

## Enrique Solari Swayne and *Collacocha*

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During the past twenty five years, Peru has experienced a theatrical revival. Young dramatists such as Sebastián Salazar Bondy and Juan Ríos have developed an impressive body of new works which have enriched the national repertoire with fresh themes and novel techniques. The vigor of this theatrical revival cannot be better exemplified, however, than in the success of Enrique Solari Swayne's *Collacocha*. This drama of man's heroic struggle against the intransigence of a hostile environment won the enthusiastic approval of local audiences on its opening in Lima in 1956.<sup>1</sup> It enjoyed subsequent success in Latin America and Spain, highlighted by the first prize at the First Pan-American Theatre Festival in Mexico City in 1958, and a silver plaque at the Festival Bolivariano in Bogotá in 1959.<sup>2</sup> Recently, it has been presented by the Lima theatrical group, *Histrión*, at the International Theatre Festival in Buenos Aires in March, 1970.

Enrique Solari Swayne was born in Lima in 1915. After studying abroad in Germany (1934-1939), and in Spain (1939-40), he returned to Lima as a professor of psychology at the University of San Marcos in 1948. As a student in Munich, he demonstrated an interest in literature and began a five-act historical drama in German based on the life of the Egyptian Pharaoh Cheops. The work remained unfinished, however, and Solari Swayne showed no interest in dramatic writing for some time afterward. It was not until the debut of *Collacocha* that Solari Swayne began his career as a dramatist in Peru.<sup>3</sup>

Solari's drama of one individual's heroic efforts for progress is also the drama of a greater struggle, a reflection of a nation's battle against hostile environmental forces. The title is a combination of two Quechua words: *colla*, the Inca's wife, and *cocha*, the lake. The play has its basis in fact.

During the construction of the Cañón del Pato hydroelectric plant in Callejón de Huaylas, an Andean spring thaw caused a lake to overflow and kill 150 Peruvian workers.<sup>4</sup>

The enthusiastic acceptance of *Collacocha* was due in large part to the protagonist, Echecopar, an engineer who defies human limitations in his dedication to the construction of a series of tunnels through the Andes. He is dynamic and forceful, yet sympathetic. His is not simply a single-minded adherence to duty for its own sake, but rather a faith in the value of humanity and its need to transcend the bonds of ignorance and misery. Echecopar is, above all, an idealist, "un hombre mezcla de pragmatismo y de quijotería."<sup>5</sup> He shares the idealist's faith in progress and the perfectibility of man's condition. Yet he is a man of action, not a man of ideas. Though sensitive to the needs of his fellow man, he prefers tangible remedies to vague ideologies. Behind a forbidding exterior, his is a generous spirit obsessed by the specters of poverty and injustice. He combines action and sentiment with a dynamism rooted not in the desire for self-glorification but in the self-abnegation of dedication to a humanitarian cause. Some critics have chosen to see in Echecopar the Nietzschean superman who transcends external limitations and becomes a law unto himself. A careful study of the character contradicts much inherent in this Nietzschean ideal. The author himself feels that his creation is above ideologies, stating:

El fundamental sentido . . . del ingeniero Echecopar se resume en tres palabras: amor sin condiciones, libertad irrestricta y acción fecunda. ¿Si es Nietzsche? No sé. . . Me temo que el adjetivo le quede algo grande. En cuanto así es nazi, o comunista, o monárquico, o laborista, creo que él mismo lo dice con claridad: "¿Qué me importan a mí las ideas? ¡Me importan los hombres! Sé generoso, honrado y valiente, y piensa como te dé la gana."<sup>6</sup>

The reason for the fascination which this figure inspires in others is explained indirectly in the opening lines. The young engineer Díaz arrives from Lima to replace the engineer Fernández, and the two men discuss the construction of the tunnels. As Díaz explains the arrangement of the equipment and the location of Lake Collacocha, their conversation gives background information necessary for understanding the protagonist. Díaz awakens our interest in Echecopar. But as the central figure enters, he manifests a personal magnetism surpassing our expectations. As a mythological giant emerging from the mysterious recesses of nature, Echecopar laughs heartily and yells out his own name with stentorian force allowing the echo of the tunnel to magnify the sound, "Echecopaaaaaaaaaar" . . .<sup>7</sup> His laugh is his implicit contempt for the forces he opposes. It is the proud affirmation of one who feels himself equal to the challenge of titanic forces. His first words to his workers show also the charisma which causes his men to iden-

tify with him and with his struggle. As opponents of an unyielding obstacle, they themselves become oblivious to external elements, such as time and weather. Like Echecopar, they discover that their work gives them an uncommon independence and autonomy. When Echecopar asks the workers if it is morning, they reply: "No es de día ni de noche." Echecopar replies: "No es de día ni de noche: ¡es de túnel!" (p. 329) The workers express a firm dedication to their work and an indifference to nature, worthy of Echecopar himself:

Todos. Mucho frío, mucho frío. . . .

Obrero 1. Pero no importa, patrón. Cuando le oímos a usted entrar gritando en el túnel, nos olvidamos del frío y nos ponemos alegres. (p. 329)

As Echecopar continues through the tunnel, he leaves the men with the majestic farewell: "¡Adiós, hijos del abismo y de la tiniebla, hermanos del silencio y del viejo Echecopar!" (p. 330)

The first act explores the figure of Echecopar. The second act brings to a climax his conflict with nature. Yet, as an individual Echecopar stands as a symbol of collective struggle. In his complete dedication to his mission, he is much more than just a company employee. His motivation is not financial gain, nor the fulfillment of demands set by superiors, but the desire to attain a personal goal. He is, above all, a solitary figure isolated from family and friends by a deep sense of mission. His physical isolation in the Andean sierra parallels his spiritual isolation. As he rejects his wife, children and brother as being insincere and misguided fools, he rejects also those with whom his business brings him into contact—the politicians, the aristocrats, the establishment that seeks its own comfort and ignores the suffering of the masses. However, he fails to align his sympathies with institutionalized critics of the system—the communists. Rather, he rejects the facile generalizations of established ideologies, and prefers actions to words. Though he is extreme and inflexible, we admire Echecopar; he is concerned with issues greater than himself. His very words speak, not of concern for his own destiny, but of concern for the destiny of his own country.

Much of the success of *Collacocha* is due to the harmonious balance between vivid action and philosophic discourse. The violent cave-in which takes the lives of 180 workers is a high point of dramatic interest, but Solari makes violence the basis for interpretation of deeper values. He realizes that moments of crisis destroy men or make them heroes; hence it is at the moment of greatest peril that Echecopar is most impressive. Preferring the safety of his workers to his own well-being, he remains to coordinate the evacuation. In his determination to remain, he shows a self-confidence which influences his men. The labor leader, Bentín, who disagrees with Echecopar in the first act, acknowledges the latter's moral strength. As

Echecopar asks him why he decides to risk his life and stay behind, he responds: "No sé. A su lado me siento tranquilo. Además, con su actitud me ha hecho usted reflexionar sobre mí mismo." (p. 364) Fernández is then moved to say: "Es usted un gigante, Echecopar. . . ¡Bendita sea la hora en que nació!" (p. 384) Echecopar's spiritual strength influences those around him, but the moment in which his strength unifies his men in imitation of a hero also marks the beginning of his tragedy. The destruction of the tunnels beneath Collacocha seems to be nature's victory over Echecopar's challenge to its power; for it extinguishes his will to dominate and plunges him into guilt because of the death of those who failed to escape. Ironically, the zeal which is admirable in Echecopar is also his fatal flaw, since it leaves him inflexible before his environment. When Soto warns him about the danger of water from Collacocha seeping down and destroying the tunnels, Echecopar fails to respond rationally or to take precautions; instead he reacts as if Soto's warnings were impugning his courage. He errs in confusing caution with weakness and responds to Soto: "El hombre que quiere dominar esta Naturaleza tiene que ser fuerte, como ella." (p. 341) He seems obsessed by the power of his opponent: "Tú sabes que toda la fuerza y la pujanza que le faltan aquí al hombre las tiene, con creces, la Naturaleza salvaje, contra la que tú y yo luchamos." (p. 342) However, his exaggerated defensiveness is also his exaggerated pride. He describes himself as superior to Soto, whom he accuses four times of cowardice; but time eventually proves him unequal to his claim to be oblivious to the threat of his own death and the death of his men: "Yo, por mi parte, estoy dispuesto a asfaltar esta carretera con mis huesos y con los de ustedes." (p. 343)

The Peruvian critic, Estuardo Núñez, compares Echecopar's indomitable will to overcome every barrier to that of the Ibsenian protagonists who struggle desperately to transcend the mediocrity of the commonplace.<sup>8</sup> Tragedy, however, has the function of revealing to characters the ultimate truth about themselves. Here, Echecopar's iron will also breaks under the strain as Bentín grows to find new courage in the face of disaster. Echecopar grows as he realizes only too late that there are limits to the power of the individual. At the peak of the destruction, he states to Fernández: "He sido demasiado solitario. Ahora comprendo que no se puede vivir solitario." (p. 387)

The play's construction leads naturally to this dramatic climax at the end of the second act. The first act engages our sympathy for Echecopar. The protagonist's conversations with Bentín, as well as with Fernández and Díaz, contain explanatory passages which show a dedication and an independence that set him apart from the other men. His belief in men and his contempt for theories, apparent in the forceful language with which he rejects alien ideas, suggest the tension between the individual and his environment that will be resolved in the second act. The second act is the most

forceful of the play. Here the dramatist makes use of sound effects to increase suspense as earth tremors of increasing intensity are heard throughout the act. At the end of the act, the tremors gain in intensity until they shake the cabin and cut the electric power as a prelude to the final destruction. The dramatist heightens the air of tension with the surprise of newly arrived characters—Taira, Soto and Roberto—who learn of the peril at the moment of greatest danger. Echecopar, however, remains the center of interest. The scene is Echecopar's cabin, and external developments are relayed only indirectly to the audience. As a result, the dialogue, rather than the actions themselves, takes on special importance. The mounting danger gives rise to discussions of priorities complicated by conflicting human values. The interchange of dialogue conveys a sense of excitement, as cries of panic and desperation, such as Santiago's exclamation: "¡La tierra se está hundiendo! ¡Las montañas nos aplastan!" (p. 372) Even Echecopar's will to resist the limitations of reality reaches its height as he minimizes the danger of annihilation: "A ver, ¿qué es lo que ocurre? Bentín, ¿qué es lo que pasa? En realidad, no pasa nada. Casi nada." (p. 376)

The third act relaxes the dramatic force which has reached its climax at the end of the second act. A lapse of time and an abrupt transition from the second act centered on Echecopar to a placid conversation in the third act between Bentín and Fernández about him, establish a feeling of anti-climax.<sup>9</sup> As the act begins, Bentín and Fernández return to the scene of the accident. As in Act I, their discussion of the accident and of the events of the succeeding several years serves as an exposition. Fernández explains that Echecopar has remained at the scene of the accident, living in a small house next to the cemetery where he personally tends the tombs of the victims of Collacocha. His spirit is not completely broken; rather, he is now a man divided within himself. He enters in the third act with the same proud announcement of the first act, "¡Echecopaaaaaaaar!" (p. 396) Still, however, he suffers the burden of guilt which he attempts to rationalize: "pero, si fuese necesario, lo volvería a hacer todo igual. ¿Entienden? Lo que pasa es que hoy nadie quiere ofrecer su felicidad por nada. . . . Yo expuse mi vida por el progreso de un país casi salvaje, a merced de todos y de todo." (p. 399) Yet, when told he is not guilty and has nothing to justify, he responds: "¿No hay nada que justificar? ¿De modo que ciento ochenta vidas no son nada?" (p. 402)

The dramatist reveals that he was influenced in his creation of Echecopar by *Barabbas*, the work of Swedish writer Pär Lagerkvist.<sup>10</sup> The novelist finds the criminal released in place of Christ; Barabbas, a guilt-stricken murderer resolves his inner conflict by eventually becoming a follower of Christ.<sup>11</sup> Echecopar finds such a justification when, as the play ends and the driver Taira makes a successful trip through the newly completed tunnels, he feels that a cycle of life has been completed: "¡Entonces el anillo se ha

cerrado! Lo que vivió y murió ha nacido nuevamente. El eterno ciclo se ha cumplido y Echecopar es un hombre feliz." (p. 409)

Other Latin American dramatists have studied the relation of man to an overwhelming natural environment. Notable among them are the Brazilian dramatist Isaac Gondim Filho in *A grande estiagem* (1955) and the Chilean novelist and short story writer Francisco Coloane in a drama of Chile's southern frontier, *La Tierra de Fuego se apaga* (1945).<sup>12</sup> In general, however, Latin American writers have failed to reflect in the drama the prominence of the geography of the New World which is found in the novel and short story. Of the small number of dramatizations, *Collacocha* is perhaps the most successful. It presents a character who discovers meaning in dedication, finding the inner strength of which Fernández speaks when he explains, in the opening lines, why he has come to the mountains: "No vengo huyendo de nadie. Más bien vengo buscándome a mí mismo." (p. 324) *Collacocha* affirms the basic paradox of which André Gide speaks when he claims that man's happiness lies not in his freedom, but in his acceptance of duty.<sup>13</sup>

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## Notes

1. The theatre critic of *El Comercio* states for example: "Pocas veces un público de estreno ha recibido con tanto calor y entusiasmo una pieza dramática nacional, como la ofrecida por la AAA: *Collacocha* de Enrique Solari Swayne." *El Comercio* (22 de mayo de 1956).

Solari Swayne has presented two other works, *La mazorca* (1965) and *Ayax Telamónio* (1968). Both works have remained unpublished, however, and copies are unavailable for critical study of the texts.

2. José Pichel, "Theater in the Americas," *Américas*, II, No. 4 (April 1959), 24; *El Comercio* (6 de octubre de 1959), p. 14.

3. Alfonsina Barrionuevo, "Collacocha vista por su autor," *Caretas* (30 de septiembre de 1962), p. 52; "Bastidores humanos de Solari Swayne," *La Prensa* (20 de marzo de 1960); Alberto Tauro, *Diccionario enciclopédico del Perú* (Lima: Juan Mejía Baca, 1967), III, 183.

4. Pichel, p. 24.

5. *El Comercio* (22 de mayo de 1956).

6. Barrionuevo, p. 52.

7. Enrique Solari Swayne, "Collacocha," *Teatro peruano contemporáneo*, ed. José Hesse Murga (Madrid: Aguilar, 1963), p. 327. (All following references are to this edition.)

8. Estuardo Núñez, *La literatura peruana en el siglo XX* (Mexico: Editorial Pormaca, 1965), p. 68.

9. A conversation with director Luis Alvarez (July 24, 1968) reveals that the dramatist rejected suggestions that the third act be omitted or made to precede the first and second acts.

10. *El Comercio* (11 de octubre de 1959), p. 4.

11. Pär Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*, trans. by Alan Blair (New York: Random House, 1951).

12. Walter Rela, "Frecuencia del tema regional en el teatro sudamericano contemporáneo," *Anales de la Universidad de Chile*, CXVIII, No. 117 (primer semestre, 1960), 196, 200.

13. André Gide, in the foreword to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Night Flight*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert (New York: New American Library, 1942), p. xi.