

Juicio final: A Definition of Human Existence

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El hombre moderno no se entrega a nada de lo que hace.

—OCTAVIO PAZ

This one-act play deals in Existential terms with the problem of being. At the instant of his death, a man finds himself before a judge and assumes that he must give an account for all that he has done in his life, but that is not the issue. Instead, the Judge's concern is to find out whether the man was ever truly alive while on earth—whether any spark of life has survived his corporal death—and he steers the interview accordingly. The protagonist is oblivious to the problem and pursues his own line of thought. His sense of personal identity lies wholly in what he was in life (father, husband, businessman), but as the Judge points out, these are relationships with the world that ceased when he died. Now he is alone. Is there anything in him that can endure?

But can't I call on my good deeds, cries the man; all the sacrifices I made to bring up my children, don't they count for anything? Yes, they count, says the Judge, but only in an indirect manner; only insofar as they affected you. Did you ever feel that you yourself were the product of the love you bore your children? Wasn't it your self-denial for them that made you? "Porque, en el fondo . . . esas cosas que uno hace lo hacen a uno. Uno las hace a ellas y ellas nos hacen a nosotros" (p. 167).¹ The good works that I have performed, answers the man, are what have made me.—Well, then, where are you? "¿Dónde está? Es lo que buscamos" (p. 167).

As it develops, the protagonist is an average, middle class man of the world. He has had no true experience of life, nor ever allowed himself to feel the essence of living. The problem posed in the play is, where is man's soul found, his true identity? The answer involves the definition of existence and life. It is a common fallacy to suppose that one *is*, on a human level, simply because of what one has done or made of oneself in society; we must distinguish who we are from what we have done:

Hombre: El haber hecho muchas cosas prueba que tengo que haberme hecho a mí.

Juez: Desgraciadamente eso no es cierto. Hay quienes no hacen nada, y son tanto. Y quienes hacen mucho, y son tan poco. (p. 172)

Deeds accomplished, goals realized, rules of conduct observed—these are dictates of the mind. They are reasoned inferences about life, but not an immersion in the essence of living, not a direct contact with life as a pulsating, spontaneous experience of the moment when time ceases and one is exposed to an absolute present. It is in the feeling function, in the Eros principle that life is found.

So thinks the Judge, as we observe when he asks the man how he feels about Nature. Has he ever stood outside at midnight, at the center of the universe, to contemplate the starlit sky, forgetting the concerns that possessed him by day? No. Does he enjoy being in the country? No, he has always been a man of action and he finds the country boring. Nevertheless, he remembers that once he was on his way to a social gathering one clear, cool evening, and he was about to ring the doorbell when all at once he felt sad. Without rhyme or reason he suddenly had an urge to go for a walk and ramble through the streets. . . . Nothing like this had ever come over him before. This is very important, says the Judge, what happened during the walk? No, he didn't go for a walk; he resisted this impulse and simply rang the doorbell. The mood passed as soon as he joined his friends.

Juez: Estaba usted llamándose esa noche, y no se oyó. O, mejor dicho, se oyó, pero no quiso atenderse. Es una gran lástima. Esa noche nos hubiera bastado ahora. Pero se abandonó usted a sí mismo, lo abandonó. Y ahora él lo abandona a usted. (p. 173)

The man begins to understand.

Throughout the play, the music of a flute is heard whenever feeling is mentioned, as during this passage where the man recalls his irrational impulse. Then, when he thwarted the impulse, or as the Judge says, when he forsook his inner self, the music of the flute fades away. Martínez describes its melody at length; it is to be sad and sinuous like "el alma en pena de un rondador ecuatoriano" (p. 159). In a limited sense, the music of the flute leads us to understand that the man's soul comes hovering near him whenever he evokes his encounters with it. More importantly, however, music activates the feeling function and symbolizes it. A literary example of this is found in *Steppenwolf* (Hesse's dramatization of Jungian psychology) when the intellectual Harry Haller is initiated into the feeling or Eros side of life by Hermine's dancing lessons. For this reason the flute, an emblem of the great god Pan, carries the meaning of the play. Its rhythm is an image of the flow of psychic energy, the life force that animates man and draws him into life—all that lives is governed by rhythm.

Hoping to help the man, the Judge questions him about his childhood. Didn't he experience his true self at that time of unaffected participation in life? "En esa época de la vida, por lo general, se encuentra uno a sí mismo" (p. 174). After much searching, the man remembers that as a child he had wanted to be a musician, and yes, he had bought himself a red flute. Here is a true symbol

of life, for red is the color of feeling and a red flute is marvelously emblematic of the real experience of psychic health which this modern Everyman might have known. The pure and other-worldly quality of a flute's tone evokes the life he repressed. Meanwhile, offstage, the restless piping of this flute passes through the spectators with a quiver, and sinks into silence.

The man in *Juicio final* now feels that his life is like a house with laughter inside: "La vida mía, es como una casa en la que quiero meterme, y no encuentro la puerta. Y oigo voces adentro. Y risas. . . . Es triste. Porque también me oigo reír a mí, adentro" (p. 172). I take this to be the house of his inner reality, with its *life* (the laughter); he wants to enter into himself, but the ego has never contacted the total psyche which is the Self. The ego has been frozen within consciousness and has had no inkling of that which is beyond reason, beyond its own limits, and it is now too late.

The house with its voices and laughter is an image of the fullness of life, where the rules of time are suspended and one is plunged into a continuous present. In effect, it is identical with Octavio Paz's perception of the Mexican fiesta, which he describes as an immersion into pure living such as we enjoyed before the birth of consciousness: "la Fiesta . . . abre en dos al tiempo cronométrico para que . . . el presente eterno se reinstale. . . . La Edad de Oro regresa."² In contrast, the kind of fiestas the man of *Juicio final* attended were social obligations; he never lost or forgot himself for a moment.

In the terms that Mircea Eliade has provided, the house full of laughter into which the man cannot enter is the transcendent reality of myth, where sacred time, the modality of the gods, prevails.³ It may be entered, for example, by means of ritual, which destroys the meaningless profane time wherein we ordinarily live. But for the man in *Juicio final*, any ritual, such as the ritual of his religion, was purely formal, as his hypocrisy in extolling the virtue of the Last Sacraments reveals. A typical modern, he lived in a world without transcendence, or as Paz and Sartre put it, in a world without exit, never knowing, indeed deliberately avoiding, those timeless moments which are snatches of the eternal present. Because he has never lived outside of time, he simply does not have the capacity for eternity. In Christian terms, he has no wedding garment.

He is equally wanting in the matter of love and even hatred; he has never committed himself to any idea or to any person. Once a young woman fell in love with him, but, as he says, it would have been dangerous for him to have reciprocated. His whole life, his very being might have been in jeopardy. The Judge explodes: "¿Para qué quieren ustedes la inmortalidad entonces?, si no tienen nada con que llenarla, si no tienen nada que llevar a ella" (p. 177).

Existentialism, Martínez is saying, is commitment to the joy *and* heartache of living, to the beautiful abandon found in music, emotion, instinct. Experience of the non-rational is essential to total existence, for such encounters make us and give us an identity in the world of objects. Otherwise we are engulfed in custom, duty, and standards which are empty unless touched by the magical essence of life.

Inevitably, because he knows nothing else, the man in *Juicio* keeps referring to the kind of life he led as evidence that he exists, and when the Judge repeats that it is not his life that is being judged, it is he himself, the man screams: "Empieza

usted a decir tonterías. ¡Yo soy mi vida!" (p. 175). Oh yes, says the Judge, one likes to say that. But some lives are so false, so hollow, that there is nobody inside. Many people who think that somewhere or other they have a soul, an authentic self to sustain them if the need arises, discover that they are empty shells when death or adversity threatens them. Their lives were filled, but they were empty. They should have clung to something that does not pass, a meaningful idea, a truth.

In these different ways Martínez advances his argument that man's essence consists in being truly alive and open to the mystery of life, and not in accumulating accomplishments, for these do not define us unless life has passed through them into us. The play is about real wisdom. To the questions, what is existence? what is essence? it declares that the answer is the same for both, namely, the life process and man's participation in it.

Martínez uses the setting of the particular judgment immediately after death for its dramatic and didactic value, not to make any religious statement. Why the title is *Juicio final* and not more fittingly "juicio particular" may be that the outcome for this man *is* final, since there is no being left in him, nothing that can be either rewarded or punished. To the man's question, What happens now? the Judge replies, Nothing, and prepares to leave. Nothing in the fullest sense of the word. As he begins to realize the meaning of this nothingness, the man weeps. For him, as for so many of us hollow men of this century, the world ends with a whimper.

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Notes

1. José de Jesús Martínez, *Juicio final* (1962) in *El teatro hispanoamericano contemporáneo*, Carlos Solórzano, ed. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1964), vol. 2.

2. Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1969), p. 189.

3. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), pp. 21, 35f.