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EL GESTICULADOR: TRAGEDY OR DIDACTIC PLAY?

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In his "Primer ensayo hacia una tragedia mexicana", Rodolfo Usigli convincingly proposes that the genre of tragedy has actually been dead since (and including) Seneca, Shakespeare having given us the feeling but not the sense of real tragedy and Eugene O'Neill having produced "personajes dramáticos hasta el grado mayor que pueda lograrse en nuestro tiempo" (p. 111) without, however, writing a real tragedy (these two are the only ones who have even come close). But, he says, it may be that Mexico contains the necessary ingredients to "revivir la grandeza griega en la tragedia" (p. 125). He holds this opinion because Mexico has in its history two elements which were also present in the original tragedy: "la destrucción sin semejanza y la supervivencia sin pareja en el mundo moderno" (p. 114). The tragic hero **par excellence** of this history is Cuauhtémoc, whose story is possibly superior to even that of Oedipus, since it reflects the destruction of a group of gods, of a teogony and of a mythology by another god (p. 123). However, in this article Usigli gives no indication that he considers himself worthy of writing the first Mexican tragedy; in fact, he makes a fairly negative reference to himself when he describes Mexico as "país sin teatro, sin expresión teatral propia, pese a los geniecillos de mi especie..." (p. 125). And, in fact, the article appeared in 1950, thirteen years after *El gesticulador* was penned. But in his epilogue to the edition of the play published in 1947, he claims that indeed it had been "el primer intento serio de tragedia en el moderno teatro mexicano" (p. 241) and there are certainly elements of the play that make one think that he was attempting to produce a tragedy when he wrote it. Donald L. Shaw, in "Dramatic technique in Usigli's *El gesticulador*", observes that in writing the play Usigli appears to have pursued two goals at once, one being the above-noted declared intention of creating a tragedy, the other, which is the "predominant aspect", the expression of protest and political criticism (p. 125). In his article, Shaw analyzes to what

degree Usigli has been able to reconcile tragedy with protest, affirming that *El gesticulador* is open to criticism as a tragedy" (p. 129). His only real supporting evidence, however, about why it is not a tragedy has to do with the characterization of the villain Navarro: the latter is so stereotypically evil that the sympathies of the audience are all with César, because of which "tragic pathos is inevitably absent" (p. 129). John W. Kronik ("Usigli's *El gesticulador* and the fiction of truth") also notes in passing that if we situate the play in the tradition of the classic tragedy "it is likely a failure" (p. 6) but explains the conflicting intentions that are sensed in the play differently: "in his ventilation of the theatre's artificial fabric, Usigli causes the mediating artifice to subvert the statement it appears to be making" (p. 7).

Shaw implies that this is a didactic play which shows signs of having tried to be a tragedy and which succeeds in generating the aura of a tragedy. In a general sense, I agree with him, as I do with most of Kronik's remarks, though I will express the internal contradiction differently. But the attempt and failure of the play as a tragedy has not been examined closely, in spite of the fact that the play "demands" it by its very construction and by Usigli's having clearly expressed that his intention was to create a tragedy. My commentary will focus on the elements which I feel reflect Usigli's intention, as well as on those which hinder the play's being read as tragedy. I will mainly argue that there is no tragic hero in the play and that what the play demonstrates about "destiny" in contrary to the essence of a classic tragedy.

The first of these significant elements is the choice of the protagonist's name, César, obviously reminiscent of Julius Caesar, one of Shakespeare's great tragic heroes. Even though in his "Primer ensayo" Usigli shows that he recognizes the difference between classic and Elizabethan tragedy and declares that he intends to write the former, he apparently could not resist this bit of intertextuality, which he knew would call the audience's attention to the tragic dimensions of his play. The allusion is made explicitly when César, about to leave for the plebiscites, says to Elena: "Me recuerdas a la mujer de César... del roman" í, (p. 786)* Our César's fate is, of course, as was his namesake's, to be killed at the hands of a traitor. But if Usigli's play is to be a tragedy, the most fundamental question, the one with which we will be most concerned in this discussion, is whether or not César Rubio's characterization and trajectory resemble those of a tragic hero. We must decide if we are in fact dealing with a man who is essentially good but who brings about disaster (of the two types of Aristotelian tragedy — the one that ends happily and the one that ends in disaster — we would clearly be dealing with the second kind) through an error in judgment or a flaw in character. And does our character ever realized that he has erred?

Another element which urges us to read *El gesticulador* as a tragedy is the fact that it deals with destiny, that "destiny" is one of the main motifs. As we know, all tragedies are ultimately about destiny. In a sense, they all "say" the

same thing: the individual must be sacrificed to some great force in order for the world to continue its march. Oedipus must be brought down in order for Thebes to be delivered from the ire of the gods; the Duke of Lope's *El castigo sin venganza* must sacrifice his own happiness for the good of the world he commands, killing his own son and wife; the burning desires of García Lorca's female characters must be squelched in order for the Andalusian society described by the playwright to continue (even if such a continuation is being criticized by him). In this regard we must look at our play's passages on destiny and at what the plot itself says about destiny and decide if it is in any way keeping with what a tragedy generally says.

And then there is the issue of emotion. Usigli has clearly meant to move us to pity, not only for César but also for his son, who is condemned by the events of the play to spend a lifetime trying to promote a truth which will only lead him to the insane asylum. Here what we must decide is whether the horror we feel at César's unfortunate death or Miguel's and Elena's said fates take precedence over the delivery of a didactic message.

In order to answer the questions we have just posed and determine the genre of *El gesticulador* it will be helpful to review the differences between a tragedy and other dramatic genres. Aristotle used the term "tragedy" mainly to distinguish serious drama from comedy. As drama has developed over the centuries, however, other types of serious drama have emerged, so that "tragedy", which for most of us now means only the kind which ends in disaster, *Oedipus Rex* being our model, must be distinguished from melodrama (I think of the plays of Eugene O'Neill), "mood plays"¹ such as Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, and the didactic play, whose chief functions is to convince the audience of a point of view and try to move it to action. The most representative playwright of this last genre is, I believe, Bertolt Brecht, but there are an abundance of plays written for this purpose in modern times, some of them in a more realistic vein than Brecht's, others even more experimental (all of the plays of Enrique Buenaventura, for example, are didactic plays).

To make such generic distinctions is sometimes easy and sometimes extremely difficult. In the mood play it would appear that from an external point of view, nothing has happened: we see on stage a slice of life (sometimes in naturalism's sense of the expression, but not always), and sometimes the slice chosen is very static. No one has died, no one has lost a great love, no one gone insane. The point of these plays is not to make a grand statement about life and death, but rather to analyze the minutiae of which our everyday existence is composed or the internal lives of those who populate the quotidian sphere. This type of play is easily distinguished from the classic tragedy, and, I think, from *El gesticulador*.

A melodrama is sometimes more difficult to distinguish from a tragedy, since it does paint with large strokes, in the way of tragedy. I like the general guidelines of Robert Heilman:

In melodrama, man is seen in his strength or in his weakness; in tragedy, in his strength and his weakness at once. In melodrama, he is victorious or he is defeated; in tragedy, he experiences defeat in victory, or victory in defeat. In melodrama, man is guilty of innocent; in tragedy, his guilt and his innocence coexist (p. 90).

He remarks also that in melodrama the protagonist has an essentially undivided nature, whereas the tragic hero "is caught between different imperatives each of which has its own validity" (p. 89). But even if César Rubio does not qualify as a *bona fide* tragic hero, it will not be because his characterization is melodramatic.

Possibly the most difficult distinction is that to be made between tragedy and didactic play, since the hero of the didactic play may also be characterized by what Heilman calls "dividedness" and since thought, which we tend to associate with the didactic, and "emotion", which we know must be present in a tragedy, are not only not mutually exclusive, but almost always found together, the line to be drawn between them being very subjective. We sense that emotion should prevail over thought in a tragedy, and vice versa in a didactic play; but, again, how that balance is described in each play will always be debatable. Shaw, for example, claims that the pathos derived from the antagonism between Navarro and César is not great enough to produce a real tragedy, but that

the moment of overconfidence in his farewell and above all the ironies surrounding his interview with Navarro and the latter's triumph, which are more than sufficient to convey a sense of wasted opportunity and of the inherent malignity of things, conspire to surround César with an aura of tragic pathos (p. 133).

He would lead us to believe, then, that we have a sort of "semi-tragedy", (my term, not his), since he does not want to deny the emotional impact of the ending. I, on the other hand, feel that by ending the play with Miguel and the fan of posters, Usigli has (probably unintentionally) ended with the triumph of thought over emotion. So we are on safer grounds if we examine the type of message of the play and the trajectory of the hero; if our play does not match the pattern of classic tragedies even in the most basic of elements, and if it acts upon the audience by creating a sense of indignation at certain "correctable" social ills, then, it would seem, we are dealing with a didactic play.

In order to analyze the character of César Rubio, we must remember that we actually have three César Rubio's in the play. One, of course, is dead at the start of the play, living now only as a myth. The César Rubio apparently lived out his life very consequentially, always fighting for what he believed was right, never compromising, never fearing the consequences of his boldness. Therefore, as far as we know, he never had any difficult moral decisions to make,

never anguished over the right thing to do, did not bring on his death by any fault in his character or any tragic error, but rather died because the system could not permit a man of such caliber to exist. He was not a tragic hero, but, quite simply, a hero.

The second César Rubio is the professor who moves his family to the northern province so that he can begin his life anew. This César Rubio obviously does anguish over his decisions. At the opening of the second act, we learn from Elena that since the night César sold the false information to Oliver Boston he has been a changed person: distant, short-tempered, preoccupied. She accuses him of suffering from guilt, of contemplating flight, of being very unhappy with himself:

CESAR: Acabemos... habla claro.

ELENA: No podría yo hablar más claro que tu conciencia, César. Estás así desde que se fue Bolton... desde que cerraste el trato con él. [...] Me acusas de espiarte, de odiarte... huyes de nosotros diariamente... y en el fondo, eres tú el que te espías, despierto a todas horas; eres tú el que empieza a odiarnos... (II, pp. 751,754).

He is battling with the real decision: whether to use the money Bolton has sent him or return it and appease his conscience. Before he can make a decision, we learn that Bolton has published his findings in *The New York Times* and suddenly the politicians appear at César Rubio's door, changing the nature of the decision he must make. He now has the opportunity to actually become the hero he has falsely claimed to be. Before the end of the scene he has, of course, decided to go through with the charade, and it is this decision which ultimately leads to his death. However, this trajectory is only similar to that of a tragic hero in the most schematic of senses.

Here we should stop for a moment to scrutinize César character in the light of typical traits of a tragic hero. Let us first remember that the latter must be essentially good, in fact, probably "better" than most of us (Aristotle's observation that he is from a noble class is clearly not applicable to modern tragedy, but I think that tragedy becomes "anti-tragedy" if the hero is motivated by evil rather than by good). There are several indications that the professorial version of César Rubio is not particularly "good", though Elena insists fairly frequently that he is. In Mexico City, he was, it would appear, mediocre and unmotivated. He cannot even answer to himself the question of why he never did anything with his vast knowledge of the Revolution. In contrast with the young, eager Bolton, César has accumulated facts over the years without putting them to any good use, lost in a world of illusions (another leit motif of the play). While we feel very little sympathy for Miguel when he complains that his father was a failure (we know he is at the age in which children judge their parents mercilessly), we cannot help but notice that César does in fact seem to be more

concerned with appearances than with truth or reality. Indeed, this concern is what brings about the crucial conversation between Bolton and him: Elena has no desire to have guests at a time when they are in such upheaval, but César says: "...pensaría muy mal de Mexico si la primera casa a donde llega le cerrara sus puertas" (I, p. 733). And then when she says they don't have much food, he insists on offering some to Bolton, since appearances count more than reality: ¿Qué diría si no...?" (I, p. 735). César Rubio the professor, then, is mediocre, more concerned with appearances than truth and, it would seem, not totally scrupulous. This we learn as the play progresses: the plan behind the move to the northern province included a possible blackmail of Navarro, the murderer of the original César (And why has César Rubio the professor not denounced Navarro in all these years since the Revolution?) This man does not seem to be the material of which tragic heroes are made.

What, then, of his trajectory? Did he not die tragically because of his decision to help his country? The answer is no. The man who is shot down at the end of the play is not César Rubio the professor, but César Rubio the General, in a second life: what we have in this play is a true transformation², one character willing himself to become another. The César of Act I is only superficially the César of the first two acts, as the stage directions which describe his entrance indicate:

En estas cuantas semanas se ha operado en él una transfiguración impresionante. Las agitaciones, los excesos de control nervioso, la fiebre de la ambición, la lucha contra el miedo, han dado a su rostro una nobleza serena y a su mirada una limpidez, una seguridad casi increíble (III, p. 775).

The transformation in César has improved his character; Estrella says of him, "Es un hombre extraordinario. Sabe escuchar, callar, decir lo estrictamente preciso, y obrar con una energía y una limpieza como no había yo visto nunca" (I, p. 773). Now he is hero material; now he will risk his life in order to improve the political situation in his country. But the man who dies at the hands of the supposed *cristero* is the first César once again, a man who, as we saw before, does not hesitate, does not agonize over decisions, is not "divided" (Heilman), but simply acts according to his unifaceted, brave character. César goes to the plebiscites imprudently, giving the matter very little thought. And he dies happy, a hero's death (in the eyes of his countrymen, not necessarily those of his audience), never realizing the ironic consequences of his actions: thanks to his false assumption of the General's personality and his intransigence in dealing with Navarro, the latter is now able to appropriate the platform of the former and guarantee his own success.

There is no *anagnorisis* for César Rubio. Aristotle did not claim that all tragedies had a moment of recognition, but he did feel that the ones that did were the best ones, especially when the recognition or discovery had to do with the

character's identity. In order for our hero to be truly tragic, he would have had to recognize before dying that it is impossible to assume the personality and identity of another man, something that Elena has been trying to tell him all along. He would have seen his error, recognized that he is, after all, only César Rubio the professor and that in trying to be the General has made a terrible mistake. Perhaps Usigli felt that because we, the audience, are aware of the professor's tragic error, it is not necessary for the character himself to have a "toma de conciencia". But without it, in this play, at least, what happens is that the plot tells us something totally contrary to the essence of tragedy. Tragedy normally tells us that the attempt to escape destiny will only lead to an ironic fulfillment of whatever that destiny was. And it is always an individual destiny which can neither be eluded nor exchanged for that of another man. In our play even though Elena seems to speak for the playwright in passages such as the following which indicate that César is "wrong", he is ultimately "right": he realizes his lifelong dream of becoming someone recognized and revered by all; he takes on the identity of the deceased General to the point where a portrait painted of him looks more like the first César than the professorial one.

CESAR: [El General y yo] teníamos más o menos la misma edad.

ELENA: Pero no el mismo destino. Eso no te perentenece. (II, p. 752)

* * *

CESAR: Siempre me pregunté antes por qué el destino me había excluído de su juego, por qué nunca me utilizaba para nada. Era como no existir. Ahora lo hace. No puedo quejarme. Estoy viviendo como había soñado siempre. A veces tengo que verme en el espejo para creerlo.

ELENA: No es el destino, César, sino tú, tus ambiciones. ¿Para qué quieres el poder? (III, p. 787).

Contrary to what tragedy has told us throughout the centuries, then, and contrary to what is said about destiny in this play, the action shows that one man can in fact assume the destiny of another, though it is with mixed results: very favorable for César, Julia (the honors to be bestowed upon the dead César will be her "beauty"), and Navarro; unfavorable for Elena, Miguel and Mexico.

César is not a tragic hero. But sometimes the hero of a tragedy is not the character who dies, but, rather, the one who must live with the knowledge of the significance of the tragedy (in *Bodas de sangre*, for example, the Mother and the Novia are tragic heroines, though they will live, while the Novio, who dies, is merely a tragic victim). Shaw suggests that "Elena's situation, torn as she is between honesty and loyalty, is genuinely tragic" (p. 133); but a tragic situation does not automatically produce a tragic character and since Elena never makes

any decision at all in the play, never takes any action, she cannot seriously be considered such. The candidate for this type of heroicity in our play would be Miguel, since he maintains a firm position throughout the play and makes a difficult decision at the very end, refusing to participate in the continued propagation of the César Rubio myth. But, I feel sure, there are very few readers/spectators of *El gesticulador* who feel any sympathies or admiration for Miguel. He is even less a character forged from tragic material than his father: he complains unpleasantly in every scene in which he appears; he is described as cowardly by his sister, lazy by his father, unloving by his mother; and he is so obsessed with his search for the truth that he unwittingly contributes to the death of his own father (without, of course, ever assuming responsibility for it, since his obsession is with his father's flaws, not his own). I believe we can reject him quickly as a tragic hero, but in thinking about him, the subject of the search for truth has come up.

Donald Shaw writes that the basic theme of the play is the conflict between truth and falsity and that "the only definite pronouncement is that untruth always triumphs in Mexico (p. 133). The latter is certainly true and if we follow the motifs throughout the play, we discover that indeed the most predominant motif is that of "la verdad". But with regard to truth, I sense an ambivalence in Usigli: while he wants desperately to arouse indignation in his countrymen over the misrepresentation of truth, the falseness, demagoguery and corruption which permeate the culture from the most powerful politician to the humbles student, he also sense that truth is relative and the search for it can lead to an unhealthy, self-righteous obsessiveness such as Miguel's (Julia says to her brother, and we can only agree with her, even though she tends to be on the side of non-truth in the play, so happy is she to have her father become famous: "... tu afán de tocar la verdad no es más que una cosa enfermiza, una pasión de cobarde. La verdad está dentro, no fuera de uno" (í, p. 791). So, while Usigli would like to see everyone take up the truth as a new cause and shows us how César attempt to found truth on a lie is doomed from the onset, he also suggests that one man's truth may not be every man's truth and that much of the demagoguery he criticizes is due to an attempt to ignore the diversity of "truth". But in depositing the second part of this message in Miguel, for whom we feel little sympathy or identification, he confuses us and contradicts himself. Kronik characterizes Miguel as "too fixed in his convictions to acknowledge the destructive powers of truth, to say nothing of its inaccessibility" (p. 13) and expresses Usigli's contradiction nicely:

In his epilogue to *El gesticulador* and in his pronouncements elsewhere, he unwaveringly condemns the lie that the Mexican lives in every phase of his personal and national existence. Yet in the play, the positions that emerge are not so clear-cut. César's lie has a positive moral dimension, while Miguel's passion for truth is touched by quixotism and inflexibility (p. 14)

El gesticulador has been the object of frequent commentary and criticism over the years, its detractors generally making it clear that in spite of its flaws or deficiencies, it is one of the pillars of contemporary Latin American drama. I agree. Shaw begins his article saying "the play's technique represents a compromise between conflicting aims" (p. 125) and ends by calling it "technically accomplished and elegantly structured" (p. 133). Kronik says "as a directly political drama, the piece can be considered defective or unconvincing for its series of contrivances" but adds immediately that "...contrivance is precisely the stuff of this play, which moves in that richer terrain where the circumstantial subject matter is transcended in its very enactment" (p. 5). For me, though Usigli did not succeed in his attempt to write a tragedy, he has given us a rich play in which subplots blend nicely with the main plot, in which each character gives the spectator something to think about, in which universal problems (the generational gap, the problem of self-worth, the relationship of reality to illusion) are combined masterfully with problems specifically relating to Mexico. It is a play which "works", but which confuses, since the playwright himself was of two minds as he created it. It is my contention that a tragedy cannot be a message play and I sense that if a play which resembles a tragedy does not actually turn out to be one, what it will be is a message play. But this will have to be studied elsewhere, taking into account a considerably larger corpus of works. Also still up in the air: so what was the first Mexican tragedy?

NOTES

* All citations from *El gesticulador* are taken from the FCE edition.

1 There is no universally accepted term for this type of play; besides "mood play", I have also heard "psychological play", "pièce bien faite", or in Spanish, simply "pieza".

2 Kronik also recognizes that there is a genuine transformation in César. He uses the terms "metamorphosis" (p. 9) and "conversion" (p. 10) and sees the play as a play-within-a-play, César writing a script for himself as the General which will include his own death (p. 12).

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