

## A Note on the Plays of Carlos Díaz Dufoo, Hijo

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In a review of the collected works of Carlos Díaz Dufoo, hijo, *Epigramas y otros escritos*, published by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (México, 1967), the reviewer aptly commented on the lack of critical attention given to the writer: "Un escritor sólo recordado por sus contemporáneos y amigos (Torri Icaza, Reyes, Martínez del Río), vuelve a hacerse presente con todo su rigor y asombrosa lucidez (¿cómo podemos tener en olvido a algunos de nuestros mejores? . . .)"<sup>1</sup>

While Carlos Díaz Dufoo (1861-1941), co-founder of the famed *Revista Azul*, is commonly cited in histories of Spanish American literature, references to his son are scant indeed. Díaz Dufoo, hijo was born in Mexico City in 1888 and died by his own hand in the same city in 1932. Although he graduated with a law degree from the Universidad Nacional, he was predominantly interested in philosophy throughout his professional life. Díaz Dufoo taught the subject at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria and the Facultad de Derecho of the Universidad Nacional. His interest in philosophy and in particular the works of Friedrich Nietzsche came to fruition with the publication of a collection of pessimistic aphorisms, *Epigramas* (Paris, 1927). This collage of maxims, which established his reputation as an essayist, has received the most scholarly attention to date.<sup>2</sup>

The object of this essay, however, is the study of his previously neglected dramas, *Temis municipal* and *El barco*, which appeared in the controversial Mexican literary journal, *Contemporáneos* (1928-31).<sup>3</sup> Díaz Dufoo's plays merit study not only for their intrinsic value as works of art but as documents in the history of the Mexican theatre. Much like the plays presented by the members of the Teatro de Ulises and the Teatro Orientación, they attest to a conscious desire among Mexican dramatists to create a

theatre of more universal scope.<sup>4</sup> In both pieces Díaz Dufoo veers radically from the traditional socio-political orientation of the Mexican theatre by presenting works of broad philosophic appeal. Dramas of pure ideas, they synthesize the abstruse preoccupations of the more familiar *Epigramas*. *Temis municipal* and *El barco* are particularly important, however, since they treat a fundamental theme in Mexican letters of the thirties: the struggle of modern man against the suppressive force of mass culture.

Díaz Dufoo's earliest attempt at dramatic writing, *Temis municipal*, a one-act allegory, is strikingly similar to Francisco Monterde's *Proteo, fábula en un acto*.<sup>5</sup> Both dramas are designated with the names of mythological deities and are somewhat similar in technique.<sup>6</sup> While Monterde specifically states that *Proteo* takes place in "cualquier época," the stage directions in *Temis municipal* omit any reference to time or place. Set against a timeless backdrop, *Temis municipal* probes the eternal enigmas of life: the relativity of truth and justice, the nature of reality, and the anguish of the questioning mind. Removed from temporal and social factors, this play is reminiscent of the classic universality of the Greek theatre. The interplay of its characters, who are personifications of abstract qualities, is an attempt to shed light on the complex nature of interpersonal relationships.

The allegory is structured around a courtroom drama in which the human heart (the symbol of free will) is censured by representatives of organized society. It begins when the counsel for the defense orders: "Pido que vengan los 15 testigos de descargo que habían de aclarar, de manera elocuente, la conducta del acusado. El corazón humano" (p. 99). The play, which lacks the conventional plot element, consists of a series of subtle metaphysical debates developed from a constantly changing perspective of reality.

The conflict between individual values and social ethics, a recurrent theme in the works of Nietzsche, is one of the play's major themes.<sup>7</sup> The author sets the tone of the drama by declaring, through an ironic analogy, that rules of social conduct have veritably imprisoned the mind. Thus the accused declares: "Por lo demás, una cárcel no difiere de un colegio de abogados sino por la mayor libertad interna que hay en la primera: las cadenas de la respetabilidad son más duras que las violencias de la asociación forzada. Una cárcel abrigaría el mejor trato humano si sus miembros creyeran un poco menos en la santidad de la virtud que los condena, si no se sintieran obligados a hacer cosas malas y si no confundieran lo malo con lo sucio" (p. 100).

The essence of reality, he continues, is not to be found in external behavior patterns but in the recesses of the mind: "Un testigo son dos ojos mal clavados en un hecho. Y un hecho es el aspecto deformado de una realidad. Nuestra vida está más allá de nuestros hechos. En la consciencia" (p. 102).

Continuing to deplore the leveling force of mass society, Díaz Dufoo affirms that the ideal of justice has been debased and made the servant of democracy. The idea, centered around the Kantian Immanency-Transcendence dialectic, is developed through delicate dramatic counterpoint:

El Juez.—La justicia, acusado, de atributo divino ha venido a ser atributo democrático. Es verdad que no podrían establecerse diferencias entre esos dos modos políticos de una noción insegura, pero una distinción vale siempre como una distinción.

El Fiscal, *magistralmente*.—La justicia inmanente. . .

El Reo, *con furia*.—La justicia es siempre trascendente.

Un Jurado, *a los otros jurados*.—¿Inmanente? ¿Trascendente? ¿Qué son estas cosas y qué relación tienen con un delito?

El Reo.—Que se calle ese imbécil. Los jurados no vienen a pensar, sino a votar.

(*Movimiento de indignación de jurados y de público.*)

El Fiscal.—¡Hablar así de una forma de la consciencia colectiva!

El Reo, *con desprecio*.—El *consensus gentium*. . . (p. 103).

The passage is particularly important since it exemplifies a central theme in the writings of the playwright's contemporaries. Díaz Dufoo's aristocratic distrust of democracy and contemporary mass society, a basic tenet in the writings of José Ortega y Gasset, had been dealt with extensively by such Mexican thinkers as Bernardo Gastélum, Samuel Ramos, José Romano Muñoz, and Enrique Munguía, Jr.<sup>8</sup> These writers expressed more explicitly in their essays what Díaz Dufoo alluded to in his dramas: the decadence of modern society is due to the absence of rule by the intellectual elite.<sup>9</sup>

In his presentation of the accused's poignant defense of the spiritual realm of man's existence, the author shifts from the plane of subtle philosophical abstraction to dramatic pathos. Thus the *reo* declares: "Yo defendiendo mi alma, mi alma insignificante, mi alma inefable, mi jirón de razón de ser. Eso es grandemente anormal, substancialmente de excepción. No es cosa de cantidad, sino de calidad. Yo no soy mis padres, yo no soy mi especie, yo no soy todo mi mismo. Lo normal es abstracto, es negativo, como la antisepsia y los cultos públicos" (p. 109).

The plea against the loss of man's self-identity is poetically reiterated as the drama reaches its climax: "Y luego, que, en lugar de un público gozoso, juez justo de la farsa, decidan de ella curiales opacos y legos perdidos en incolora bruma. Misterio municipal, mundo municipal, cosmogonía municipal, dios municipal" (p. 110).

Behind the drama's allegorical façade there is the author's ever-present realization of the tragic sense of existence. A bitter disillusionment with twentieth-century life is presented in the protagonist's closing remarks: "Podría gritar, lamentablemente, al advertir, detrás de esta mascarada de

justicia, fuera del alcance de sus intérpretes, los dolores reales; el hambre, la suciedad, la miseria definitiva, el comercio con la violencia

Aun podría llorar, llorar sumisamente, todas las lágrimas. Llorar las lágrimas eternas de Prometeo, llorar las lágrimas sin consuelo de Edipo y las de Tristán, llorar las lágrimas ineficaces de Lanzarote, llorar las lágrimas esenciales y humildes, llorar 'la lágrima no llorada' (p. 112).

To date *Temis municipal* has been interpreted as a satire on the Mexican judicial system.<sup>10</sup> An analysis of the drama reveals that, far more than a simple attack on Mexican bureaucracy, it is a complex commentary upon society. Rather than a mockery of Mexican legal procedures, the work might be better interpreted as an indictment of twentieth-century civilization where the tyrannical power of mass uniformity has weakened individuality. This theme is illustrated in the final lines of the play. Here the accused, who has unflinchingly denied the right of the jurors to pass judgment on him, symbolically acquiesces to the masses:

El Juez, *con gran suavidad, dentro de una corriente de sutil simpatía*.—Señor filósofo, ¿va usted a poner su inefable secreto en nuestras manos filisteas?

El Reo, *con sobresalto, desagrado y perfecta comprensión*.—Señor juez, haga usted examinar a los testigos (p. 113).

The second play by Díaz Dufoo, *El barco*,<sup>11</sup> reflects a growing tone of existentialist despair. In a short prologue, the author explains his thesis: "Esta farsa pasa en el mar, en el 'café-terrace' de un trasatlántico moderno. Los personajes salen a contar su flaqueza. Vuelven luego a la nada—destino del fantasma—en el crepúsculo de la tarde" (p. 117). The simple plot sardonically highlights the shallowness of human existence. When a maritime official warns a group of first class passengers that their ship is about to sink, the fated group begins to speculate on the purpose of existence.

The threat of imminent extinction serves to denude the characters of all the trappings of social acceptability. Under this impetus they reveal themselves to be as they really are—timid, second-rate minds—exemplifications of the degeneracy of modern life.<sup>12</sup> The drama ends on a note of bitter irony when the passengers are told that the announcement that their ship was to sink was an error. The curtain falls as the stupefied and abulic protagonists listen to the lustful clamor for life rising from steerage.

Structurally and thematically the play is similar to *Temis municipal*. Although somewhat longer (it is divided into five scenes) it is still essentially a drama of ideas. According to John Nomland: "Sólo las palabras tienen importancia: Son el principio y el fin de la obra."<sup>13</sup> Díaz Dufoo again uses counterpoint to highlight his philosophic tenets. The work takes the form of a series of ideological debates with the characters cast as oppos-

ing sets. The technique is exemplified in the following dialogue between two extreme types: the abulic visionary and the businessman.

Hombre de Negocios.—¿Duda usted de la fuerza comercial, del genio activo que maneja la vida de los pueblos?

El Hombre Cansado.—Creo en la casualidad, creo en el origen providencial y caprichoso de las empresas humanas, creo en la inercia que las hace crecer y en la sinrazón que las hace morir.

El Hombre de Negocios.—Caretta de la debilidad.

El Hombre Cansado.—No lo es. Soy un hombre débil que ama la debilidad. De ella proceden las más finas virtudes, las que ustedes no comprenden (p. 120).

The thematic preoccupations presented in *Temis municipal* are developed more explicitly in *El barco*. The pessimistic tone of the former becomes more graphic as the author points to the vapidness of specific social institutions. The ideal of marriage, for example, is berated:

El Viejo Esposo.—¿Y del matrimonio?

El Filósofo.—Que es imposible unidad de almas y perpetuo conflicto, en el que una persona perfecta pide que se someta a su voluntad irrefragable otra persona perfecta, de irrefragable voluntad.

La Vieja Esposa.—¡Bufón!

El Viejo Esposo, *al filósofo*.—El matrimonio es el irreparable absurdo que se repite siempre (p. 119).

The characters move in a shadowy world of depression, verging on total nihilism. A courtesan, pointing to a poet's wife, reminds the poet that happiness is ineffable: "¿Qué busca? El olvido, la muerte, la nada. Su alma fue más allá de su vida y su vida más allá de su muerte. Es menos que una sombra. El pasado se enlaza al futuro en un presente brumoso, triste como vejez sin recuerdos" (p. 122).

The world of Díaz Dufoo is one in which religious values have ceased to have meaning: "Dios es una rectificación trascendente de nuestra mala conducta" (p. 143). Self-destruction for many has become the only answer. A courtesan pleads: "No tengo nada, no soy nada. Déjeme usted morir a su lado" (p. 144). Related to his pessimistic world view is the author's basic distrust of the forces of modern civilization. Thus the official who announces the impending tragedy declares: "La técnica y la vida, que unidas forzosamente forman ese monstruo inestable que se llama la civilización" (p. 123). His disdain for the dehumanizing forces of modern technology is at times presented through bitter caricature:

La Mujer Joven, *irónicamente*.—¿La técnica conduce a la certeza absoluta?

El Oficial, *misericiosamente*.—Señorita, la técnica es el mundo exacto, insensibilizado, sereno; el mundo purificado por las matemáticas, reducido a líneas, ecuaciones, funciones, relaciones rigurosas; el mundo que nada tiene que ver con la certeza porque no se puede negar (pp. 124-125).

The concluding lines of the play again suggest similarities between Nietzsche and Díaz Dufoo. The latter's postulate that all creative forces in life spring from the nadir of society is presented with great explicitness:<sup>14</sup>

Los Pasajeros de Tercera Clase.—Viva nuestra vida de cieno, de podredumbres, de fecundidad temeraria, de amargura sin tasa, de hambre sin remedio y de fealdad sin cura. Viva esta buena mala vida de amados horrores y sordidez amada. Viva la grosería magnífica, la miseria gloriosa, la estupidez perseverante, la oscura claridad.

El Filósofo, *en el grado mayor de exaltación, gesticulando en un marco de cielo rojo*.—Es cierto, cierto, inexorablemente cierto, cierto como nada lo fuera. Todo viene de abajo. Nada es puro. Nada deja perfume.

Y de este lodo, de este caos pestilente, de esta supuración obscena, de esta nada fecunda vienen el ser, la belleza, la inteligencia. La transmutación es inexplicable, pero también odiosa, bueno sólo para los fieles de un dios anodino, abstracto, opaco, plebeyo—pintura desvanecida del 'hombre pequeño', del hombre que 'vuelve siempre.' (*Después de una pausa.*) Y, en último término, ¿por qué y para qué la facultad crítica? (pp. 149-150).

Although the plays by Díaz Dufoo cannot be properly considered as typical works of the early experimental theater groups, they are tangentially related to them.<sup>15</sup> While his works were neither characterized by the vanguard propensity for psychological introspection, so typical of the dramas of Celestino Gorostiza and Xavier Villaurrutia, nor the use of creative scenographic elements, they synthesize one of the salient themes of the post World War I literary generation—the fear of the annihilation of man's spiritual values by the advancing forces of technology. Both *Temis municipal* and *El barco* illustrate with particular clarity a major philosophic tenet in twentieth-century Latin American literature.

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## Notes

1. Unsigned review, *Diálogos*, IV (January-February 1968), 38. In a similar review Rubén Marín ("Libros en los ojos," *Abside*, XXXII, October 1968, 360) commented: "He aquí otro buen libro de los que con gusto y respeto exhumamos el Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes. Importante libro a pesar de todo. Digo a pesar de todo porque es libro que agarra la lengua como la agarra la hiel."
2. See José Luis Martínez, *El ensayo mexicano moderno*, I (México, 1958), 240, and Julio Torri, *Tres libros: Ensayos y poemas, De fusilamientos, Prosas dispersos* (México, 1964), pp. 158-161. The essays are reproduced in *Epigramas y otros escritos* (México, 1967), pp. 7-14.
3. *Temis municipal* appeared in *Contemporáneos*, IX (March 1931), 193-205 and *El barco* in XI (July-August 1931), 1-30. All references will be made to the versions in *Epigramas y otros escritos* with page numbers in parentheses in the text.
4. For a discussion of these groups see, Frank N. Dauster, *Historia del teatro hispanoamericano siglos XIX y XX* (México, 1966), pp. 53-59 and Antonio Magaña Esquivel, *Imagen del teatro mexicano* (México, 1940), pp. 83-108.
5. Dauster (*Historia del teatro*, p. 53) notes that *Proteo* was the first Mexican play to be staged by a Mexican experimental theatrical group.
6. For a discussion of the use of classic myth by Monterde and his contemporaries see Margaret Sayers Peden, "Greek Myth in Contemporary Mexican Theater," *Modern Drama*, XII (December 1969), 221-230.
7. The majority of critics who have commented on Díaz Dufoo, hijo (See Rubén Marín, p. 360, and Julio Torri, p. 8) allude to the influence of Nietzsche. Although it is not possible within the limits of this essay to substantiate direct influence, similarities between the writers have been indicated.
8. Samuel Ramos referred to the influence of Ortega on this generation of writers in *Historia de la filosofía en México* (México, 1943), p. 149: "Una generación intelectual que comenzó a actuar públicamente entre 1925 y 1930 se sentía inconforme con el romanticismo filosófico de Caso y Vasconcelos. . . . En esta perplejidad, empiezan a llegar a México los libros de José Ortega y Gasset, y en el primero de ellos, las *Meditaciones del Quijote*, encuentra la solución al conflicto en la doctrina de *razón vital*." For further commentary on the reception of Ortega's ideas in Mexico see Patrick Romanell, *Making of the Mexican Mind* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1952), pp. 141-185; Anibal Sánchez Reulet, *La filosofía latinoamericana contemporánea* (México, 1949), pp. 14-15; and Jaime Torres Bodet, *Contemporáneos, notas de crítica* (México, 1928), p. 124.
9. See Bernardo Gastélum, "Ciencia del caballero," *Contemporáneos*, IV (June 1929), 201-214; Samuel Ramos, "La cultura criolla," *Contemporáneos* XI (July-August 1931), 61-82; José Romano Muñoz, "La doble solución al problema del valor de la vida," *Contemporáneos*, III (March 1929), 206-213; and Enrique Munguía, Jr., "Ética y maquinismo," *Contemporáneos*, VIII (September-October 1930), 175-180.
10. For example Willis Knapp Jones (*Behind Spanish American Footlights*, Austin, 1966, p. 499) wrote: "His son, Carlos Díaz Dufoo Jr. (1888-1932) tried to enter the field with a farce, *El barco* (1931), set aboard a transatlantic liner, and *Temis municipal* (1931), ridiculing Mexican legal procedure, but he lacked his father's craftsmanship."
11. Magaña Esquivel (*Imagen del teatro*, p. 93) notes that the play was presented by the Teatro Orientación, during its last season in 1934. Francisco Monterde (*Bibliografía del teatro en México*, México, 1934, p. 125) made record of a separate edition: "Existe edición aparte de 100 ejemplares con dos dibujos de Carlos Obregón Santacilia. México, Imp. Mundial. 1931."
12. George Allen Morgan (*What Nietzsche Means*, New York, 1941, p. 77) illustrates Nietzsche's theory on the decadence of modern society with the following citation from the author: "Everywhere paralysis, fatigue, torpor or enmity and chaos: both more and more evident the more one ascends to higher forms of organization. The whole no longer lives at all. . . ."
13. John B. Nomland, *Teatro mexicano contemporáneo, 1900-1950* (México, 1967), p. 257.
14. Nietzsche had written (Morgan, p. 78): "A species arises, a type becomes firm and strong in the long struggle with essentially identical unfavorable conditions. . . . Here that indulgence, that excess, that protection under which variation is encouraged, are absent: The species needs itself as species, as something that can obtain a footing and make itself stable at all, precisely by means of its severity, uniformity, simplicity of form. . . . A type with few but very strong traits . . . becomes fixed in this manner beyond the change of generations. . . ." Díaz Dufoo had expressed the idea earlier in *Epigramas* (p. 44): "Y se debe crear con lo

insignificante, con lo malo, con lo imperfecto, con la miseria; crear de la nada. El mundo se hace con amor, que es fe.”

15. Nomland (pp. 256-257) associated Díaz Dufoo, hijo with the *Teatro de Orientación* group: “El hijo de Carlos Díaz Dufoo . . . se unió a los rebeldes del *Teatro de Orientación* y allí estrenó *El barco*, que se una extraña pieza experimental.”