

The Eucharistic Image as a Symbol of the Downfall of Modern Man

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A recurrent theme in contemporary Latin American drama is the Eucharist, the rite of man's communion with God. This sacrament, traditionally interpreted by the Catholic Church as the reenactment of Christ's sacrifice, is considered essential for heavenly salvation. Although a number of corollaries may be made, there are only two fundamental prerequisites for participation in the Eucharist: namely, abiding in a state of grace, and observing total abstinence from solids and liquids for one hour prior to communing. The Eucharist is a most desirable sacrament, since through the processes of both commemoration and transubstantiation man is able to transcend his mundane world and be placed on a more intimate spiritual footing with God. As the culminating moment of the Mass, the Eucharist is regarded as a time of spiritual ecstasy and inner joy derived from the promise of a better life. Because of these beneficial features, the Eucharist is traditionally the most sought-after of the sacraments.

Eucharistic hope and anticipation are decidedly not the case, however, in three Spanish American plays. On the contrary, the Eucharist contributes to man's downfall in *El Mayor General hablará de teogonía* (1957) by José Triana, *El tuerto es rey* (1970) by Carlos Fuentes, and *Para que se cumplan las escrituras* (1965) by Agustín Cuzzani.¹ Although there are varying reasons for this spiritual breakdown, in each work the result is comparable: despite his attempt to commune, man becomes further alienated from God and, in consequence, discovers himself in an even more hopeless state than before.

Perhaps the principal reasons for failure to commune successfully in *El Mayor General* are the presence of mortal sin and insufficient belief in God. Of the three main characters, two, Elisiria and Higinio, are indisputably in a state of sin. As the illicit lover of her sister's husband, Elisiria repudiates the omnipotence of God, the Mayor General. Ever since the Mayor General witnessed their thwarted plot to murder Petronila some twenty-five years ago, Elisiria and Higinio have

been imprisoned in his house, not through actual bondage, but as the result of their own guilt. Meanwhile, Petronila's shortcoming is one of lack of sufficient faith. Although she does believe in the Mayor General, Petronila is depicted throughout the play as a weak personage who is incapable of defending her Lord against the verbal attacks and assassination plot on his life. Instead, Petronila steepes herself in the happier memories of the past and in the adoration of the relics of her dead child. In this respect, Petronila may be termed a "Sunday Christian"—while she is willing to listen, she is not disposed to defend the Mayor General before disbelievers. Petronila's child-like confidence in the Mayor General leads her to regard him as a benevolent old gentleman, whereas Elisiria's profound sense of guilt causes her to view him as a cruel and sarcastic power from whose wrath there is no escape. In an attempt to gain their freedom, she and Higinio plot secretly to kill the Mayor General.

It is precisely this vast difference of opinion between sisters which affects individual reactions to preparations for the twenty-seventh anniversary celebration. While Elisiria taunts her sister for her exactitudes, Petronila displays an air of excited and ingenuous anticipation: "Hoy celebramos un acontecimiento único." (p. 171) Having prepared for this momentous occasion for a year already, she chides Elisiria for her unwillingness to help now. With all the painstaking care of an acolyte, Petronila arranges the table like an altar:

Hay que encender todas las *velas*, así la casa tendrá un aspecto más agradable, más íntimo: el propio para las confidencias. Y entonces hablaré con el Mayor General. Le *confesaré* todas nuestras angustias. Y él tratará de *aliviarnos la carga*. (Pausa.) Un *aniversario*. Veintisiete años de casada. Todavía estoy joven e impaciente. Ayúdame. Soy feliz. No todos pueden decir lo mismo.²

In describing her tasks, Petronila signals out numerous items required for the celebration of the Mass. To the embroidered tablecloth (altar cloth) she adds flowers and candelabra. She alludes to the *traje de gala* which the Mayor General will don (the priest's vestments), and sets out her cherished *copas de bacarat* in honor of the occasion, in the hope that "cuando el Mayor General ponga los labios en sus cuerpecitos serán más puras." (p. 172) It is ironic that Elisiria, too, alludes to the mystical powers of the Mayor General's body. She favors assassinating him in an effort to relieve her personal burden of guilt: "Su sangre nos servirá de alimento. Seremos santificados después." (p. 179) In this violent act the Eucharist would no longer serve to purify spiritually, but rather, would be transformed into a camouflage for a previous wrong-doing. Both sisters, then, yearn to commune, but their motives differ greatly.

Petronila, in the meantime, fully intends to confess her earthly anguish and worries to the Mayor General, convinced that he can and will ease her heavy heart. Moreover, she looks forward to hearing his sermon on theogony. This is to be an anniversary celebration—a day of joyful commemoration and renewal, in which cake and champagne are substituted for the traditional bread and wine. All her efforts are ruined, though, first by Elisiria and Higinio, and later, by Petronila herself. Elisiria and Higinio sip champagne before the arrival of the Mayor General, and even Petronila breaks her fast by consuming a *pastelito*

beforehand. The failure of the three to abstain prior to their official meal invalidates all the previous communion preparations. As a result of their premature celebrating, the communion table lies once more in a state of disarray, and strewn about are slivers of glass from the goblets which were smashed during an absurd dance between Elisiria and Higinio. Their lack of a state of grace, failure to abstain and out-and-out desecration of the altar clearly indicate that the three are by no means ready to meet the man who lives upstairs.

The communion scene, or more accurately, the "non-communion" scene, is intense. Terrifying bolts of lightning mark the appearance of the Mayor General, who emerges symbolically at the top of the staircase. At the moment of his entrance, all three characters below collapse to their knees in fear and adulation. All previous thoughts of murder dissolve as Elisiria and Higinio kiss the floor in humility. Only Petronila, in her role as a self-named priestess of sorts,³ ventures to speak to the infuriated guest, as, nervously, she offers him their "gifts": "¿Quiere unos pastelitos? ¿Una copa de . . . ? (Desencantada.) No quiere. . . . ¿Por qué?" (p. 189) In a powerful scene the Mayor General displays his wrath by angrily rejecting the meal, overturning Higinio's newspapers (which might be compared to the Holy Scriptures), and sending Petronila's urn of relics crashing to the floor. As a final act of renunciation, the Mayor General snuffs out the candelabra and flatly refuses to speak to them of theogony: "¿Hablar de conceptos? ¿Y de proyectos cósmicos. . . ? Qué atrevimiento . . . Ofrezco mi hospitalidad y todavía se permiten. . . ." (p. 191) With a sigh of disappointment he expresses the hope that others more worthy might one day come to dine with him.

That the communion attempt in this play has proved to be a fiasco cannot be blamed on God, the Mayor General. On the contrary, by presenting themselves in such an imperfect fashion, the three mortals have given God no other recourse than to reprimand them for their negligence. As Frank Dauster notes, "Triana's attack is directed not at God but at his worshippers, who are stupid, weak and vacillating."⁴ Furthermore, the guilty followers only strengthen the power of the Mayor General through their display of slavish worship. As a result of their abuse of the Eucharist, both literally and symbolically, Elisiria and Higinio fall even farther from the graces of the Mayor General, and in a broader sense widen the communication gap between God and man.

A similar occurrence may be observed in *El tuerto es rey* by Carlos Fuentes. In contrast, however, God alone is responsible for the corruption and desecration of the eucharistic elements in this play. Depicted as the all-powerful Marido, God is the unloving abandoner of his own creatures. The Marido carelessly deserts his subjects and goes off on a week-long gambling spree, entrusting his prized caviar and champagne (bread and wine), and his wife to his servant Duque while he is absent. It is obvious from the outset of the play that Duque and Donata are hopelessly trapped. Virtual slaves of the Marido, both are blind and neither possesses (or at least admits to the possession of) free-will, and therefore cannot be held accountable for any sin. As is inevitable, all initial attempts to remain morally and spiritually faithful to their master end in a mutual surrender to human weakness that is symbolized first, in the profanation of the Marido's sacred provisions, and secondly, in the act of adultery.

The illicit consumption of the revered caviar and champagne is averted at

first when Duque guards them from the avaricious Donata. His deception produces an admission that she has secretly partaken of the food already:

Duque: Son sándwiches de paté y de caviar, es una botella de Richebourg, son cosas que usted no sabría apreciar y que a mí. . . .

Donata: Pordiosero. Por avaro te lo tienes merecido. Tus canapés son como suelas de zapatos, enroscados, tiesos, y tu vino sabe a musgo y telaraña.

(El Duque se incorpora con dignidad.)

Duque: ¡Ah! Entonces la señora ha probado. . . .⁵

The taste differences described here illustrate the importance of proper preparation for the special "meal." As with the Eucharist, inadequate religious knowledge results in the inability to appreciate fully the spiritual delicacies.

Like the faithful servant of the New Testament, Duque is determined to be ever vigilant until the return of his Lord: "Cuando regrese, el señor querrá saber si su pan y su vino están intactos. El los dejó en mi custodia." (p. 69) Donata, on the other hand, is openly resentful of the cruelty of the Marido. In fact, traces of her rebellion against the Marido's apathy toward his subjects are reflected in Donata's impetuous confession of attempted theft: "Estuve a punto de robarme tus cosas . . . tu pan y tu vino. . . . Me acuso . . . sobre todo me acuso que no tuve valor . . . quizás . . . otro día . . . encuentre una justificación más honorable. . . ." (p. 75) Duque makes a similar confession following their act of lust, and it is then evident that neither confession is valid according to Catholic tradition, for instead of contrition, the couple seek revenge against their creator. By relinquishing free-will and therefore any guilt, Duque and Donata are, strangely enough, "free" to do whatever they please.

Like Elisiría and Higinio, Duque and Donata blame their master for their sins. Donata retorts viciously: "Cree que va a encontrarlo todo igual . . . que sólo él puede divertirse en el mundo . . . condenarnos a esta soledad eterna . . . y encontrar su casa igual cuando regrese. No quiero." (p. 85) Trembling, they drink sloppily straight from the wine bottle, and wipe their mouths crudely with their hands. A subsequent desecration occurs when, after a frenzied ballet, Duque tears open the food, flings Donata a piece, and the two squat like animals on all fours, grunting as they devour the food. (p. 103) The act marks the obliteration of the complete Eucharist, since at this point both "body" and "blood" have been consumed. In destroying the sacred elements Duque and Donata have, in effect, destroyed themselves. The sacrilegious nature of this eucharistic rite has brought the couple down to the level of common beasts. Having consequently condemned themselves, yet unwilling to accept responsibility for their actions, Duque and Donata seek consolation in planning the murder of the Marido.

Despite the love-hate relationship which exists between Duque and Donata, both are fully cognizant of the mutual dependence that binds them. Similarly, they are able to discern the reliance of the Marido upon those who are subservient to him, since he must punish in order to survive. Once deprived of his servants, the Marido will cease to exist. With this thought in mind, Duque and Donata vengefully abandon the very one who once rejected them.

When he returns on the seventh day, the Marido becomes enraged at the

wrong-doing in his house: "Dejen que los encuentre . . . los expulsaré . . . a los dos . . . ya no podrán regresar a darse la buena vida, a mis costillas . . . juraron comportarse como ángeles . . . raza de demonios. . . ." (p. 125) God, the negligent and cruel oppressor of his people, must pay the consequences of his own sins, however, and justice is ultimately restored in the swift and unexpected death of the Marido at the hands of machine-gunners, quite ironically when he is unable to prove his identity. Unlike the Mayor General, the Marido has acted irresponsibly and must atone for his injustices to his creatures. For a second time and for a different reason, no successful communion with God is achieved. Furthermore, the improper usage of the Eucharist has led to the downfall, this time not only of the couple, but of God as well.

A third example of the faulty execution of the sacrament of communion takes place in *Para que se cumplan las escrituras* by Agustín Cuzzani. In this play, nevertheless, the outcome is a more positive one. Manuel, depicted as the Christ of the Atomic Age, battles a computer for his life. Alleged to be infallible, the computer has predicted Manuel's death at 3:00 p.m. on April 17, but Manuel manages successfully to defy the machine by choosing to die one day early. His sacrifice not only destroys the threatening computer but restores free-will to mankind.

As early as Act I the importance of wine in the religious context is established. Juan, one of the disciples and a university professor, describes the origins of the invention of the marvelous machine and the subsequent experiments in the bar "donde se bebió vino." When Marcos questions the significance of this allusion to wine, Juan replies: "En razón de sus implicancias teológicas. Todas las religiones se orinan en el vino."⁶ The eternal conflict between destiny and free-will is manifested throughout the play. At first Manuel appears to be his "own man," but gradually comes dangerously close to losing his identity to the omnipotent machine. Shortly before his death he tells his girlfriend Estrella: "A veces pienso que la libertad no es más que una ilusión y que todos somos en realidad muñecos manejados por esas fuerzas ciegas . . . Marionetas, monigotes. Recién el 17 de abril lo averiguaré." (p. 111)

When the three students who conceived and built the computer realize the vast capabilities of their invention, they make every effort to dissuade Manuel from fulfilling his task. In the computer laboratory on the evening before Manuel's death, Estrella and the students prepare a contemporary communion supper with the potential Savior. Although humanitarian, their intentions are not what they should be, and consequently the pizza and wine are rejected by Manuel who, despite their pleas, remains staunch in his decision. In a final attempt to change Manuel's mind, Kery begs:

¡Tu debes vivir para que no caiga sobre nosotros el crimen y el dolor de haber usado la ciencia como el antifaz del gangster o el capuchón del verdugo! ¡Míranos, Manuel! Yo no quiero tu sangre en mis manos. (Solloza.) ¡Yo no quiero tu sangre en mis manos! (p. 141)

This last argument clearly expresses the deepest fear of the four, namely, that they will be held responsible for Manuel's death. Still unconvinced, it is only after

Manuel feels that he has adequately renewed his intentions that he agrees to join them in communion:

Ahora sí, Estrella. Brindaré contigo por el día, por las 24 horas de un día único. Tal vez el último que me sea permitido vivir, tal vez el primero de una vida nueva, plena y libre junto a todos ustedes. ¡Brindemos, amigos! (p. 143)

The disciples descend to the street, as Christ's apostles from the Upper Room, without having communicated completely with their Savior. For the third time total communion has not been achieved, but unlike the other cases the human downfall is only temporary. Although by sacrificing himself Manuel relinquishes human existence, more importantly he transcends victoriously as Savior and the upholder of free-will for all mankind. In sharp contrast to that of any of the other characters discussed, Manuel's self-destruction proves, in the long run, to be both noble and beneficial.

The study of the three works reveals two essential points. First, in order to participate in the Eucharist in an acceptable way one must adhere to certain regulations. Secondly, intentional deviance from the requirements leads to failure to commune fully with God, which, in turn, results in total rejection and condemnation by God and subsequently to the downfall of the communicant and/or Deity. In *El Mayor General* all three human communicants are guilty of sinful acts, and all must be punished accordingly. Even though Duque and Donata of *El tuerto es rey* claim innocence for their covert deeds, the overpowering guilt they experience suggests a certain degree of responsibility for their actions (the same flaw which, to a greater extent, causes the flagrant murder of God, the Marido.) In the third instance, the conclusion is a favorable one: the forfeiting of an earthly life in exchange for a far loftier station, that of venerated Lord and Redeemer.

The popularity of such a theme in contemporary Latin American theatre is particularly significant, since it represents a challenge to the integral role religion has played in Latin American daily life. Playwrights like Triana, Fuentes and Cuzzani are not willing to accept inherited Catholic doctrine unconditionally, nor to admit its absolute essentiality to man's existence. Strongly influenced by the currents of European existentialism and the absurd, these and other Latin American intellectuals are themselves in constant search for some meaningfulness that they might attach to an otherwise absurd human condition. What is more, it is this influence which lends a degree of universality to their own dramatic works and which, in turn, enhances their literary worth.

Because of the innumerable inversions of values they perceive, it is only natural that these playwrights be compelled to question the validity of all aspects of human existence. Under this new system of thought, religion—and more specifically the Eucharist—becomes an expression of futility rather than of hope, as it was traditionally held to be. Finally, the examination of this theme raises a number of questions regarding the nature and disillusionment of modern man as depicted dramatically. Additional literary analyses might well lead to a better

understanding of man's seemingly futile plight, and as such present a sound case for further study.

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Notes

1. The editions used in this study are the following: José Triana, "El Mayor General hablará de teogonía," in *En un acto*, Frank Dauster and Leon F. Lyday, eds. (New York, 1974), pp. 161-193; Carlos Fuentes, *El tuerto es rey* (México, 1970); Agustín Cuzzani, *Para que se cumplan las escrituras* (Buenos Aires, 1965).

2. Triana, p. 172. The underlining is my own.

3. Frank Dauster, "The Game of Chance: The Theater of José Triana," in *Dramatists in Revolt*, Leon F. Lyday and George W. Woodyard, eds. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), p. 169.

4. Dauster, p. 170.

5. Fuentes, pp. 68-69.

6. Cuzzani, p. 90.

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