The Hero in Contemporary Spanish American Theatre: A Case of Diminishing Returns

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The traditional role of the mythological hero demands that he follow a standard path of adventure which is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *i.e.* separation-initiation-return. As Joseph Campbell defines his quest, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from his mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."[1] When the figure of the hero is translated from myth to literature however, the traditional role is not always played, nor does the hero always follow the standard path. His stature, power, and behaviour have all been used as determinants in the classification of works of fiction.

For example, Aristotle speaks, in Chapter II of the *Poetics,* of the differences in works of fiction which are caused by the varying elevations of the characters in them. Northrup Frye, employing Aristotle's use of the words σπαμδαιος and ψ∝μλος in their figurative sense of weighty and light rather than in their moralistic sense of good and bad, classifies fictions by the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same.[2]

Thus, he states, we may have the hero who is superior in *kind* to other men and to their environment. He is a divine being, and the tales told about him will be myths in the common sense. Examples would include the myths of creation such as the Akkadian epic: *Enuma Elish* and the Indian *Rig Veda.* When the hero is shown as superior in *degree* to other men and to his own environment, he is the typical hero of the *romance*, who is capable of marvelous actions but who is a human being. In his world, the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended and, once the postulates of romance have been established, they violate no rule of probability. Here we have moved from myth proper into legend, folk

tale, *märchen,* and their literary affiliates and derivatives. In this category would be included *The Odyssey, The Epic of Gilgamesh,* and *The Ramayana.*

The third type of hero of which Frye speaks is the one in the *high mimetic mode,* the leader. He is superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment. He possesses authority, passions, and powers of expression above the norm, but his actions are subject to social criticism and to the order of nature. He is the hero of most epic and tragedy, and is primarily the hero that Aristotle had in mind.

The hero in the *low mimetic mode* is not superior to other men nor to his environment. He is one of us, and we respond to a sense of his common humanity. The low mimetic hero is most commonly found in comedy and realistic fiction. (The words high and low are merely diagrammatic as Frye employs them, and have no connotations of comparative value.) The last type of hero that Frye catalogues belongs to the *ironic mode.* He is inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves and we have the sense of looking down on him in scenes of bondage, frustration, or absurdity.[3]

Throughout the last fifteen centuries, European literature has reflected a dilution of the figure of the hero and a definitive change in perspective which, as Ortega says, regresses from a distinct, panoramic plane to focus on a single, proximate point with a resultant blurring of the surrounding space.[4] The center of gravity of the hero's role has steadily shifted down the list and today, even though the low mimetic hero is still to be found, as we shall see later, more and more we are faced with anomie: a collapse of social structures governing a given society, the state of alienation experienced by an individual or class in such a situation, the personal disorganization resulting in unsocial behavior. We are faced with anomic types: fictional characters who confuse right and wrong and who, because we identify with them, may be more demoralizing than outright villains would be.

The decline in the belief in free will and responsibility, and the acceptance of determinism have robbed the would-be tragic hero of the opportunity to take credit for his actions—to commit himself freely to a tragic course, rather than being simply victimized by forces over which he has no control. This figure is often a corrupted entity: too good to be a villain, too bad to be a fool, too serious to be a mere clown, too interesting to forget. One of the pervasive characteristics of the ironic hero is his loss of purpose, his inability to find any meaningful direction to his life or to all human existence. This loss of purpose is tied to the loss of God, which is heralded by Nietzche's cry in *Thus Spake Zarathustra,* "Dead are all the gods."

He may be a rebel, an outsider, like the Romantic, low-mimetic hero, but he does not have the tyrant God of the Romantic hero to rebel against.[5] There is only an abstract fate that toys with men as they (in Hemingway's image) wriggle desperately, like ants on a burning log to avoid their ultimate fate—death. "But they killed you in the end. You could count on that. Stay around and they would kill you," are the bitter thoughts of Lt. Henry, as he waits for Catherine's imminent death in *A Farewell to Arms.*[6] The "they" is appropriately vague. Or as Camus states in *The Rebel,* "Even by his greatest effort man can only propose

to diminish arithmetically the sufferings of the world. But the injustice and the suffering of the world will remain and no matter how limited they are, they will not cease to be an outrage. Dmitri Karamazov's cry of 'Why?' will continue to resound; art and rebellion will die only with the last man."[7]

We also encounter the inadequate hero whose shortcomings are comic or tragic-comic rather than tragic or pathetic. A common theme encountered is an inadequacy to meet and accept the grand part, the greater role, to heed the call. This inadequacy, which for the most part is not a definitive refusal of the call, but rather an inability or ineffectuality in the face of same, is very often freely admitted by the hero, as in T. S. Eliot's, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

> No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant
> to be;
> Am an attendant lord, one that will do
> To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
> Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool.
> Differential, glad to be of use,
> Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
> Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
> At times, indeed, almost ridiculous —
> Almost, at times, the Fool.

Two key questions often trouble the ironic hero: Why should a man live (the question of suicide)?; and, Why should a man not harm others (the question of murder)? We shall see these dilemmas faced in some of the plays under consideration.

This figure of the ironic hero—staggering through absurd days, lacking control over his circumstances, plagued by an all pervasive, collective guilt which is general and interchangeable (the existentialists' ". . . nous sommes tous des assassins")—is by no means limited to the contemporary theatre. The Spanish American novel has more than its share of ironic heroes. Suffice it to mention some of the more well-known examples such as Artemio Cruz, Pedro Páramo, Aniceto Hevia, Fushía, El acosado, and that ironic hero *par excellence,* Horacio Oliveira. Obviously, the list could go on and on.

In theatre, however, where character and action go hand in hand, the alienated, lost, isolated, inadequate, absurd, guilt-ridden, or confused figure that constitutes the "ironic hero" is highly manifest, and visible to us in the graphic and direct way which the drama alone provides.

The works under consideration are few, arbitrarily selected from the tremendous number of plays written and produced in Spanish America during our times. No attempt has been made to be comprehensive, since such would have been a presumptuous, if not impossible undertaking. Other plays may come to the mind of the reader that might be felt to illustrate more pointedly the characteristics ennumerated. The plays selected are "now," however. They speak to us with a direct, urgent dialogue, and they illustrate some of the characteristics heretofore set forth as typical of the shifting and diminishing role of the hero.

The first play, *Collacocha,*[8] by Enrique Solari Swayne of Peru, differs from the others of which we shall speak in that its hero is in the low mimetic mode.

He is a realistic hero who heeds the call, embarks on the quest and attempts to return to society with a boon.

The author states, in the dedication preceding the play:

> Dedico esta obra, en general, a todos los que están empeñados, generosa, sana y vigorosamente en forjar un Perú más justo y más feliz. En forma especial la dedico a todos aquellos que están empeñados en la habilitación de nuestro suelo como morada del hombre. Porque, quizá, ellos también podrían decir, con el protagonista de la obra: 'Estamos combatiendo la miseria humana y estamos construyendo la felicidad de los hombres del futuro.'[9]

Echecopar, the chief engineer for a tremendous project that would connect the coast with the highlands by means of tunnels blasted through the Andean rock, is a strong, virile man, direct and with no affectations. His speech is measured and energetic. In anger, he can be cutting and at times uncontrolled. But with it all, he is tender and compassionate. In the third act, his whole being reflects and exudes a prophetic air. At the end of the play, his voice is absolutely serene, and he is at peace with himself and the world.

As a low mimetic hero, Echecopar illustrates one of the salient features of all heroes—loneliness. And the hero's loneliness, ironically, stems from that very distinction which wins him the admiration of the populace. In the final analysis, if he endures long enough, the loneliness is sharpened by his heroic aspirations: the greater the aspirations, the more poignant the sense of mortal limits.[10] Echecopar, in the face of almost impossible odds, is determined to complete the tunnel and, as he says to his co-workers, ". . . estoy dispuesto a asfaltar esta carretera con mis huesos y con los de Vds." The inevitable happens. The waters of the *laguna* of Collacocha break through fissures in the mountain rock, the tunnel is flooded, and many Indian workers and one of the technicians, Soto, are killed.

In Act Three, which takes place five years later, Fernández, the young engineer who had assisted Echecopar previously, is now Chief Engineer. Echecopar, in a self-imposed isolation, heavy with guilt, passes his days looking after the tombs of those who died in the cave-in and flood. All is not lost, however. Fernández, who is a projection and continuation of Echecopar—without his heroic dimensions, but nonetheless affected by his drive and determination—completes the tunnel, the trucks roll through, and Echecopar is vindicated.

No Sisyphus he, Echecopar's ordeals ultimately are met and overcome. The boon is won. Our hero states: "¡Es grandioso y fenomenal! ¡Soy un hombre feliz!" And when Soto's voice comes to him with the warning that the lake is once more forming and that another cave-in could occur, Echecopar retorts, "¡Qué importa! Vendrá otro hombre, y otro, y otro, y muchos más. Y un día nuestros hijos estarán parados firmes y para siempre sobre el suelo que supimos conquistar." Echecopar follows Nietzche's admonition to ". . . live as though the day were here . . .", and is one of the few cases of positive thrust found in the contemporary theatre.

Among the new generations of Peruvian playwrights, Sebastián Salazar Bondy is perhaps the one who has contributed most to the revaluation of theatre

in his country. Restless, contemporary in his technique, influenced by the French theatre (he studied in the Conservatory of Dramatic Art in Paris), he combines a deep concern with socials ills with a refined aesthetic consciousness.

In *No hay isla feliz,*[11] a tragedy and the most representative example of his art, the action is dense and profound, and presents the spiritual ruin of a family that does not succeed in escaping its adverse destiny. The main theme is frustration, as the aspirations of Daniel dwindle through the years. In the First Act, Daniel, sure of himself and his future, is convinced that he can effect a change in society and in his town, which is economically dependent upon the construction of the Pan American highway. His hopes and expectations fade inexorably before the onslaught of time. Finally, his wife dead and his children gone, he seeks the solution to the tragic dilemma that life has placed before him in the annihilation of his own personality.

Salazar Bondy presents a double figure: protagonist-antagonist in the characters of Daniel and Ramón. The latter never made a pretense of striving. We could say that he refused the call to the quest and abandoned himself to his adverse destiny. The encounter between the two is impressive; through it we witness the collapse of the last vestige of moral resistance the protagonist possesses. To what avail was Daniel's striving? He asks, "¿Debí dejar que la vida me aplastara como a un gusano?" Ramón answers, "Fuiste y eres un gusano; jamás quisiste aceptarlo, pero es así." Later, Daniel exclaims sadly, "Esta debió ser mi isla feliz." Caustically, his antagonist responds, "No hay isla feliz, Daniel; jamás la hubo ni la habrá." The tragic sense of the play reaches a climax at this point, as the curtain falls on the figure of Daniel in the penumbra of the stage, a figure which has become ". . . un bulto, una sombra, nada. . . ."

Jorge Díaz' first full length play, *Requiem por un girasol,*[12] illustrates several of the predominant attitudes found in his theatre. Among them are the free association of ideas and motives, a rebellion against ultra-structurization typical of a large segment of contemporary writers (not just Spanish Americans), a sharp critical eye which is in keeping with the thematic thrust of the play rather than being merely gratuitous, and a profound feeling of agony.

The world he manifests in *Requiem* is absurd, topsy-turvy, laughable and painful. The setting of the play is a funeral home for animals, the tone bizarre, the characters symbolic. Señor Linfa, proprietor of the rather grotesque establishment, immune to human suffering, glossed over with the veneer of a successful salesman who has come to believe his own sales pitch, peddles his funerals: *de primera, de segunda* or *de tercera,* according to the extent of his clients' grief and pocketbook. Manuel, his general flunky, is our ironic hero—in this case a pitiful specimen of humanity who slowly loses all identification with human traits to become, in death, no more than an animal, indeed, even less, as he is perfunctorily dumped out of an oversized coffin that had been custom-made for a pet giraffe.

The general process is one of a steady dehumanization of the protagonist, Manuel. In the midst of the absurdity of the situation, and faced with the morbid and insensitive Linfa, Manuel's ineffectuality in controlling in any way his own destiny stands out in bold relief. He cannot nor does he try to account for the irrationality, the pain or the disorder of life. He accepts these as fundamental—and succumbs.

La hiel nuestra de cada día,[13] by Luis Rafael Sánchez, a young Puerto Rican dramatist, is the first of a two-part suite entitled *Sol 13, Interior,* which is the address of the old, dilapidated building where the action takes place. The protagonists, Píramo and Tisbe, are not the famous, legendary lovers, but an old couple who are poised on the brink of complete abjection. Life has fled by them, and they are left with nothing: no children, no money and, finally, almost no furnishings when they exchange their sofa and a chest for a lottery ticket in a desperate attempt to break out of the circle of despair in which their poverty has enclosed them.

The only positive reality is the love they have for each other. But old age is upon them. Píramo rejects Tisbe's suggestion that he become a beggar, for he considers it too great an indignity. Convinced that there is no exit, Píramo takes rat poison and kills himself, feeling sure that Tisbe will be better off without him. Píramo, a sad manifestation of the ironic hero, inadequate and victimized by an unyielding society, finally had asked himself the key question: Why should a man bother living?

Osvaldo Dragún, the prominent Argentine dramatist, has written traditional plays as well as those which incorporate dramatic innovations. His theatre reflects a preoccupation with contemporary man, specifically the inhabitant of Buenos Aires in his fight against those forces with strive to destroy his will and reduce man to a victim. He is not provincial, however, for the experiences of his characters reflect the human struggle in general. He also has reinterpreted historical themes in a contemporary light.

In *Historias para ser contadas,*[14] Dragún employs a *commedia dell'arte* format with a verse prologue to the public in which the actors declare themselves to be *raconteurs* of true stories of present-day Buenos Aires. There is no scenery, and four actors play all the parts.

In the first of the three stories, "Historia de un flemón, una mujer y dos hombres," the protagonist, a salesman, is suffering miserably from an abscess. The parody of the contemporary "rat race" is masterfully handled. The man is suffering, so he cannot work, but he must work if he is to earn money. He should go to the dentist, but time is money, and he cannot afford the time off from work—although he cannot sell since he cannot open his mouth. He finally goes to the dentist, who promptly sends him for x-rays which take two days. Day by day his face swells, and the dentist, like everyone else, is indifferent to his pain and recommends a long and costly treatment. Finally, unable to open his mouth at all, and in excruciating pain, the salesman doubles over and dies.

In the second story, "Historia de cómo nuestro amigo Panchito González se sintió responsable de la epidemia de peste bubónico en Africa del Sur," Panchito González, a salesman, pressured by the ever rising cost of living, discovers a foolproof way of making money. He devises a plan to pass off canned rat meat as beef, and send it to the Negroes of South Africa. His company gives him a tremendous raise for his ingenious idea, and the Public Health Service gives him a medal for his efforts in the local campaign against rats.

When news of a bubonic plague in South Africa reaches him, Panchito is guilt-stricken; his employers discharge him for anti-humanitarianism; but, as the protagonist states at the end,

. . . ¿y si mañana me vuelven a ofrecer 5.000 pesos por hacer lo mismo? ¿Qué voy a hacer? Yo debo pensar en mi familia, ¡y 5.000 pesos son 5.000 pesos! ¿Y si en vez de los africanos son los santafecinos? ¿Qué voy a hacer? Les juro que no sé. Y eso me hace pensar. . . .[15]

The last of the trilogy is entitled "Historia del hombre que se convirtió en perro." The protagonist, desperate in his attempt to find work, accepts a job as watchdog in a factory. He keeps looking for work only to find another watchdog's job, but at five pesos more per day, so he accepts. Gradually he becomes so accustomed to his role that he is no longer sure if he is a man or a dog, and he speaks in a mixture of words and barks.

The impact of the stories lies precisely in the condensed, almost staccato dialogue, the non-realistic presentations, and in the fact that, while the three protagonists are barely line sketches rather than full-fledged portraits, all succeed in illustrating man's suffering in a degenerate society which is devoid of human values. Once more, all are absurd figures, completely ineffectual in controlling their own destinies.

The youngest of the group of writers under consideration is Iván García of the Dominican Republic. Influenced by the French "nouveau théâtre," García cultivates an antirational theatre which pursues, through a depiction of a world that refuses to communicate with man, or vice versa, a reaction in the audience that leads them to a comprehension that ". . . de nada valen las prédicas sin el concurso de la buena voluntad y del propio sacrificio."[16]

The three basic elements that appear in García's works—a nihilistic focus, an intent to create a catharsis, and the almost invariable problem of dialogue with one's surrounding reality—are readily manifest in the volume of his plays entitled *Más allá de la búsqueda.*[17]. Each of the plays leans heavily on the use of symbols, with these symbols being viewed and presented from several distinct angles to bring home forcibly the author's philosophy and world view. The heroes encountered may bear mythical names: Prometeo, in the first play entitled *Más allá de la búsqueda,* carries an impossible burden of guilt and loneliness and desperately seeks "something" to destroy his pain which is the pain of the collective unconscious. Or the hero may, as in the play *Don Quijote de todo el mundo,* be a variation on the name of the sad hero, and be called Alonso Quezada. Moving through a series of situations, Quezada makes an impassioned plea for communication, understanding and truth, only to be met with silence, confusion and lies.

Other characters have symbolic names, as in *Fábula de los cinco caminantes,* with the personages Fórtido, Mínimo, Orátulo, Revóluto and Cárnido. Here the absurd situations reach a climax as the quest for meaning and self continues. The characters reach the end of the road, nothing has been gained, and Revóluto calmly states, "Hay que buscar más adelante. . . Hijos de la gran puta." [*Curtain*]

García also explores, with his nonsense characters Trobo, Tribo, Trabo and Flemo, Flimo, Flamo, the essence of absurdity in *Los hijos del Fénix* which is a "noticiero y comerciales interpelados con escenas grotescas." Or he will move back to a semi-realistic scene, as in *Un héroe más para la mitología.* Here, the hero, David Morales, surrounded by characters bearing representative names such

as El Presidente, El Jefe de las Fuerzas Armadas, Un Héroe Delgado, Un Héroe Gordo, El Borracho Político, El Borracho Práctico, etc., moves inexorably towards his death in a senseless war.

Lastly, turning to José Triana's *La noche de los asesinos,*[18] we enter a veritable hall of mirrors, as reality and fantasy are reflected and re-reflected in a grotesque game of ritualistic murder.

In this three-character play, consisting of two sisters and a brother, Cuca, Beba and Lalo, a convoluted series of relationships are worked out. The play begins with a murder, but, as the action unfolds, we realize that it has all been an intricate game— a game which is repeated and repeated like so many rehearsals for opening night. The murder rehearsals lead to a savage parody of the adult world with the three adolescents acting out all of its negative aspects.[19] Most of Act II is another game: the imaginary police investigation into the murder. Cuca, Beba and Lalo switch roles rapidly and abruptly. At times they are all pretending, at other times one is in the play within a play, and another is back in an objective reality. In this dramatic metaphor of a decaying institution—the family—Lalo, under a burden of guilt, seeks the self in the annihilation of the parent-authority figures. He seeks his salvation, but all he finds, however, is irrationality, unreason and chaos.

The ironic heroes we have dealt with are different from one another, but all emphasize the meaningless and absurd incongruity of human existence. They function as battering rams in their assaults on the audience's traditional beliefs about life, about drama, about the "reasonable." All conduct, no matter how aberrant, senseless, cruel, "far out," or even insane, is appropriate to this hero as long as such conduct functions to highlight what the dramatist feels to be the truth about life.

With the exception, in *Collacocha,* of Echecopar who manages to come forth from his despair to the threshold of new hope, the others encountered have offered no answers, no hope. Daniel, in *No hay isla feliz,* dissolves into emotional nothingness when all of his illusions have been destroyed; Manuel, in *Requiem por un girasol,* dies, as does Píramo, in *La hiel nuestra de cada día,* the latter by his own hand, the former a victim of society. Of the three protagonists in *Historias para ser contadas,* one dies, one continues his nonhumanitarian, meaningless life, and one is reduced to a border-line animal existence, reminiscent of the professor in *The Blue Angel.*[20] García's protagonists run the gamut of the ironic hero types. Triana's characters, in *La noche de los asesinos,* in their desperate quest for their own faces and identity, find only masks.

As stated previously, the world view presented by most contemporary writers has regressed from a panoramic plane to focus on the individual. As Joseph Campbell maintains,

> Today there is no meaning in the group, all is in the individual. But there the meaning is absolutely unconscious. One does not know toward what one moves. One does not know by what one is propelled. The lines of communication between the conscious and the unconscious zones of the human psyche have all been cut and we have been split in two.[21]

And the ironic hero reflects this spiritual dichotomy as he quests—once more Campbell's words, ". . . to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul."[22]

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Notes

1. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, Inc., 1949), p. 30.
2. Northrup Frye, *An Anatomy of Fiction* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), p. 33.
3. Frye, pp. 33-34.
4. José Ortega y Gasset, "On Point of View in the Arts," *Partisan Review* (August, 1949), pp. 822-836.
5. Harold Lubin, *Heroes and Anti-Heroes* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1968), p. 311.
6. Lubin, p. 311.
7. Lubin, p. 312.
8. *Teatro peruano contemporáneo* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1959), pp. 309-399.
9. Ibid., p. 309.
10. Lubin, p. 205.
11. *Teatro peruano contemporáneo,* pp. 206-305.
12. Jorge Díaz, *Primer Acto* (Madrid: Taurus, 1967), pp. 153-199.
13. Luis Rafael Sánchez, *Sol 13, Interior* (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1961).
14. Osvaldo Dragún, *Teatro* (Buenos Aires: Astral, 1967), pp. 53-85.
15. Dragún, p. 75.
16. Marcio Veloz Maggiolo, Introduction to *Más allá de la búsqueda.*
17. Iván García, *Más allá de la búsqueda* (Santiago, Rep. Dom.: Universidad Católica, 1967).
18. José Triana, *La noche de los asesinas* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1965).
19. Frank Dauster, "The Game of Chance: The Theatre of José Triana," *Latin American Theatre Review,* 3/1 (Fall 1969), pp. 3-8.
20. *The Blue Angel,* Screenplay by Carl Zuckmayer and Karl G. Vollmöller. Adapted from the novel by Heinrich Mann entitled *Professor Unrat* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1951).
21. Campbell, p. 388.
22. Campbell, p. 388.