

Usigli's *El gesticulador* and the Fiction of Truth

JOHN W. KRONIK

Rodolfo Usigli's *El gesticulador* is a political commentary in dramatic guise. It is by that token an accusing statement on contemporary Mexican reality, and as such it conforms to Usigli's frequently stated convictions about the needs of the Mexican stage. The critics have regularly interpreted the play in the light of its social immediacy, a typical view being that Usigli composes "teatro en una forma [. . .] concreta de análisis realista de la sociedad mexicana."¹ Some, like Octavio Paz, read *El gesticulador* as an expression of the Mexican character (a judgment with which Usigli would concur); and one critic argues, not unconvincingly and following Usigli's own self-analyses, that his theatre is an examination of man's intrinsic qualities, not only of his social relationships.² All these assessments are valid, but whatever the magnitude of its contribution to the operative discussions of modern Mexico, *El gesticulador* is not so shallow a play as to limit itself to such ideological engagement. In fact, as a directly political drama, the piece can be considered defective or unconvincing for its series of contrivances. But contrivance is precisely the stuff of this play, which moves in that richer terrain where the circumstantial subject matter is transcended in its very enactment. That circumstantial involvement is never abandoned, and *El gesticulador* is anything but the autistic exercise that Usigli was given to condemning so roundly. Yet, regardless of Usigli's personal proclamations in favor of a theatre of ideas and against his experimentally oriented contemporaries of the vanguard, his "pieza para demagogos" is one of those plays which all the while that it molds the theatrical medium into a vehicle of socio-political commentary also turns inward onto itself to unmask and probe the medium that it is. If the theatrical artifact that Usigli wields with *El gesticulador* is a mirror, the image reflected back to us is double: the Mexican scene and the play itself. Not only are fiction (in the sense of artistic invention) and language here vehicles for the expression of social and psychological concepts, but conversely, the historical reality of the play is a metaphor for the nature of fiction and the nature of language.

Usigli's volume of writings on the theatre and his prologues and epilogues to his plays give testimony to his concern for the state of the dramatic art in Mexico and also record his ponderings about the theatre as an instrument of esthetic expression.³ It is not my contention that Usigli wrote *El gesticulador* as a paean to the birth of a play, but it is surprising that critics have not responded to the structural evidence in the work that reveals it as self-reflexive. *El gesticulador* is a play within a play. Furthermore, since plays are inventions and the subject of this play is invention, *El gesticulador's* interior duplication contains the echo of its own making. What D. L. Shaw, in his useful and perceptive explication of Usigli's play,⁴ sees as a radical alteration in all its aspects by the end of Act II, is actually the fictional elaboration of the play within the play. Only at the exclusive level of the outer play can we speak, as Shaw does, of a thematic, interpersonal, and psychological evolution. What Shaw takes to be a transformation in the play's initial components are, more accurately, the new components of the second or interior play, the one for whose creation and existence the protagonist of the outer play, César Rubio the professor, is responsible. That is, where Shaw's perfectly acceptable interpretation functions at the level of a single play with a single character named César Rubio, another and perhaps more productive understanding of *El gesticulador* enlists Usigli and César Rubio in their own game and extracts from the text two plays, each with a character named César Rubio. To trace the interior recreation of César Rubio and subsequently to align the esthetic implications of his dual existence with the play's major thematic element will be our task in this essay.

That task is the more readily accomplished if, in view of the above discussion, we are willing to label *El gesticulador* as metatheatre. We shall then feel less constrained than Shaw to situate Usigli's play in the tradition of the classic tragedy, in the strict context of which it is likely a failure, and shall see it evolving more according to the Shakespearean and Calderonian vision of drama. *El gesticulador* is a metaplay first in the simple sense that it is self-reflexive. It is also a metaplay insofar as it fits into Abel's category of "theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized."⁵ Can there be any doubt that the action of *El gesticulador* adheres to Abel's dictum that "in the metaplay life *must* be a dream and the *world* must be a stage" (p. 79)? That this indivisibility of life and theatre, reality and dream was on Usigli's mind at this time is corroborated by the fact that he prefaces an essay written in 1939, the year after *El gesticulador*, with the speech from *As You Like It* (II, vii) in which Jaques pronounces the famous lines, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players"; and then picking up the Shakespeare citation, Usigli reaffirms: "Así la anatomía del teatro se asemeja a la humana."⁶ (The nebulous dividing line between lived and invented reality is a preoccupation in several of Usigli's plays.) The lengthy epilogue to *El gesticulador* had already drawn the connection between this philosophical stand, what Calderón called "el gran teatro del mundo," and the play's implication that offended so many viewers, namely that all Mexicans are gesticulators: "una escuela de teatro resultaba verdaderamente superflua en un lugar donde el teatro se vivía, donde todos eran políticos, es decir, actores consumados que actuaban cotidianamente en una farsa interminable."⁷ A gesticulator, an impostor, a hypocrite is an actor; conversely, imposture is an actor's lifeblood.

The characters within the play are themselves conscious of the existential and political metaphor that derives from this philosophical blurring. Miguel, soon after the play opens, by momentarily evoking the family's past as a lie, an unsuccessful comedy designed to camouflage their economic plight, presages the nature of the future action as a lie. Unlike Miguel, his father accepts the theatrical temper of existence. He sees as the only alternative to living one lie the living of another lie. The individual simply chooses to enact one or the other, so that in politics, the play makes clear, it is not a matter of authentic individuals versus role players. All are role players, and one can only hope that those who imitate goodness can conquer the impostors of evil. The two political gesturers in this play, Rubio and Navarro, are not of the same pith. César justifies his self-theatricalization both to his wife, Elena, and to his rival, Navarro, on the basis that humbug reigns in Mexico:

Todo el mundo aquí vive de apariencias, de gestos.

(II, 754)⁸

Puede que yo no sea el gran César Rubio. Pero, ¿quién eres tú? ¿Quién es cada uno en México? Dondequiera encuentras impostores, impersonadores, simuladores; asesinos disfrazados de héroes, burgueses disfrazados de líderes; ladrones disfrazados de diputados, ministros disfrazados de sabios, caciques disfrazados de demócratas, charlatanes disfrazados de licenciados, demagogos disfrazados de hombres. [. . .] Todos son unos gesticuladores hipócritas. [. . .] Todos usan ideas que no son suyas; todos son como las botellas que se usan en el teatro: con etiqueta de coñac, y rellenas de limonada.

(III, 782)

The interior fiction that César weaves in response to his personal dilemma and, secondarily, to his perception of the national scene has all the trappings of a play, including script, special rhetoric, costume, and actor's remuneration. For César and for his spectators, both those acting inside the play and those sitting outside it, that interior play, the enactment of dream-creation, constitutes the ultimate eradication of the frontiers between stage and street. Already by the time the spectator hears the recitation in Act II of Bolton's account that ends with "La verdad es siempre más extraña que la ficción," that irony has in turn been subjected to irony by the fact that the truth which is stranger than fiction is itself a fiction. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" is one echo; "toda la vida es sueño, y los sueños sueños son" is another.⁹ As man lives out his play, *El gesticulador* dramatizes man living out his play. There is no vehicle more ideal than a metaplay for the portrayal of a social order that lives by the lie. And as we shall see, in his ventilation of the theatre's artificial fabric, Usigli causes the mediating artifice to subvert the statement it appears to be making.

The raw material of *El gesticulador* is history—truth so rendered by time. Both the playwright and his principal character manipulate history in the interests of their respective fictions. That complex game circumscribes the relationship between creator and creation—that is, first between Usigli and César Rubio and then between Professor César Rubio and General César Rubio. Usigli recognizes

that the theatre is not history, but anti-history, and is accepted on faith rather than on the basis of certifiable evidence. The poet (that is, creative artist) and the historian do not have the same mission, which is why the *Corona* trilogy bears the designation of "piezas antihistóricas." In *El gesticulador*, the poet Usigli, inspired by history, has invented a historian who is, figuratively, a poet and who avails himself of history in order to fulfill himself as a poet. In other words, César Rubio is a historian who, in order to take his own place in history, turns poet and transcends the factual limitations of history; yet to do so, he is dependent on his detailed knowledge of historical happenings, as the scenes with the visiting delegation and with Navarro prove. Usigli and César Rubio thus appear to be creatures of the same ilk. Neither is slave to the historical scenario that serves him as inspiration. Usigli's belief that the theatre is the imaginative reconstruction of the past finds literal duplication in the actions of César Rubio. When Rubio interprets a historical fact that is an invention of Usigli's derived from the latter's interpretation of Mexico's past, the two have initiated a parallel process vis-à-vis history. We, sitting outside the play, know Usigli to be the fabricator of all these machinations; César Rubio, not so privileged, is responsible for the intricacies of his own involvements.

That responsibility devolves upon César Rubio as his creator casts the illusion of sharing his prerogatives as playwright in order to return to the realm of fiction, a fiction that he had made to appear historical. Initially, in the outer play—Usigli's exclusively—there is a fictional character named César Rubio, a university professor of history, protagonist of this drama. There is another fictional character, also the creation of Usigli, who by Usigli's designed coincidence likewise bears the name of César Rubio and was a famous general killed in the revolution. He is the fiction made to appear historical. (The pairing of Ambrose Bierce and César Rubio as Bolton's two research interests seems to legitimize the fiction historically.) From the perspective of the inner play, since Professor César Rubio has no Pirandellian insight into his fictionality, the general is a historical reality, and the drama is the professor's assumption of the fictional role of being the historical personage (the general). In that inner play, César Rubio is playwright and actor in one stroke. The creation of the general is accomplished in two phases, both of which are in the hands of the professor. The first is realized narratively when César tells Bolton the story of the general. The second is César's dramatization of the general in the body of the professor. How the general functions as a catalyst in the psychic development of the professor we shall remark on in a moment; for now it is significant that, thanks to the professor, the general has acquired dimensions far greater than those of his original pseudo-historic status, and even his mythic complexion has been reconfirmed. *El gesticulador* is in these terms the drama of Professor César Rubio's dramatization of General César Rubio. The tripartite division of the play reflects the course of this creative scheme:

- Act I—Introduction (past): César Rubio, professor and historian: the personal dilemma is exposed, along with its possible resolution through fiction.
- Act II—Transition (present): César Rubio, creator: the act of artistic invention is dramatized.

Act III—Resolution (future): César Rubio, general and politician: the fiction is realized; fiction and history together are transcended in the process of mythification.

As political drama, *El gesticulador* reaches its culminating point with the death of César Rubio. The interpretation of it as metatheatre, however, suggests a structural shift, with the climax of the outer play coming near the end of the first act when César allows Bolton to believe that he is the revolutionary general. That moment also constitutes the inception of the play within the play. César's acceptance of the deputation's political charge after lengthy discussion and probing in Act II is then the climax of the inner play. That leaves the final act as the occasion for the coalescence of identities.

To be fully accurate, the dynamics of that synthesis are manifested already in Act II, and the reaffirmation of identity is effected in the month that elapses before the action of the final act. Even the denial of the fiction is a step in the trajectory of its generation. When César says to the politicians, "Nunca pensé en resucitar el pasado, señores" (II, 760), reviving the past is exactly what he is doing. There is a further dramatic irony that underlines for the audience the dual level of the game in process when Treviño's question to César, "¿Por qué habla usted de sí mismo como si se tratara de otro?" receives the answer "Porque quizás así es" (II, 763). And as the interrogation draws to a close, two stage directions, of the sort that theatricalize the theatre, tell more than César's dialogue: "Involuntariamente en papel, viviendo ya el mito de César Rubio"; "Desamparado, arrastrado al fin por la farsa" (II, 765, 767).

Whether the professor's metamorphosis into the general is real or fictitious is a problem only for the spectator initiated into the two-tiered game of invention. César in the last act demonstrates both through his external demeanor and in his transmuted character that he has fully conformed to the role he had created for himself. If the professor in the outer play is unconscious of his fictionality in regard to Usigli, it is not so likely that the professor in the inner play forgets that as general he is role-playing; but the fiction has taken him over: that much is demonstrable. The César Rubio of Act III is an utterly new man, as distinct in personality, if not in identity, from the earlier César Rubio as that César Rubio is from Rodolfo Usigli. And like the playwright, César Rubio the historian disappears once the drama of the politician is under way. He can be present only in that portion of the play that is the staging of artistic creation. As the creation takes shape, its creator is expunged from the script, and when the act is consummated, only its effluence is visible. That visible entity in the end is the fruit of César's lie. He can say in full candor to Navarro in their confrontation: "Empecé mintiendo, pero me he vuelto verdadero" (III, 783). Those words reflect a conviction so strong that he repeats them to Elena: "Es que ya no hay mentira: fue necesaria al principio, para que de ella saliera la verdad. Pero ya me he vuelto verdadero, cierto" (III, 787). When Miguel, eavesdropping, hears César pronounce the words "No soy César Rubio" (III, 783), he believes he has heard the truth and, flushed with anguish, loses his faith in his father. But the irony is that his father *is* César Rubio—on two counts, no less: he is, as he has always been, César Rubio the professor; on top of that, he has *become*, and therefore is, César Rubio the general, psychically and in the eyes of the people. Ironi-

cally, too, he merits greater respect in his acquired condition than in his previous state. The ultimate irony is that the disappearance of the historian constitutes César Rubio's realization of himself as a historian. Unlike Bolton, César is a professor of history who does not write. He complains to Julia (I, 734) that, despite all his knowledge, he has been unable to create anything, even a book. Later he is to accomplish that more profoundly than he could have dreamed, far more perfectly than the productive but duped Bolton, for César's creation is flesh and book, subject (myth, being) and object (word, play) all at once. César's conversion into the general is his composition of a text, his evocation of history for others to read. He thus fulfills himself at the same time as a man, as a creative artist, and as a historian.

Of course, César does not accomplish this pursuit without assistance. Man's eagerness to believe in fictions is César's closest collaborator. His principal abettor is Oliver Bolton, for César's lie was Bolton's truth before César ever invented his lie. To the extent that César Rubio, floundering about, was a character in search of an author, in Bolton he finds his opportunity for self-definition. The creative act depends on coincidence—a suggestion, an observation, an illumination—for its inception. The outside stimulus catalyzes the inner need. Bolton makes his appearance, not intent on historical truth, but on “una verdad que corresponda al carácter de César Rubio, a la lógica de las cosas” (I, 745). César improvises, tests out his invention on this knowledgeable listener one step at a time, and the incipient idea matures into a full-fledged fiction and subsequently into (apparent) fact. The path is from inspiration to (ambiguous) text. In the second act the five politicians take up the task where Bolton had left it and become César's unwitting prompters in the composition of his script. Elena, by failing to disclose the masquerade when she had the opportunity to do so on both occasions, is guilty of complicity in the creative act. Julia, who thrives on heroes, gleefully embraces her father's new identity and will have no truck with her doubting brother. Navarro also contributes to César's fictionalization and, setting up another fiction to accomplish the feat, assures the character's immortalization. Everyone helps César Rubio to compose the text that he becomes.

In Act III there are two César Rubios present on stage: the man in his double identity and the image on the election poster. The device accentuates the duality, particularly when César asks if the portrait resembles him. Guzmán's emphatic assent and his report of an old man's statement, “César no cambia” (III, 776), nurture the dramatic irony while confirming the imposition of the face depicted on the poster, that of the general, the fiction. The two entities have acquired the same face. In the end, as the creator has become his creation and the self has turned into the other, the other's past reinvented to be present transforms the self's illusions into reality. The simulacrum is on paper, not in the body of the living César Rubio. When César says, “el muerto no es César Rubio, sino yo, el que era yo . . .” (III, 787), we realize that both Rubios will have died twice: the professor when he became the general and when the politician is assassinated; the general first in his condition as historical fiction and then in his fictive reincarnation. By the time of the assassination, the two fictions—the one that usurped its creator's role and the one whose historicity was usurped—have fused in the process of mythification.

The continuing presence of César Rubio on stage, even after his death, in the form of his likeness on the placard symbolizes his mythification. The mythic dimension of *El gesticulador* is of special importance in linking the play's meta-theatrical structure with its thematic implications. It is the vehicle that extracts from César Rubio's interior recreation a commentary on the superiority of fiction, the ambiguity of language and art, and the relativity of truth.

Myth, to start with, is an amalgam of truth and lie: history recast as fiction or fiction become historical. *El gesticulador* is myth because history so revived as to be present and ever-present is myth. But if lie is a fundamental ingredient of myth, in Usigli's play myth is lie in a more problematic and disquieting fashion. If we follow the general's trajectory, we see that he has passed from history (or historical fiction) to myth before the action of the play opens. He is then, in the course of *El gesticulador's* dramatic present, historically reborn only to be mythified once again and permanently. However, we descry a difference between the original and the ultimate mythic states: the one that precedes the action of the drama and is recast by it rings true, while the one that is newly contrived and legated to infinity stands on the hollow foundation of dishonesty. After all, it is the work of a trickster clever enough to appreciate the disparity between the mythic potential of a hag-ridden professor with a flypaper memory and a heroic revolutionary who suffered a mysterious fate. The myth appears further debased through the participation of Bolton, who in his innocence is more mythmaker than historian, and Navarro, whose mythmaking is clearly a function of his political demagoguery.

We are making a mistake, however, if we isolate the general from the professor, as the play does not, for the process of mythification is cumulative and *El gesticulador* is in any event the professor's, not the general's, drama. We commit a further error if we stop at the imprecations that *El gesticulador* hurls at the morality of its historical circumstance. The collectivization of a lie is demagoguery in a political context; in another it is mythification. The very failure of the revolution that César Rubio's fate dramatizes leaves him larger than life through the growth that he has experienced. If the existing myth of the general serves as the enabling agent for the professor's fictitious dispossession of the general, then the weak professor's psychic accomplishment is as much to be wondered at as the deeds of a soldier in battle. The professor's maneuver of becoming another, which is the action of this play, automatically grants him the other's mythic stature, but that stature has been earned in the becoming. The sullyng contribution of Navarro's mythmaking cannot be erased from the text; yet it does not diminish César Rubio's rights to mythic rank: it diminishes only itself.¹⁰

The elevation of César Rubio the man into a myth whose stature, on the one hand, he deserves but of whose falseness, on the other hand, the spectator is quite aware represents a tension that inheres to fiction insofar as fiction also demands faith in a falsehood. Rather than resolving that tension, the action of *El gesticulador* traces its elaboration through the blatant exposure of the inner play's César Rubio as a fiction. Mythopoeia and the invention of fictions are thus equalized in the irresolvable tensions of their constituent qualities.

D. L. Shaw says (p. 132): "while the man dies his imposture lives on." Precisely so: Cervantes, Unamuno, Pirandello, and history itself have demon-

strated that the creation outlives its creator, that the fiction is not burdened with the finiteness of man. César confirms that idea from his perspective when, with an ironic smile, he assures Bolton that the general is more alive than the two of them. If one wonders how César Rubio can compose a script for himself that includes his own death, the answer is that as a man playing the role of another, he knows—and he proves so in his clash with Navarro—that his death is part of his performance. His death in the third act is the natural follow-up to the second-act suppression of the professor as he evolved into another. That process of subsumption, it would appear, engenders more lasting forms: fiction, myth, immortality. The murder and the permanent sequestration of the truth are, ironically, the guarantors of these happy states. Realizing—as Bolton does not—that the truth that is stranger than fiction *is* fiction, we find ourselves seduced by the notion that fiction is superior to truth.

Such a view of the privileged status of fiction is viable only if we relinquish our insistence on absolutes, as Miguel refuses to, and behold ambiguity as the inherent characteristic of language that allows such a posture. A play's self-examination as theatre must ultimately turn upon its agent of linguistic communication, the word. *El gesticulador's* plot and structure are dependent on the same sign's reference to two initially distinct entities: "César Rubio."¹¹ That alone is an admission into Usigli's word game. A further embroilment at this level centers on the mythic connotations of "César": a literal or an ironic reading of the sign bestows contradictory personalities on its bearer and classifies the word as variably revealing or deceptive. Similarly, in the play's opening conversation among the family members, many of Julia's comments are made in a sarcastic tone. With bitter playfulness she inverts the surface meaning of her words and their intended thrust, thereby exposing the untruthfulness of the linguistic sign. By contrast, when Miguel says: "Ahora ya hemos empezado a hablar" (I, 730), the suggestion is that only through language can the truth be enunciated; the absence of discourse is the absence of truth.¹² César agrees that it is best to let language manifest itself: "No quiero que volvamos a estar [. . .] rodeados de pausas." Finally, the arbitrator in this situation, Elena, issues a double plea. First, she says that César owes his children no explanations: that is, silence is preferable to speech. Secondly, she admonishes him not to take the children's words at face value ("Ni debes tomar así lo que ellos digan" [I, 730]), which means that their words must be apprehended in context, interpreted. One concludes that language is untrustworthy and mystifying. That sentence, itself fraught with a multiplicity of meanings, which César addresses to his son, reverberates everywhere: "No conoces el precio de las palabras" (I, 731). Articulated or not, words can hide the truth, just as the furniture and dishes borrowed for the party on Elena's saint's day concealed the truth of the family's poverty. But, ever deceptive, the signs are reversed when the situation changes, and the contradiction between appearance and reality is perpetuated. In its period of poverty, the family professed economic comfort; now, when the family's fortunes are on the rise, "se advierte cierta ostentación de pobreza, una insistencia de César Rubio en presumir de modestia" (III, 773). At that same juncture in the play, language is shown to have a subversive potential even if it is not actively manipulated (at least, the manipulator here is not Rubio but Usigli): Estrella includes in his reading of the President's

telegram the word "punto" after each sentence. The ideograph converted into word acts as a subverting agent that renders a serious document ludicrous.¹³

At the same time as language is truth's only hope, the ambiguity of language confers upon truth its relativity. Language is with equal ease the mediator of hypocrisy or truth, fiction or history. Exactly at the point where César Rubio's fictionality is consummated, the words that he pronounces in apparent affirmation of his identity ring out as a declaration of the subterfuge of language: "He dicho ya que soy César Rubio" (II, 760). Truth and lie are one here. The speaker is, indeed, César Rubio. But does the linguistic label, a convention, establish identity? Or does identity—truth—lie in the nature of the object independently of its signifier? If so, can we ever fathom the nature of anything through language? Is language then not a misleading instrument whose essence invites error and misuse? If the code is imperfect, the talented and the unscrupulous decoder operate in the same terrain. César Rubio evidently is a master of the word: "Sabe escuchar, callar, decir lo estrictamente preciso [. . .] Al señor Presidente lo conquistó a las cuatro palabras" (III, 773). He constructs his fictional self entirely through understatement, ellipsis, and insinuation. The ambiguity—multiplicity and duplicity—of language accomplishes the rest for him as his listeners cooperate. Meaning is attributed *to* the word; it does not emanate *from* it. The word thus fixes on an object the identity that others perceive in it (that is, fictionalize). Estrella's use of the title "mi general," first hesitatingly, then with assurance, suffices to make a general of César Rubio. The object comes into being upon conferral of a sign.¹⁴

Within *El gesticulador*, only Elena, in fear of the consequences, and Miguel, out of idealistic conviction, resist the apparent inversion of truth and lie. In addition to her timid effort to deflect her husband from his course, Elena tries to convince Julia to forget a young man in Mexico City, pointing out that he does not love her. Julia's hurt reaction triggers an oracular response that Elena utters as a reproach but that accurately describes the motives of Julia and the others about her: "La verdad es la que te hace daño, hija" (II, 750). Here the word is truth, and the truth impedes the soothing elaboration of a fiction. Her friend is forgotten later on as Julia, always in need of a *Lebenslüge*, becomes enraptured by the myth of César Rubio in which she is participating. At that point she protests to Elena like a latter-day Segismundo: "No hay mentira, mamá. Todo el pasado fue un sueño, y esto es real" (III, 793). Miguel, unlike his sister, rejects the relativity of a positive present if it does not quench his thirst for totally unadulterated historical veracity. "Nada es más grande que la verdad," he shouts (III, 790), and the play ends with his plea, "¡La verdad!" He cannot accept his fate of having been born into a world of façades as bogus as the sets in a theatre and clamors to strip away the deceit that hides the truth. He is too naive to have captured the facts of life—and language and play; too fixed in his convictions to acknowledge the destructive powers of truth, to say nothing of its inaccessibility; and too one-dimensional in his fictional constitution to recognize that whatever César Rubio accomplishes internally and whatever Usigli accomplishes with *El gesticulador* has been accomplished by fiction. Usigli's own plays are eloquent statements of his belief in the expression of truth; but as a practicing dramatist,

he chooses illusion as his vehicle. In his epilogue to *El gesticulador* and in his pronouncements elsewhere, he unwaveringly condemns the lie that the Mexican lives in every phase of his personal and national existence. Yet, in the play, the positions that emerge are not so clear-cut. César's lie has a positive moral dimension, while Miguel's passion for truth is touched by quixotism and inflexibility. The inventor of fictions garners the prize of immortality in myth; the seeker of truth is condemned to personal anxiety over the unbreachable mystery of the absolute. Certainly, *El gesticulador* paints all the evils of hypocrisy and cheating, but it also invests lying (fiction) with moral exemplariness. If on an ethical plane that lesson seems astonishing, cynically pragmatic, even Machiavellian, to the adherents of fiction and of the sustaining power of illusion, that formula comes as no surprise. As every critic knows, fiction is a religion that demands faith, yet does not crumble under rational scrutiny.

With language beyond the grasp of absolutes and meaning such an uncertain commodity, it becomes apparent why Usigli should opt for a play in the first place, and in particular one in which the fictive process is dramatized, in order to declare that the search for truth is best served by the recognition of its relativity. In a country where the university is mute, saddled with strikes and repression—"nadie enseñaba ni nadie aprendía ya" (I, 731)—the theatre must take over as the propagator of truth, as Usigli does with his play and César Rubio with his. "Un pueblo sin teatro es un pueblo sin verdad" is the motto for the epilogue (p. 159), which is a way of saying that the absence of fiction equals the absence of truth. That the theatre is fiction, dependent on the brittle medium of language and on interpretation, does not hamper it in its function because fiction and truth occupy the same space. Julia accurately locates that space when she angrily says to her brother: "La verdad está dentro, no fuera de uno" (III, 791). César, himself, proclaims the pluralistic character of truth, at least implicitly, when in answering Elena's overtures that he abandon his illusions, he shifts his phrasing: "¡Mis sueños! Siempre he querido *la* realidad: es lo que tú no puedes entender. *Una* realidad. . ." (II, 753; my italics).¹⁵ Miguel's final cry for *the* truth is accompanied by an action that suffuses his hope with the deepest irony: "el rollo de carteles [. . .] se abre como un abanico en una múltiple imagen de César Rubio" (III, 798). Those unfurling multiple images are the multiple images that the play has constructed: the multiple images of César Rubio, of language, of art, of truth. In many vanguard works, self-reflexivity is a voluntary divestiture of their illusionist status. *El gesticulador's* self-referentiality as dramatic creation is, rather, a confrontation with reality and a proclamation in support of truthful expression. Miguel, however, is not its spokesman, for Usigli's play recognizes itself as an imposture that condemns posturing. Usigli alerts his spectator to the horrifying duplicity that marks politics and human relationships; but he has understood that in the inscrutable and privileged realms of language and of art this same duplicity harbors all the secrets of their delight.

Notes

1. Carlos Solórzano, *Teatro latinoamericano en el siglo XX* (Mexico: Pormaca, 1964), p. 132. I do not intend to enmesh myself here in the discussions of reality and realism, fanned by Usigli's own essays and taken up eagerly by his readers; for example, Vera F. de Beck, "La fuerza motriz, en la obra dramática de Rodolfo Usigli," *Revista Iberoamericana*, 18 (1953), 369-83.
2. Solomon Tilles, "Rodolfo Usigli's Concept of Dramatic Art," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 3/2 (1970), 33.
3. Eunice J. Gates has drawn attention to these in "Usigli As Seen in His Prefaces and Epilogues," *Hispania*, 37 (1954), 432-39; Tilles examines them further, as does R. Vance Savage, "Rodolfo Usigli's Idea of a Mexican Theatre," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 4/2 (1971), 13-20. An openly preceptive essay on how to fashion a play is Usigli's *Itinerario del autor dramático* (Mexico: La Casa de España, 1940).
4. "Dramatic Technique in Usigli's *El gesticulador*," *Theatre Research International*, 1 (1976), 125-33.
5. Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), p. 60.
6. *Anatomía del teatro* (Mexico: Ecuador 0°0'0", 1967), pp. 15, 26.
7. "Epílogo sobre la hipocresía del mexicano," in *El gesticulador* (Mexico: Letras de México, 1944), p. 190.
8. All textual references to *El gesticulador*, by act and page number, are to Rodolfo Usigli, *Teatro completo*, I (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963), 727-802.
9. Of the two historians in the play, Rubio is clearly the more sage. Bolton, who proclaims that "La historia no es una novela," falls into the trap of propelling a myth as history. César, for his part, says: "Sin embargo, la historia no es más que un sueño. Los que la hicieron soñaron con cosas que no se realizaron; los que la estudian sueñan con cosas pasadas; los que la enseñan (con una sonrisa) sueñan que poseen la verdad y que la entregan" (I, 746).
10. Through a series of telltale strokes the spectators are readied for the mythic fettle of the character they see on stage from the outset. Not the least of these is the name that associates him with the Roman emperor, both the historical figure and the Shakespearean character, the story of whose triumphs and betrayal has persisted as myth. The play twice makes specific reference to Caesar in open parallelism (II, 756; III, 786). At the same time, the first description of César blurs time-bound history and timeless myth in his very person: "su figura recuerda vagamente la de Emiliano Zapata y, en general, la de los hombres y las modas de 1910, aunque vista impersonalmente y sin moda" (I, 728). In short, Elena is confused when she defines César's flaw as his refusal to be himself, for César was created to be a role player. His name as a sign of Roman and Mexican history-become-myth, his identity as a character in a play, his socio-political circumstance, and the idea that the world is a stage all bear out his mythic and fictive ethos.
11. Navarro, with Usigli guiding a careful choice of words, spells out the nature of the farce ("Te viene grande la figura de César Rubio, hombre. No sé cómo has tenido el descaro . . . el valor de meterte en esta farsa") and the role that the word plays in it ("Te llamas César y te apellidas Rubio, pero eso es todo lo que tienes del general. [. . .] Se acuerdan de tu cara, y cuando quieren nombrarte no tienen más remedio que decir César Rubio") (III, 781).
12. Later, when the Bolton account is made public, Miguel is once more the first to implore that truth and fiction be sorted out, and he again sees the solution resting with the word: "¿Y por qué el silencio? No es más que una palabra . . ." (II, 757). But if César were to give his word, would Miguel then have solved the enigma? One need only take note of the political delegation's dependency on César's word.
13. The element of political satire through language in *El gesticulador* should not escape the spectator. From the moment the politicians enter the scene in Act II, the dialogue takes on rhetorical overtones. With the coinage of the word "rubista" (III, 774), this dimension of the play reaches its apex. An individual who is a sham is the basis for a new word that consequently is informed of a meaning of whose emptiness all who use it are unaware. Their perception has led them to confer meaning on a sign; but in reality its referent and the meaning accorded it stand in contradiction to each other. Also, the following definition, in César's words, deserves some thought: "La política es una especie de filología de la vida que lo concatena todo" (III, 775).
14. In the "Epílogo" Usigli attacks the practice that "los universitarios fracasados" have of acquiring titles through political means: "el título es un escudo, una apariencia o máscara, una mentira individual en que el hombre se enconcha para esconder su incapacidad para hacer frente de otro modo a la vida. Y esta mentira se colectiviza con rapidez y despersonaliza a su propietario convirtiéndolo para siempre, de modo abstracto, en el doctor, el licenciado, etc." (p. 191). The first sentence applies in part to Professor César Rubio; the second then fits César Rubio become "el general." But the critical attitude with which Usigli makes this state-

ment cannot be brashly connected to César because the moral context of his fictional existence is equivocal. Outside the play, the social reality to which the remark pertains makes it wholly condemnatory; but in the framework of his fictionality, César's behavior is as moral as it is immoral. "Es inútil añadir que *El gesticulador* no es precisamente César Rubio, sino que tiene una semejanza impresionante con México" (p. 204).

15. I recognize that those who believe in the possibility of apprehending an absolute truth or a single legitimate textual meaning will reject such a relativist view, which they regard as crassly subjective. E. D. Hirsch, for example, in *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), calls this relativistic fallacy "cognitive atheism" (p. 36). This objection, of course, constitutes a denial of all perspectivist theories. On the other hand, Abel, in his summary of *Metatheatre* (p. 113), gives his classification those traits that Usigli has attempted to articulate in *El gesticulador*: "Tragedy gives by far the stronger sense of the reality of the world. Metatheatre gives by far the stronger sense that the world is a projection of human consciousness. / Tragedy glorifies the structure of the world, which it supposedly reflects in its own form. Metatheatre glorifies the unwillingness of the imagination to regard any image of the world as ultimate. [. . .] Metatheatre assumes there is no world except that created by human striving, human imagination."