of Betsy's brother, Max, that brings her back to the U.S. after spending ten years in Venezuela. Without a death, no return, no story and no choices for Betsy to make. In *OK*, it is only because Angela's husband has passed away that she comes looking for her former seamstress and forms part of the triangle which enables the story to progress and gives us the open ended ending discussed earlier in this paper. In *Pájaro* it is Mickey's assumed death that makes everyone write the letters that make up the book. Yet in the end we do not know if he is actually dead, or off to a new beginning. It is open ended, but we have come to expect that of Chocrón.

Death in all these cases is used as an enabler, as a circumstance which opens up avenues and creates choices for the characters. In *Mónica* we don't know who died, only that a death caused her to change her residence. In *OK* we know only that it was Angela's husband who died and left her wealthy. Betsy's dead brother is more of a presence in *El quinto*, his strength and unique qualities symbolized by the crystal wall that he built in the home before his death. In *Pájaro*, Micky will be known to us from the beginning as the central character whose death is assumed, but not certain. There is, then, no consistency to the type of person whose death will be the enabler for the story to unfold.

In all the cases examined, death was not an end, but led the living into a new life with new options and new choices. Those new options often required or involved travel and a search for a new beginning (*Mónica*, *El quinto*, *Pájaro*, *Rómpase*). The protagonists embark on a search for answers, but that search requires them to ask questions, to be aware of their options and to find answers for themselves (Betsy, Mónica, Daniel). They are always hostile to others who wish to limit them, to preach to them, or give them standard answers. This "cuenta nueva" (aprovecho para que mi vida pudiese experimentar borrón y cuenta nueva) (*Rómpase*, p. 246) may involved triangular relationships which create even more choices on different levels (*OK*, *El quinto*, *La máxima*). All avenues are now open, no limits are set, and the protagonist is positioned to exercise choice.

The reader of Chocrón's plays and novels may never know how they end, never be sure of the choices made. The final scene will be open ended, leaving us to ponder the outcome and to weigh the merits of each possible option. We know, however, that Chocrón does not abandon us nor does he abandon his protagonists. Instead, he leaves them and us on the horns of a dilemma, free to choose, but fully aware of the weight of the "elección responsable" that is required of us all.

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