The Dramaturgy of Florencio Sanchez: An Analysis of *Barranca Abajo*

René de Costa

Florencio Sánchez is generally considered to be the first dramatist of major importance to emerge in Spanish America since Independence. *Barranca abajo*, his best known tragedy, is unquestionably an extraordinary work. Don Zoilo, the protagonist of this modern classic, is one of the first New World dramatic personages with the stature of a complex major character. The play, first performed in Buenos Aires in 1905, and revived with almost perennial regularity, has proven itself to be an extremely successful piece of theater. Indeed, its steady passage over the years from a quaint drama of the River Plate region to a place of permanence in the theatrical repertories of the Hispanic world suggests the presence of universal dramatic qualities.

Although the continued theatrical success of the work has generated numerous reviews, the literary composition has been studied only in a most cursory fashion. To be sure, there are many informative books and articles on the life of the author and the theater of his time, yet there is a surprising dearth of serious critical attention regarding the dramaturgy of Sánchez' master works, particularly *Barranca abajo*.[1] This phenomenon is curious, since the play at its premiere prompted a basic question regarding its structure: Was the suicide of the protagonist in the final scene a satisfactory solution to the dramatic conflict? At the time, critical concern was such that the ending was actually modified for the second performance. In the words of the play's original director, José J. Podestá:

> *Barranca abajo* fue su primer gran éxito en mi compañía; cuando me la leyó le observé que no era posible que el público aceptara lo que él sustentaba en el final: "Esa es mi idea," me contestó, "mi tesis." "Con ella quiero probar que cuando un hombre ya no tiene nada que hacer en esta

> vida, puede un amigo, un pariente, no oponerse a la voluntad de suicidarse."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Convencido Sánchez de que su tesis no podía prosperar, aceptó la enmienda que yo le hice y que es la misma con que se representa desde la segunda función. . . . Al día siguiente del estreno de *Barranca abajo*, lo tomé en un momento de íntima satisfacción y aprobó la reforma que hice a su tesis antihumana, que concordaba con la opinión de la crítica.[2]

In spite of Podestá's emendation, the question of suicide has remained to haunt the critics of Argentina and Uruguay, who, unknowingly, resuscitate an antiquated notion of verisimilitude in their oft-repeated allegation that it is somehow inappropriate for an authentic *criollo* to take his own life.[3] River Plate chauvinism continues to thwart dramatic criticism, and as a consequence, a serious literary question remains unanswered today: Do the various lines of dramatic action in *Barranca abajo* converge in such a way as to make the resolution in suicide inevitable?

In 1959, Luis Ordaz prepared an edition of the play based on manuscripts containing the original version and Podestá's revision.[4] Since an authentic text is now available, it should be possible to reexamine Sánchez' most significant work in order to attain a deeper understanding of his dramatic art. How does *Barranca abajo* function as dramatic literature? What specific system of actions governs the character of Don Zoilo? Answers to these questions are long overdue.

The plot, organized in three acts, is essentially expository. Don Zoilo, an aging rural patriarch, through the machinations of city lawyers loses his estate. Gradually, the love and respect of his sister, wife, and one of his daughters wanes; and they prepare to abandon him. Finally, his youngest daughter dies, and in desperation and solitude he seeks an end to his own life. The principal action concerns the protagonist's repeated assertion of self in his various efforts to retain his patriarchal position. Paralleling the decline in Don Zoilo's personal fortunes vis-à-vis the new social order is another plot line: the disintegration of the family. Estrangement and suicide result. The play's organization however, does not chronicle the process of the protagonist's fall, as does *King Lear* (a work which *Barranca abajo* resembles in more than a superficial way, as will be discussed later). Rather, the action is segmented, almost episodically, into discrete dramatic units. The familiar three-act pattern is therefore not causal, but expository; the effect is documentary.

Nevertheless, a certain sequential parallelism of action does reinforce each unit with the import of what has already occurred. Consequently, in Act I, Zoilo, unable to retain his estate, attempts to salvage his authority; he drives out his enemies and makes the decision to take his family away to a new homestead in the interior. In Act II the enemy is within; the commissioner and his cohort have already established a liaison with the younger women of the family. Zoilo is powerless to prevent his civil arrest. By Act III, the old *criollo*'s position has so eroded that he can only acquiesce when his family actually does abandon him. A proud patriarch without a patriarchy, Zoilo prepares for his final attempt at

self-assertion: suicide. The representation of the three acts lacks the pattern of traditional dramaturgy (exposition, complication, and denouement). Instead Sánchez depended on the device of recycling the principal action to highlight the major theme, the assertion of self, and thus gave his work a unique coherence.

In each act Zoilo chooses to leave rather than suffer a humiliating defeat. Thus, he leaves his estate, the homestead, and finally the world while the women of the family make an essentially parallel series of decisions to abandon him. Structured around the idea of separation, the play uses the divisions of the three-act form in a particularly effective way. Within each act there is an absolute continuity of time whereas between the acts time is discontinuous. As a result the actions transcend the chain of causality which usually defines the progression of realist drama. Sánchez, by limiting his dramatization to three distinct, but not unrelated moments of crisis, managed to present a most effective case-study of an individual's anguish in its full psychic potential. Perhaps it is for this reason that *Barranca abajo* has ultimately become the vehicle for Don Zoilo, certainly the most complete character ever to emerge on a Spanish American stage prior to the César Rubio of Usigli's *El Gesticulador.*

Events which are not pertinent to the principal action of self-assertion are made to occur between the acts. For example, the first act ends with Zoilo's altruistic decision to begin anew in the interior. In the second act the family is already installed in the humble homestead of Zoilo's *ahijado* Aniceto. In this way, the dramatist avoids presenting an onstage quarrel between the enraged protagonist and the women over what they surely would have considered to be a less than satisfactory solution to the family's plight. The second act concludes in a similarly hermetic fashion with the betrothal of the tubercular Robusta and Aniceto. The final act then begins with Robusta's bed on stage, "asoleándose," in mute testimony to her death between the acts. Here the dramatist has studiously avoided a scene of grief. At this point it should be noted that although Florencio Sánchez worked out of the realistic tradition of the late nineteenth century stage, he nonetheless managed to prune his work of the nonessential detail and the melodramatic circumstance so highly esteemed by his contemporaries. In so doing, he pioneered the lean plot line of the contemporary theater in South America. The scenic arrangement of *Barranca abajo* reveals not only his mastery of the techniques of the modern stage but also the highly structured nature of his original approach to dramatic art.

Like the death of Cordelia in *King Lear*, the death of Robusta is the final blow for Don Zoilo. Whereas the conventions of Shakespeare's time permitted the protagonist to come on stage carrying the body of his dead daughter, Sánchez avoids the melodramatic corpse. Instead, absorbing perhaps from the naturalists a certain studied attention to detail, he realized the dramatic potential of sublimating a stage prop into a dynamic figure. At the opening of the third act the scene is quite tersely delineated: "La misma decoración. Muestras de abandono. Contra la pared del rancho una cama desarmada asoleándose" (75). The bed, stripped bare and left to sanitize in the sun, imposes itself as an object with an expressive function.[5] It immediately tells the audience of Robusta's death and is a constant reminder of Zoilo's loss. Other props in the play have a similarly

active role because of the forceful way in which they generate an expectation for certain kinds of action. Although occasionally the object is used in the expected fashion, following realistic convention, as when Zoilo threatens the women with his whip (I, x, 43-47), at other times a seemingly decorative object advances and creates the potential for action. One might think of the play's opening: a domestic tableau in which all the women in Zoilo's family appear in the patio. Robusta is applying a plaster to her ailing mother Misia Dolores; her sister Prudencia and her aunt Rudelinda are both ironing. Through the accomplished use of a simple prop, in this case a candle, the dramatist quickly establishes the atmosphere of tension and discord which reigns in the house of Zoilo:

MISIA DOLORES.—Poneme pronto, m'hija, esos parches.
ROBUSTA.—Peresé. En el aire no puedo hacerlo. (*Se acerca a la mesa, coloca los parches de papel sobre ella y les pone sebo de la vela.*) ¡Aquí, verás!
RUDELINDA.—¡Eso es! ¡Llename ahora la mesa de sebo, si te parece! ¿No ves? Ya gotiaste encima'el paño.
ROBUSTA.—¡Jesús! ¡Por una manchita!
PRUDENCIA.—Una manchita que después, con la plancha caliente, ensucia toda la ropa. . . Ladiá esa vela. . . .
ROBUSTA.—¡Viva, pues, la patrona!
PRUDENCIA.—¡Sacá esa porquería de ahí! (*Da un manotón a la vela, que va a caer sobre la enagua que plancha Rudelinda.*)
RUDELINDA.—¡Ay! ¡Bruta! ¡Cómo me has puesto la nagua!
PRUDENCIA (*displicente*).—¡Oh! ¡Fue sin querer!
ROBUSTA.—¡Jua, jua, jua! (*Recoge la vela y trata de reanudar su tarea.*) (I, i, 33-34)

The ensuing argument builds in intensity. The scene functions principally to create an atmosphere rather than to convey information. Thus, when Don Zoilo enters at the peak of the argument, the mood suddenly shifts, for the women feign harmony and begin to chatter about the weather. Now, although the protagonist says absolutely nothing, his peculiar deportment and the evident effect it has on the women communicate an ominous tension in which the dialogue tells nothing but indicates all:

Don Zoilo aparece por la puerta del foro. Se levanta de la siesta. Avanza lentamente y se sienta en un banquito. Pasado un momento, saca el cuchillo de la cintura y se pone a dibujar marcas en el suelo.

MISIA DOLORES (*suspirando*).—¡Ay, Jesús, María y José!
RUDELINDA.—Mala cara trae el tiempo. Parece que viene tormenta del lao de la sierra.
PRUDENCIA.—Che, Rudelinda, ¿se hizo la luna ya?
RUDELINDA.—El almanaque la anuncia pa hoy. Tal vez se haga con agua.
PRUDENCIA.—Con tal de que no llueva mucho.
MISIA DOLORES.—¡Robusta! ¡Robusta! ¡Ay, Dios! Traeme de una vez ese matecito. (*Zoilo se levanta y va a sentarse a otro banquito.*)

RUDELINDA (*ahuecando la voz*).—¡Güenas tardes! . . . dijo el muchacho cuando vino. . . .

PRUDENCIA.—Y lo pior jué que nadie le respondió! ¡Linda cosa!

RUDELINDA.—Che, Zoilo, ¿me encargaste el generito pal viso de mi vestido? (*Zoilo no responde.*) ¡Zoilo! . . . ¡Eh! . . . ¡Zoilo! . . . ¿Tas sordo? Decí. . . ¿Encargaste el generito rosa? (*Zoilo se aleja y hace mutis lentamente por la derecha.*) (I, ii, 36)

Everything serves to draw attention to Zoilo. Not only does his unexpected silence alter the course of stage events, even his limited physical movements are used as attention-focusing devices. Furthermore, and perhaps most significantly, he uses a menacing prop in an odd way. The silent Zoilo takes out his knife and proceeds to scratch the ground with it. The mere physical presence of man and object serves a semiological function more potent and direct than any verbal sign. Zoilo has yet to say anything. Nevertheless, from the vantage point of the stage participants as well as that of the theater public, he is the absolute center of attention.

The modern drama championed by the Podestá family in the River Plate region signaled a break with the rhetorical style of dramatic declaration employed in Spain and fostered in Spanish America by the touring companies from the peninsula. The innovation did not consist of a mere change in diction, as the colloquial flavor of the dialogue would seem to imply, but rather comprised a totally new concept of dramatic action. After Podestá's success with the mime-drama (*Juan Moreira*), it was readily apparent to all concerned that a dramatization was something more than a set of dialogues which could be acted out. Drama, not just verbal, was physical impersonation as well. A representation of an action therefore, to be truly effective, must be the result of a significant fusion of word and deed. In this new scheme of things the characters' movements and the use of stage objects passed from the domain of the acting company to that of the author. The creative possibilities of dramatic literature were thus increased immeasurably.

Florencio Sánchez was in the forefront of the innovative New World dramatists who were abandoning the hollow forms of the past in order to experiment with new and more effective means of dramatic expression. In the final act of *Barranca abajo*, when Don Zoilo is crazed with anguish over the loss of his favorite daughter and his failure to salvage the family's honor, neither a revealing soliloquy nor an intimate colloquy could adequately convey the excruciating distress of the old *criollo*. Here, the dramatist eschews such rhetorical devices in order to show the mood of impending disaster. With stage objects, physical action, and a minimum of dialogue he represents the psychic torment of the protagonist. Paralleling the pattern of the opening act and echoing its significance, the closing act begins with the women involved in discussion, while Don Zoilo is again a mute and menacing presence:

La misma decoración. Muestras de abandono. Contra la pared del rancho una cama desarmada asoleándose.

ESCENA

Al levantarse el telón, Zoilo debe estar concluyendo de ensebar un lazo; cuando termina lo enrolla y lo cuelga en el alero. Luego bebe de un jarro de agua y se aleja lentamente, silbando bajo un motivo cualquiera; monótono motivo que silba durante todo el acto.

RUDELINDA.—¡Ahí se va solo! Andá a hablarle. Le decís las cosas claramente y con firmeza. Verás cómo dice que sí; está muy quebrao ya. . . Peor sería que nos fuésemos, dejándolo solo en el estao en que se halla.

MISIA DOLORES.—Es que. . . no me animo; me da no sé qué. . . ¿Por qué no le hablás vos?

RUDELINDA.—Bien sabés que conmigo, ni palabra.

MISIA DOLORES.—¿Y Prudencia?

RUDELINDA.—¡Peor todavía! . . . (III, i, 75)

The stage objects (Robusta's bed and Zoilo's noose) speak with silent eloquence, while the women's periphrastic indecision and the old gaucho's feignedly calm whistling are diverse signs whose common function is to direct attention to the protagonist and highlight his disturbed state. In the process, the words of the dialogue have been so thoroughly denuded of significance that they are scarcely needed, save to suggest the women's nervousness. The simultaneous, although uncommunicative, onstage presence of both the women and Don Zoilo brings plot lines closer to convergence. They are readying themselves to abandon Zoilo, and he is preparing to hang himself; all are making the last arrangements to carry out a decision to leave, to break the final bond, and in so doing to escape from the tragic grasp of their oppressive relationship. Desertion and suicide thus converge to complete the metaphor of the family's fall.

From one point of view, the play can be seen as a paradigm of modular structure. Like a set of Chinese boxes, each act repeats the same basic design, but on a different scale. Beginning always with a discussion among the women trailed by the disruptive presence of Don Zoilo, each dramatic unit deepens our understanding of the tense interpersonal relationships and documents the gravity of the protagonist's psychological disturbance. We have already observed certain parallels in acts I and III; the second act contains the variant which establishes the significance of the pattern: Zoilo's return to a normal state. At the opening of the second act, the family has recently arrived in the rural backlands, and in the new homestead, the aging *criollo* seems rejuvenated, a restored image of his patriarchal self. The curtain goes up on yet another family quarrel. Robusta, Cinderella-like, is grinding corn while the other women pretty themselves for a secret rendezvous:

ESCENA PRIMERA
(Robusta y Prudencia.)

ROBUSTA.—¡Che, Prudencia! ¿Querés seguir pisando esta mazamorra? Me canso mucho. Yo haría otra cosa cualquiera.

PRUDENCIA.—Pisala vos con toda tu alma. Tengo que acabar esta pollera.

ROBUSTA.—¡Que sos mala! Llamala a mama, entonces, o a Rudelinda.
PRUDENCIA (*volviéndose, a voces*).—¡Mama! . . . ¡Rudelinda! Vengan a servir a la señorita de la casa y tráiganle un trono para que esté a gusto.

ESCENA II
(*Los mismos, Misia Dolores y Rudelinda.*)

MISIA DOLORES.—¿Qué hay?
PRUDENCIA.—Que la princesa de Chimango no puede pisar maiz.
MISIA DOLORES.—¿Y qué podés hacer entonces? Bien sabés que no hemos venido acá pa estarnos de brazos cruzados.
ROBUSTA.—Sí, señora, lo sé muy bien; pero tampoco viá permitir que me tengan de piona.
RUDELINDA (*asomándose a una ventana*).—¿Ya está la marquesa buscando cuestiones? ¡Cuándo no! . . .
ROBUSTA.—Callate vos, comadreja.
RUDELINDA.—Andá, correveidile; buscá camorra no más pa después dirle a contar a tu tata que te estamos martirizando. (II, i-ii, 56-57)

This banter continues for a moment while Robusta labors, Rudelinda combs her hair, Prudencia arranges a petticoat, and Misia Dolores works on a tartan. With the approach of Zoilo all seek refuge except Robusta. Sánchez again uses a prop with telling effectiveness, not simply in the interest of a scenic naturalism but more importantly to create a non-verbal sign which has the power of communicating directly to the audience the normalization of the protagonist. Don Zoila, in complete mastery of the new situation, makes a most commanding entrance—on horseback:

ESCENA III
(*Robusta y Don Zoilo.*)

ROBUSTA (*angustiada*).—¡No quieren a nadie! ¡Pobre tatita! (*Apoyada en el mortero llora un instante. Óyense rumores de la izquierda. Robusta alza la cabeza, se enjuga rápidamente las lágrimas y continúa la tarea, canturreando un aire alegre. Zoilo avanza por la izquierda a caballo, con un balde en la mano, arrastrando un barril de agua. Desmonta, desata el caballo y lo lleva fuera; al volver, acomoda la rastra.*)
DON ZOILO.—Buen día, m'hija.
ROBUSTA.—Día. . . ¡Bendición, tatita!
DON ZOILO.—¡Dios la haga una santa! Pasó mala noche, ¿eh? ¿Por qué se ha levantao hoy?
ROBUSTA.—No; dormí bien.
DON ZOILO.—Te sentí toser toda la noche.
ROBUSTA.—Dormida, sería.
DON ZOILO.—Traiga, yo acabo.
ROBUSTA.—¡No, deje! ¡Si me gusta!
DON ZOILO.—Pero le hace mal. Salga.

ROBUSTA.—Bueno. Entonces yo voy a ordeñar, ¿eh?
DON ZOILO.—¿Cómo? ¿No han sacao la leche entuavía?
ROBUSTA.—No, señor, porque. . .
DON ZOILO.—¿Y qué hacen esas? ¿A qué hora se levantaron? (II, iii, 58)

The live prop serves effectively as a symbol of Zoilo's renewal. Yet, the conflict remains. Don Zoilo's family refuses to mend its ways. The patriarch again asserts himself only to fail once more to set his house in order.

The parallelism of scene and action in *Barranca abajo* would probably appear monotonous were it not for the harmony of the total structure. The dramatist has evidently planned the scenario with a view to its overall esthetic effect. Repeated patterns of action have the power to cause an observer (reader, public, characters) to take special notice of whatever differs from the norm. Hence the significance of the pattern and its deviations. In the first act Zoilo's peculiar behavior was noted not only by his family (and, one assumes, by the audience), but also by an outside observer. When Ña Martiniana—a kind of rural Celestina created by Sánchez and used as a *raisonneuse*—comes to the estate, she finds him "medio maniático" (I, iv, 38). Significantly, in the third act, after the death of Robusta, she observes that Zoilo's state has worsened: "ha quedado maniático con el golpe" (III, iv, 79). Representation and dialogue are complimentary signs. Evidently, the parallelism of the observations and their graded quality are designed to direct attention toward the psychic evolution of the protagonist.

The drama takes place on both the external, physically real plane of naturalist theater and the internal, mentally dynamic plane of psychological drama. Sánchez, in 1905, and somewhat before the advent of psychodrama, successfully represented various stages of the defeated hero's mental strain. His protagonist does not suddenly decide to kill himself; he resolutely searches for a final solution. In this context, it is necessary to point out that the critics, so disturbed by the sociological implications of the tragic ending of *Barranca abajo*, have not only failed to assess the obvious significance of the play's title, but have also, and more seriously, tended to ignore the internal evidence of the text itself. The play is structured so as to represent the repeated failures at self-assertion. The protagonist is literally beaten down.

I realize, of course, that gauchophiles will find it even more difficult to accept the notion of a mentally exhausted Don Zoilo than the possibility of a suicidal *criollo*. Yet, the evidence is clear if the finale is analyzed in terms of the structural unity of the work and not viewed separately, as is usually the case. In fact, Zoilo's haughty self-esteem is already evident in the first act when he first learns of his family's deceit, and he resolutely drives the enemies from his house. In the second act, his setbacks are such that he begins to surrender to the cruelties of an indifferent world. And, in the final act, aware of his folly, he decides to end his meaningless life.

At this point it is well to ask if it is more than just a coincidence that this is also the familiar pattern of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. I think not, since there is sufficient external evidence to argue for an intentional allusion. The Elizabethan tragedy was on tour in South America in 1904 (only a year before *Bar-*

ranca abajo was staged), and the principal rôle was played by the great Italian Shakespearean actor Ermete Zacconi, Sánchez' constant companion in Montevideo.[6] That the Uruguayan created in Don Zoilo a *criollo* version of the Lear legend is quite possible; that the dramatist saw in the voluntary death of the king a theatrical antecedent for the patriarch's suicide seems most probable. In the works of both Shakespeare and Sánchez, the father is disheartened as he realizes the disparate attitudes of his daughters with regard to his ruined state. Zoilo's Robusta, like Lear's Cordelia, demonstrates her filial love while the other women in the family become more distant. The series of misfortunes afflicting both fathers leads ultimately to their insanity and death, and the untimely demise of the faithful daughter is the final blow for both defeated men. Shakespeare presented the course of Lear's fall to madness; Sánchez, a case study of the stages in the psychic degradation of Zoilo.

Over the centuries though, the problem facing both authors has remained essentially unchanged: how best to represent a mental event through words and physical action? Lear's madness was shown in the conventional manner of Shakespeare's time: rashly foolish and muttering, the king comes onstage dressed absurdly in wild flowers (IV, vi). Sánchez, of course, has Zoilo do equally inappropriate things, but according to somewhat different conventions. Fundamental to an appreciation of modern dramaturgy, particularly that of the early twentieth century, is an understanding of the playwrights' renewed and even studied concern with mimesis. In the realist scheme of dramatic action, the spectators in the theater were not simply expected to empathize with the characters, but, as a consequence, to experience the same sentiments as the stage public. Thus, when the women on stage show fear of Don Zoilo silently poking at the ground with his knife (I, ii, 36), it is presumed that the public in the theater will also feel a certain apprehension. For Shakespeare, the signs of madness were folly and the unconventional; for Sánchez, the irrational and the unexpected. Perhaps for this reason, the clues to Zoilo's strange behavior are presented with such an accumulative force at the beginning. The representation of the action permits the audience to witness the same disorienting phenomena as the stage characters, and even to wonder with Rudelinda: "Decime, Zoilo, ¿te has enloquecido endeveras?" (I, xiv, 49). Not until the end of the first act does Zoilo finally confront his antagonists, the *arrivistes* Juan Luis and Butiérrez, who arrive uninvited at the house under the guise of a courtesy call. In fact, they are attempting to seduce Rudelinda and Prudencia. Discoursing in a calm and rational manner the master of the house begins to recall to his visitors the history of his litigation with them. However, the more he speaks, the more angry he becomes, until finally, beside himself, he throws them out, cursing them as "herejes" and "salteadores." The stage directions are most revealing. Juan Luis and Butiérrez, "confusos," are to leave slowly while Zoilo "los sigue un momento con la vista balbuceando frases incomprensibles" (I, xxi, 55), the epitome of anger.

The psychological drama takes place in the mind of Zoilo. In the tensely emotive scene which concludes Act I all the witnesses to the action, by their confused reactions, show that they suspect him to be unbalanced. In the second

act he is represented as a man enraged. Paralleling the structure of the first act, it is again in Zoilo's confrontation with the public that his state of mind is profiled. Towards the end of the second act, a representative of the law arrives to take him to town for questioning. The irrational outburst is not unexpected:

SARGENTO.—Es que vengo en comisión [. . .] con orden de llevarlo.
DON ZOILO.—¿A mí? ¿A mí?
SARGENTO.—Eso es.
DON ZOILO.—¿Pero han oido Vdes.?
SARGENTO (*paternal*).—No ha de ser por nada. Cuestión de un rato. Venga no más. Si se resiste, va a ser pior.
ÑA MARTINIANA.—Claro que sí. Bé de ir no más a las güenas. ¿Qué saca con resistir a la autoridad?
DON ZOILO.—¡Callá esa lengua vos! Vamos a ver un poco; ¿no estás equivocao? ¿Vos sabés quién soy yo? ¡Don Zoilo Carabajal, el vecino don Zoilo Carabajal!
SARGENTO.—Sí, señor. Pero eso era antes, y perdone. Aura es el viejo Zoilo, como dicen todos.
DON ZOILO.—¡El viejo Zoilo!
SARGENTO.—Sí, amigo; cuando uno se güelve pobre, hasta el apelativo le borran.
DON ZOILO.—¡El viejo Zoilo! Con razón ese mulita de Butiérrez se permite nada menos que mandarme a buscar preso. En cambio, él tiene aura hasta apellido. . . Cuando yo le conocí no era más que Anastasio, el hijo de la parda Benita. ¡Trompetas! (*A voces.*) ¡Trompetas! ¡Trompetas, canejo!
ANICETO.—No se altere, padrino. A cada chancho le llega su turno.
DON ZOILO.—¡No me'de alterar, hijo! Tiene razón el sargento. El viejo Zoilo y gracias. ¡Pa todo el mundo! Y los mejores a gatas si me tienen lástima. ¡Trompetas! Y si yo tuviese la culpa, menos mal. Si hubiese derrochao, si hubiese jugao, si hubiera sido un mal hombre en la vida, si le hubiese hecho daño a algún cristiano, paso; lo tendría merecido. Pero juí bueno y servicial; nunca cometí una mala acción, nunca. . . ¡canejo!, y aura, porque me veo en la mala, la gente me agarra pal manoseo, como si el respeto fuese cosa de poca o mucha plata.
SARGENTO.—Eso es. Eso es.
RUDELINDA.—¡Ave María! ¡No exagerés!
DON ZOILO.—¡Que no exagere! ¡Si al menos Vdes. me respetarán! Pero ¡ni eso, canejo! Ni los míos me guardan consideración. Soy más viejo Zoilo pa Vdes., que pal más ingrato de los ajenos. . . ¡Vida miserable! Y yo tengo la culpa. ¡Yo! . . . ¡Yo! . . . ¡Yo! Por ser demasiao pacífico. Por no haber dejao un tendal de bellacos. ¡Yo . . . tuve la culpa! (*Despues de una pausa.*) ¡Y dicen que hay Dios! . . . (*Pausa prolongada; las mujeres, silenciosas, vanse por foro. Don Zoilo se pasea.*) (II, xvi, 70-72)

At the point the protagonist himself clearly realizes the psycho-social significance of his change in fortune. He is no longer Don Zoilo, simply "el viejo Zoilo," Lear without his crown.[7] The witnesses to this scene are able to realize that the greatness of the old patriarch was not in the material dimension but in the psychic realm. The cue is evidently received, for the women withdraw, as if in embarrassment, before this most intimate revelation. As a consequence, the other public, the audience, might similarly be prompted to pity.

Old Zoilo—enraged over his own impotence midway through the play—reacts at the end to the death of Robusta much like Lear to that of his daughter. In desperation, he seeks an end to his torment. Lear, in the flamboyant style of the Elizabethan stage, suddenly faints dead away; Zoilo, in the mime tradition of Podestá, elaborately prepares his noose. The melodramatic convention of suicide *circa* 1905 though would doubtless have been satisfied with a sudden offstage pistol shot as the final curtain falls. Yet Sánchez devotes an entire act to the preparation for the hanging. The structure of the play tells us why. The final deed must be understood as the only voluntary solution remaining to the hero who has repeatedly failed. In fact, as though to stress the thesis, even his finale in the emended version is a near failure:

> (*Zoilo . . . va en dirección al alero y toma el lazo que había colgado y lo estira; prueba si está bien flexible y lo arma, silbando siempre el aire indicado. Colocándose, después, debajo del palo del mojinete, trata de asegurar el lazo, pero al arrojarlo se le enreda en el nido de hornero. Forcejea un momento con fastidio por voltear el nido.*) ¡Las cosas de Dios! . . . ¡Se deshace más fácilmente el nido de un hombre que el nido de un pájaro! (*Reanuda su tarea de amarrar el lazo hasta que consigue su propósito. Se dispone a ahorcarse. Cuando está seguro de la resistencia de la soga, se vuelve al centro de la escena, bebe más agua, toma un banco y va a colocarlo debajo de la horca.*)
>
> TELÓN (III, xix, 92)

Obviously, the public should not be shocked at his suicide, since it has been sympathetically conditioned to its inevitability. Robusta's bed and Zoilo's lasso, like the monotonous whistling throughout the act, are all omnipresent non-verbal signs skillfully used to prepare the audience, to elicit a certain pity for the tragic end of the desperate old man who was once the proud *criollo* Don Zoilo Carabajal.

With regard to the criticism of the suicide however, there remains a final nagging problem which is common to both the original text and to the Sánchez-Podestá revision. Many critics—undoubtedly confusing dramatic action with a preceptive notion of real life—are still concerned over the fact that Aniceto, Zoilo's faithful *ahijado*, in neither version succeeds in preventing the old man from hanging himself. We already know through Podestá that Sánchez felt such a resolution to be fundamental to his thesis ("que cuando un hombre ya no tiene nada que hacer en esta vida, puede un amigo, un pariente, no oponerse a la voluntad de suicidarse"). A literary parallel in *King Lear* may help to clarify the lingering problem of the socially-oriented critics. It is in the final

scene of the Shakespearean tragedy that Lear, with the dead Cordelia in his arms, goes into a death swoon. When Edgar and others rush to help him the king's faithful servant Kent holds them all at a distance—so that Lear may die:

LEAR.—Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more.
Never, never, never, never, never!
Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir.
(Do you see this? Look on her! look! her lips!
Look there, look there!) "O, O, O, O." (*He dies.*)
EDGAR.—He faints!—My lord, my lord!
KENT.—Break, heart. I prithee, break.
EDGAR.—Look up, my lord.
KENT.—Vex not his ghost. O let him pass! He hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer. (V, iii, 304-313)

The resigned attitude of Kent anticipates that of Aniceto, who also, by his inaction, sympathetically aids the death of his *padrino*. The fact that Zacconi's interpretation of this stirring scene would be immediately familiar to the 1905 audience of *Barranca abajo* is but one more example of what was probably an intentional allusion to *King Lear*.[8]

In the final analysis though, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with a play, with the representation of an action; the dramatist is the designer of a plan to be interpreted on the stage. Sánchez' meticulous attention to the intricacies of theatrical technique and the subtleties of literary allusion goes far beyond the realist urge to imitate life, or even the naturalist attempt to study it. Acquainted with the masterworks of the modern stage, and influenced by the esthetic concerns of Hispanic modernism, he was uniquely able to communicate a dramatic sensation of reality. It is undoubtedly for this reason that the structured text of *Barranca abajo* reveals the kind of cohesion and wholeness found only in the greatest works of dramatic literature. Not only is the dialogue colloquially accurate, the stage directions carefully planned, and the settings pictorially defined, but—most significantly—the pattern of action is masterfully designed so as to raise the plight of an ordinary *criollo* to the noble dimension of tragedy. The fall of Don Zoilo Carabajal thus marks the rise of modern dramaturgy in the New World.

The University of Chicago.

Notes

1. See Karl E. Shedd, "Thirty Years of Criticism of the Works of Florencio Sánchez," *Kentucky Foreign Language Quarterly*, III, 1 (1956), 29-39; and, more recently, Walter Rela, *Florencio Sánchez: guía bibliográfica* (Montevideo: Ulises, 1967).

2. *Medio siglo de farándula* (Río de la Plata: Imprenta Argentina de Córdoba, 1930), p. 174. Podestá goes on to reproduce the texts of both versions in parallel columns (pp. 174-177).

3. The literary concern has had wide and lasting ramifications, especially after it was taken up in *La Nación* in 1925 by the Argentine essayist Lucas Ayarragaray, "El suicidio en las

campañas argentinas: psicología del gaucho" [collected in his *Estudios históricos, políticos, y literarios* (Buenos Aires: Lajouane, 1927), pp. 25-32].

4. *El drama rural* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1959), pp. 25-92. All citations from *Barranca abajo* will be from this edition; references to the act, scene, and page will be parenthetically indicated in the text of the study.

5. For a general discussion of the functional use of props see Jiří Veltruský, "Man and Object in the Theater," in *A Prague School Reader in Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style*, edited by Paul L. Garvin (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1964), pp. 83-91.

6. "Anno 1904: E l'anno di Zacconi. L'attore preceduto dalla fama già consolidata e considerato il creatore di una nuova scuola realisticamente umana, viene accolto a Montevideo, ultima tappa del viaggio transatlantico, prima di Buenos Aires, da una delegazione composta dai due impresari: Consigli e Paradossi, dai giornalisti Vedia della *Tribuna* e Salvoni della *Patria degli italiani* e da Florencio Sanchez, che l'accompagnarono durante la sosta in Uruguay e l'ultimo tratto di viaggio. Il suo repertorio è immenso: *Otello*, *Amleto*, *Re Lear*, *La bisbetica domata* di Shakespeare. . . ." [Evi Camussi-Calvi, "Riassunto cronologico dell'attivita' delle compagnie drammatiche italiane nel Rio de la Plata," in *Influenza Italiana nella cultura rioplatense*, edited by Francesco E. Marcianó (Montevideo: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, 1967), p. 186]. An illuminating discussion of the general impact that the Italian acting companies had in Argentina and Uruguay at the turn of the century is found in the introductory section of Erminio Neglia's *Pirandello y la dramática rioplatense* (Firenze: Valmartina, 1970), pp. 47-51.

7. In the middle of *King Lear* the abased monarch comes onstage in the midst of a storm. He reveals an awareness of his humbled state as he addresses himself to the elements: "I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness; / I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children, / You owe me no subscription. Then let fall / your horrible pleasure. Here I stand, your slave, / a poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man" (III, ii, 16-20).

8. A contemporary of Sánchez, Roberto F. Giusti, in one of the earliest bio-critical essays [*Florencio Sánchez: su vida y su obra* (Buenos Aires: Sud-Americana, 1920)], implied as much: "En 1940, el actor italiano Ermete Zacconi dio en Buenos Aires una temporada teatral que impresionó y agitó hondamente los círculos literarios. El arte naturalista de Zacconi fué vivamente discutido y apasionó a la opinión culta. Sánchez fué asiduo concurrente a aquellas famosas representaciones del teatro San Martín, y sufrió, fuera de toda duda, la poderosa influencia del grande actor y de su teatro: no sólo de su escogido y vario repertorio, sino también de su modo de sentir, de vivir, de dar el personaje. No es aventurado decir que tipos como el Lisandro de *Los Muertos* han salido del repertorio zacconiano, lo mismo que escenas dramáticas como la final de *Barranca abajo*" (pp. 92-93).