

Elements of Audience Participation in Gentile's *Hablemos a calzón quitado*

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A comprehensive study has yet to be written on audience involvement in the contemporary theatre, a study that would include at the very least a typology of degrees of involvement graded from differing perspectives (erasure of theatre-audience-world distinctions; various forms of direct address to the audience; metatheatrical projection, including reduplication of the audience within the theatrical work; exploitation of the registers of, alternately, classical dramatic autonomy and documentary colloquialism, and narrativity vs. dramaticity). Nevertheless, such a study, if based on an intuitive understanding of contemporary theatrical forms, would necessarily include: a minimal tripartite distinction between structures for a feigned unconcern for the physical presence of the audience as "receptors" of the theatrical event;¹ structures for a direct commentary addressed to the audience, along with verbal and acting gestures that allude explicitly to the existence of an audience; and, finally, but not without an array of possible rhetorical shadings, mechanisms for spectator involvement, such that the audience becomes one of the functioning semiological signs of the play. Whereas the first two broad possibilities permit the silent, private reading of the play as literature, the latter is only complete if spectators are physically present in the theatrical context and can be somehow explicitly involved in the action, whether throughout the play or at some fixed point(s). In this third sense, the text is only a partial outline of the complete theatrical sign, which is made whole only with the overt intervention or involvement of an actual audience (and on the basis of the spontaneous aspects such an element implies).

Contemporary Argentine theatre—plays performed roughly since the fall of Perón in the mid-fifties—has been unquestionably dynamic and many works reveal the assimilation and emulation of the sort of experimentalism associated with the best international efforts. Nevertheless, for a multitude of reasons—a precarious national economy that threatens the theatre with extinction, sporadic

but nevertheless heavy-handed censorship, audiences that in general prefer to partake of "sophistication" in foreign works in translation rather than supporting local efforts at excellence and originality, the frequent lack of that constellation of sociocultural factors that make up what we loosely call a sustained theatrical tradition (there are relatively few Argentine dramatists who, like Pirandello, Brecht, Pinter, Williams, Buero Vallejo, have more than three or four works to their credit; Cuzzani and Dragún are among the few exceptions)—Argentine dramatic works of the last twenty years have shied away from the complex efforts at open form and audience participation we associate with the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, and the Bread and Puppet Theatre. Argentina did, nevertheless, have a brief flurry in the late sixties of that paratheatrical phenomenon called the "happening."

For this reason, one cannot point to a single major example of works belonging to the third major type of structures mentioned above, although there were a number of rather abortive attempts (e.g., the Los Altillos de Florida work around 1970). Guillermo Gentile's *Hablemos a calzón quitado*² is one of the few works that attained some degree of success in this difficult venture, and, despite the reservations that critics have rightly expressed about its overall coherence as an example of a message theatre devoted to consciousness-raising, it occupies a secure place in Latin American drama of the early seventies precisely for its attempts to bridge the abyss of alienated reserve separating sweating actors from passive spectators.³

Gentile's play is unabashedly political in nature, and the prefatory note to the printed text is quite explicit in attributing transcendent meaning to the sparse cast of characters:

Hay 3 tragedias de la Imagen:

1) El Padre: Delante del espejo, rechaza su imagen porque no le satisface, pero echa la culpa al espejo: EL MUNDO ALIENADO SE NIEGA A ASUMIRSE, A ASUMIR SUS MISERIAS.

2) El Hijo: BUSCA SU VERDADERA IMAGEN. Es el hombre puro a la búsqueda de la verdad y al encontrarla encontrará también la soledad de tener que soportarla. Su tragedia desemboca entonces en cómo soportar ese enorme peso de LA VERDAD. LA ÚNICA CONTESTACIÓN ES "EL AMOR." Es decir que "EL AMOR" es lo único que permite al hombre enfrentar su Verdad. EL AMOR redime al Hombre de su alienación, lo desaliena, y le permite una salida de su TRAGEDIA.

3) El Amigo: Como Intelectual, conoce el problema de la Imagen y lo denuncia. Denuncia al MUNDO ALIENADO que se satisface con la imagen del "Hombre conquistador del espacio." Denuncia a la Imagen distorsionada, que castra al progreso científico real. De lo que Martín no se da cuenta es que está prisionero del mismo problema Imagen. En efecto: Martín rechaza todas las falsas imágenes, menos una: La imagen de "Martín REVOLUCIONARIO." MARTÍN ESTÁ BIEN INTENCIONADO Y HACE LO QUE ÉL CREE JUSTO, pero no se da cuenta que lo hace TAMBIÉN para satisfacer una "Imagen revolucionaria de sí mismo," que él necesita inconscientemente satisfacer. Esta imagen será la que de pronto le impedirá ver la "totalidad" de Juan, la "total dimensión

del hombre," y cuando finalmente busque la causa de su fracaso, descu-
brirá su barba frente al espejo, comprenderá lo que ha pasado, y se arran-
cará esa "barba falsamente revolucionaria," es decir, se despojará de la
imagen: Esta es una de las finalidades de la pieza: "Depurar el verdadero
sentido de un proceso revolucionario" (p. 3).

Allegory is a vague and overused word, particularly in the context of com-
mitted literature that pretends to offer a message concerning immediate social
issues. Nevertheless, it is, on the basis of the note just quoted, virtually an
inescapable epithet for *Hablemos a calzón quitado*, and El Padre could well have
been designated to interact not with the uninformatively named Juan and Martín,
but with, say, El Nene Boludo and El Estudiante Barbudo. If we take allegory
to mean the use of specific names and meaning contexts to denote preferentially
abstract semantic concepts (degenerate authoritarianism, repression, and revolu-
tionary sentiment in the case of the characters of *Hablemos*) rather than referring
to actual or, in the case of literature, to postulated human beings and realia,
Gentile's play comes close to being allegorical. Moreover, descriptive names like
El Padre, along with my two suggested substitutions for Juan and Martín, are
less referential than they are predicative or attributive, to the extent that they
eschew the identification of discrete objects in the real world and stress predicate
attributes of otherwise unidentified objects; once again, the stress is on the
abstract rather than on the concrete. *Hablemos*, to be sure, is not allegorical
drama in the sense that Calderón's *El gran teatro del mundo* is. Nevertheless,
like much thesis drama of modern literature, the "realistic" plot (which may
tend markedly toward the "expressionistic" in contemporary works like the play
under discussion) is often quite a transparent veil for the underlying semantic
features of the message being proposed.

In the case of Gentile's play, as may be seen from the prefatory note quoted
above, the emphasis is on a context in which a repressive and sexually degenerate
father (he is overtly homosexual and, moreover, makes his living assaulting taxi
drivers by night) keeps his twenty-four year old son in emotional and spiritual
thralldom (he functions effectively as a five- or six-year old) by playing alter-
nately the authoritarian father and the smothering mother. Into this sick con-
text—the realistic touches reminiscent of casebook examples of such stories are
rendered even more grotesque by restrained but highly appropriate expressionistic
details like the childish games played by father/mother and son—comes Martín,
the paradigmatic student revolutionary who needs a place to bed down and who
accepts Juan's childishly eager invitation when they meet by accident. Inevitably,
Martín discovers the relationship between El Padre and Juan and is appropriately
appalled by it. He undertakes none too subtly to "modify" Juan's behavior and
to bring out his innate but repressed intelligence and thirst for life. Juan rebels
against his father and calls his bluff when he threatens to leave if the son does
not abandon Martín's examples. Martín, impressed at his charge's progress, also
leaves, so that Juan may continue to find himself and his place in the world on
his own. Clearly, Gentile is concerned with the question of individual liberty
and the development of human potential free from an oppressive and inherently
degenerate authoritarianism that uses comforting but degrading overprotection
as an effective means for impeding spiritual (and concomitantly political) ma-

turity. In short, *Hablemos* is underlain by a rather overt political ideology in which the revolutionary student challenges a status quo that is portrayed in the most disadvantageous terms possible; moreover, he uses sex education and book learning (combined in one of the books given Juan to read, a sex manual) to combat the values of a father/mother-figure portrayed as sexually deviant and addicted to the cheapest forms of subculture.

The foregoing unreservedly explicit opposition between El Padre and Martín provides the fundamental semantic axis of the play, and it is difficult for any playgoer or reader to miss the point of such diametric poles of human values. The only degree of hedging on Gentile's part (and it must be remembered that *Hablemos* was first produced in Buenos Aires during the Onganía military dictatorship; censorship existed and open defiance of traditional values was still a risky undertaking) concerns the fact that while Martín represents an overt political stance (at the end of the play he hints at taking leave not just for Juan's good, but in order to undertake some sort of "mission"), El Padre represents a generalized pattern of behavior that the audience is induced to accept as symbolic of a reactionary sociopolitical body like Argentina. El Padre is *la patria*, the "fatherland" that is masculine in its basic sense (*patria* is etymologically related to *padre*) but feminine in function (*patria* is grammatically feminine). Nevertheless, the semantic opposition between El Padre and Juan is inescapable throughout the play and provides the cardinal axis along which the particular semiological signs of the play are structured: the false transvestite father and the patriarchal tutor, unequivocally "masculine" in his Che Guevara beard and dress. This fundamental distinction is echoed at several points in the play. The following scene, which comes immediately after a pathetic attempt by the father to hold Juan by reciting a verse of pseudo-poetry, will serve to illustrate the juxtaposition of the two "father figures"; this scene, moreover, is the only explicit use of the Argentine popular expression that serves as the title of the play:

PADRE: Martín. . . Hablemos como amigos, sin rodeos, sin ocultarnos nada. . . ¡A calzón quitado! Como suele decirse. . . (*Pausa*). (*Martín se arregla los pantalones*). ¿A dónde fueron anoche? . . .

MARTÍN: ¿Y? . . . Por ahí, que sé yo. . .

PADRE: Sea sincero conmigo. ¿Adónde me lo lleva, Martín?

MARTÍN: Ya le digo. . . A veces vamos al cine. . . Otras veces a caminar. . . En fin. . . Un poco de todo.

PADRE: Usted me está ocultando algo. ¿Por qué no me dice la verdad? Entre amigos no hay que ocultarse nada, ¿no le parece? (*Pausa*).

MARTÍN: Bueno. (*Pausa*). Estoy de acuerdo. Hablemos a calzón quitado, como suele decirse. . .

PADRE: No se haga el que no sabe. Mi nene está cambiado. ¿Quién tiene la culpa, eh?

MARTÍN: No sé.

PADRE: Sí que sabe. Por favor, Martín. No quiero que discutamos. Lo que pasa es que estoy preocupado. Sí, muy preocupado. No lo tome a mal, pero yo no quiero que el nene siga leyendo esos

libros. (*Pausa*). ¡Le hacen mal! ¿Le parece normal eso de dormir toda la noche bajo un montón de libros? Mi nene antes no era así. Mi nene fue siempre puro.

MARTÍN: ¡El nene, el nene, el nene! No se da cuenta que el nene ya tiene un par de. . .

PADRE: No se atreva a hablarme así. Yo sé todo lo referente al nene.

MARTÍN: Usted no sabe una mierda. (pp. 32-33).

The preceding characterization of *Hablemos a calzón quitado* would be adequate to give an idea of the basic thrust of the play and to explain the main reasons why it has come to be considered a key work in the Argentine theatrical repertoire of the seventies. Further detail would only serve to clarify aspects of the elaboration of the plot and the actual dramatic substance of the full-length work (there are two acts, but the second is divided into two *cuadros*, each with several scenes, that are as long individually as the first act).

From the point of view of dramatic structure, what is of particular interest in *Hablemos* is the working-out of audience involvement in the fundamental pattern of meaning I have just described. Although, as I have already suggested, we cannot speak of a work that appeals to direct audience participation, Gentile does attempt a modest degree of participatory involvement. The play ends with the following scene in which Martín takes leave of Juan:

MARTÍN: (*Trata de explicar*). No tengo otro papá para darte. La culpa no es mía.

JUAN: Ya sé, estamos en el 70.

MARTÍN: Algún día voy a volver.

JUAN: Ya sé. Cuando se termine de marcar los tiempos. (*Al final de la historia*).

MARTÍN: Chau, Juan. (*Pausa*).

JUAN: Martín. . . sácate la peluca, van a pensar que sos marica. (*Pausa*).

MARTÍN: (*Se toca la peluca y de pronto va hasta el espejo. Sus ojos se dilatan, comienza a comprender. Se quita la peluca y se toca la barba. Acaba de descubrir la verdad. Comprende su alienación y entonces con desesperación se arranca la barba, se despoja de la imagen. Larga pausa. Mira por última vez a Juan y sale. Juan se incorpora y corre hasta la puerta gritando*): ¡Martín! (*Martín se ha ido. Desde afuera el padre lo llama*): Nene, estoy aquí afuera, si me necesitás llamame. (*Retrocede. No quiere volver con su padre. Se siente solo. Levanta el revólver para suicidarse. Descubre al público. Larga pausa. Va hasta la platea pidiendo*): No hay alguien, ni siquiera una persona que me infle los cachetes. (*Afuera el padre lo llama. Juan busca en la platea alguien que le infle los cachetes. Luego vuelve al escenario y dirá*): Alguien en el 70, me infla los cachetes.

Telón (p. 52)

It would be easy to speak of this conclusion as conferring on *Hablemos* an open-ended structure, and certainly there is no question that the play is am-

biguous as to what sort of future we should attribute to Juan. Will he continue to concern himself nostalgically with the cheek-popping game or will he take Martín's lessons to heart, pursue the woman with whom he has already had relations, have the child he now so desperately wants, and emerge as the fully liberated man envisioned by Martín's ideology? The play seems to say that, after all is said and done, it is still only 1970 and the liberation prophesied by the Martíns of Latin America is but a distant ideal. (In 1976 the Argentine novelist, Manuel Puig, was to take up the issue again with *El beso de la mujer araña*, by bringing together a persecuted student revolutionary and a persecuted homosexual who come to realize that they are both victims of a repressive authoritarian society. Puig peppers his novel with an impressive array of Marcusian-style "eros and civilization" footnotes on social science opinion on the theme.) The printed text, in any case, gives the impression that Juan has found at least one person in the audience who will play his game with him, but it is unclear whether that person assumes the role of the absent Padre or of the absent Martín. When this critic saw the play in July 1970, no one in the packed Teatro Payró responded to Juan's appeal, and the final line was therefore slightly altered and spoken as a rhetorical question—"¿Alguién en el 70, me infla los cachetes?"—as Juan returns to the stage before the final curtain.

But the ambiguous conclusion is less interesting than the more general issue of overt audience incorporation into the structure of the play. Such an incorporation may include, it has already been noted, overt appeals to the audience or it may involve direct audience address, as in the case of Dragún's highly successful *Historias para ser contadas*. Gentile does not use direct audience address in his play, and the only appeal to spectator involvement is the final scene that I have been discussing. And, although I do not have any statistics on the subject, it is easy to believe that the conclusion was more often aborted, as it was when I saw the play, than it was successful. Perhaps this circumstance is attributable as much to the sort of deliberately ridiculous audience involvement demanded (popping an actor's chipmunk cheeks rather than embracing him or shaking his hand, or joining him in a bunny line) as it is to conservative Argentine theatergoers.

Since *Hablemos* does not depend to any pronounced degree on audience involvement until the very final scene (and even then it does not seem to be crucial to the sense of that scene), to what degree is the question of that involvement of interest in the study of Gentile's play? The answer lies in a detail that has already been referred to: the sudden abandonment of Juan by both his false and his legitimate father figure and his sense of floundering in the face of a brutally new circumstance to which he must adjust if he is to survive. As he turns to the audience, he is turning to concerned mankind (the audience is, one presupposes, concerned or it would not have stayed to the end of the play: this is a fundamental presupposition of both traditional Aristotelian and experimental non-Brechtian theatre, as well as of Brechtian theatre to the extent that it exploits audience interest if not audience sympathy), as much to find a new father figure as to receive implicit acceptance of the metamorphosis that he has experienced.

But there is an even more significant aspect of Juan's appeal to the audience, one that has to do with the way in which the play has structured rhetorically

the audience's opinions concerning what is presented to it as a semiological message to be accepted or rejected and to be evaluated in terms of legitimacy and truth potential. Quite simply, the strategy of the play is to make El Padre so unappealing, so despicable in his sick manipulation of Juan and in his attempt to hold onto Juan once that manipulation is challenged, that Martín and what he represents become attractive to the audience. Although it would be safe to say that the Argentine middle-class theatregoer is not generally attracted to the values represented by student revolutionaries (and I repeat that *Hablemos* was first staged under a military dictatorship dedicated to maintaining the structures challenged by the Martíns of Latin America), he is in the final analysis the only individual in the play who embodies some degree of sexual normalcy and personal maturity. While the audience may feel sympathy for the pathetic Juan (whom Martín's ministrations quickly reveal to be potentially more developed than he may at first appear), his behavior is deviant enough in terms of a public standard of maturity that the spectator feels repulsed by him, which is one reason why the closing scene of the play is so problematical.

Despite his sociopolitical ideals, Martín nevertheless is enough in control of himself to be the touchstone for the audience with a "normal reality" outside the confines of El Padre's grotesque, Gothic "home." From the outset of the play, it is clear that Martín becomes a privileged spectator in that home, just as the spectator is by virtue of the conventions of the theatre. Juan's opening words to Martín are ironic in the sense that they unconsciously prefigure the horror that the character is to share with the spectator, as both discover the true extent of the perverted relationship between Juan and his father:

JUAN: (*Asomándose*). Vení, pasá. (Aparece Martín con dos bultos).
¿Tenés miedo de entrar, che?

MARTÍN: (*Entrando*). Mirá, ya te dije que no quiero molestar. . .

JUAN: Pero si no hay ningún problema. Somos amigos, ¿no?

MARTÍN: Bueno. . . Recién me conocés. . . (Observa la casa). (Pausa).

JUAN: ¿Te gusta la casa?

MARTÍN: Sí. . . Escuchame. . . Perdoná que insista. . . Dejame hablar. . .
Ya sé que sos un buen pibe y que si dependiera de vos no
existiría ningún problema. . .

Ya sé, ya sé que según vos, con tu papá tampoco hay problema,
pero creo que es mejor si esperamos que venga y decida él mis-
mo. . . . Es una cuestión de ética, ¿te das cuenta? . . . ¿No me
explicué?

JUAN: . . . ¿Ética? . . .

MARTÍN: Sí. . . de ética. . . de principios. No es lo mismo que tu viejo
encuentre cómodamente instalado en la casa a un desconocido, y
que él llegue, le explicamos las cosas y, si me quedo sea él quien
lo decida.

JUAN: Es que papá es muy bueno. . . (p. 5).

In this way Martín functions as a stand-in for the spectator, discovering for the latter the nature of Juan's home and commenting on it and attempting to

change it in a fashion purportedly acceptable to the audience. This is not an uncommon form of dramatic (or novelistic) structure, and several parallel examples come to mind: Dr. Cukrowicz in Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*, Julia in Ricardo Monti's *Una noche con el Sr. Magnus & hijos*, Davies in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*, Nick (and, to a lesser extent, his wife) in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* are a few random examples that come to mind. From this point of view, Martín becomes not just the surrogate witness for the spectator, but his spokesman and his intervener: Martín reacts verbally to what he witnesses and then sets out to correct it in accord with what the audience presumably would accept as a healthy standard of behavior (at least insofar as it means Juan's gaining personal independence; sex as a means to achieve it may, however, be less immediately endorsed by a conservative audience).

Throughout the play words like *raro* and *normal* serve as foregrounded signs of the relationship between Martín the spectator and the scene he witnesses. On the one hand, Martín and Juan exchange comments about which one is really *loco*, Martín for his criteria of *ética* or Juan for his childlike enthusiasm about his grotesque world:

MARTÍN: Sos medio raro, vos. . . .

JUAN: Para mí el raro sos vos. . . . Mirá que tenés vueltas. . . .

MARTÍN: ¿Yo? ¿Por qué?

JUAN: ¡Qué se yo! Tenés vueltas. . . . Hacés un montón de cumplidos y no tenés donde caerte muerto.

MARTÍN: Vos no entendés, eso es lo que pasa. Vos no entendés que yo no quiero que tu papá. . . .

JUAN: El que no entiende sos vos. Si papá siempre me dice por qué no me busco un amigo. Lo que pasa es que vos no conocés a mi papá. (p. 6; cf. pp. 8-9 also)

On the other hand, Martín and El Padre exchange accusations on more than one occasion concerning normalcy. It is clear, for example, that Martín and El Padre have different concepts of the word *tonto*, and Martín attempts somewhat futilely to convince the father that Juan is not as much a fool as he believes (p. 14). However, the most interesting exchange based on these foregrounded verbal signs occurs at the very beginning of the second act. The father, disturbed at the changes that have occurred in his son and realizing, although still somewhat unconsciously, that he is beginning to lose him, accuses Juan of becoming "abnormal"; it is significant that Martín is a silent observer well into the scene and his first words are a sarcastic "Amén" to one of the father's particularly inappropriate comments. The key passage, however, concerns only the perverted family nucleus:

JUAN: Vos no sabés nada. Los antiguos eran mucho más fuertes que nosotros. . . . Medían como dos metros y tenían unos músculos bárbaros. . . . ¡En serio! Preguntale a Martín.

PADRE: Bueno. . . . Pero antiguos ya no quedan. . . . Es una lástima. . . . Ahora estamos en 1970 y hay que vivir de otra manera. Con

orden, con limpieza, con horario. . . Yo ya no aguanto más. (*Aparece Martín con una toalla en el hombro*). El desorden me pone histérico. ¡Sí! A usted también le digo, Martín. ¿Le parece que en esta casa viven personas normales? Díganme. . . Contéstenme ustedes porque yo realmente ya no sé. . .

JUAN: ¿A vos qué te parece, Martín? (*Martín hace un gesto con la cabeza y el hombro, como diciendo "Qué sé yo"*) (p. 29).

The foregoing examples of the structuring of relations between the three characters, the values that they represent, and the incorporation of a purportedly outside witness's point of view are scattered throughout the play and serve as leitmotifs of the overall meaning of *Hablemos*. The central juxtaposition between what Martín represents and what El Padre represents does not, however, occur in a particular dialogue, but is based on a parallelism between two scenes separated by the flow of events related to Juan's evolution toward manhood. It is nevertheless in this one juxtaposition where we can see the extent to which Gentile makes use of rhetorical strategy to condition our sense of repulsion by the father and our acceptance of Martín's ideals of personal fulfillment. Both scenes are too long to quote in their entirety, but the following key passages should be sufficient to illustrate my point. The first covers the end of the second scene and all of the third scene of the first act. El Padre, dressed as a woman and ready for a hard night's work assaulting cab drivers, puts his son to bed:

PADRE: Bueno, ahora basta. Ya es tiempo de soñar con los angelitos.

JUAN: Juguemos un rato más. . .

PADRE: No, no no. Ahora se terminó. El nene se pone debajo de las sabanitas y a dormir.

JUAN: Un cachete solo. . .

PADRE: Vamos, nene. Hacele caso a tu papi.

JUAN: ¿No me vas a inflar un cachete?

PADRE: Bueno. El último, ¿eh? (*Lo infla. Juan se lo revienta*). Ya está. Ahora mi nenito bueno se va a dormir, así yo puedo salir a trabajar. (*Pausa*). (*Lo cubre y Juan se acomoda*). [. . .] (*Lo besa. Juan cierra los ojos. El padre se levanta. Va hasta la cómoda, se mira al espejo y saca la pistola. La pone en el bolso. Mira por última vez a Juan y va a salir. Pero vuelve, murmurando*): Ay, me olvidaba los anticonceptivos (*y saca algo de un cajón. En ese momento, Martín baja por la escalera. Al ver al padre, se queda parada, inmóvil*).

PADRE: (*Susurrando*). El nene ya se durmió. . . Yo me voy al trabajo. . . ¿Cómo se siente? ¿Se dio un buen baño? . . . (*Pausa*).

MARTÍN: ¿Qué?

PADRE: (*Ríe*). Vaya, vaya a dormir, que se está durmiendo parado. Hasta mañana, y que descanse. (*Sale*). (pp. 21-22).

Later, at the end of the first scene of the second *cuadro* of the second act, Juan and Martín have returned home after a night of carousing. Juan has had his first

sexual experience, which Martín considers to be crucial in the development of his repressed manhood. Juan, drunk and euphoric about his new reality, has to be put to bed by Martín, and the contrast, highlighted by the parallelism of situations, between the latter and El Padre of the foregoing passage is crucial to the meaning of the play:

MARTÍN: Hoy no, Juan. Estoy cansado. Son las cinco y media de la mañana.

JUAN: Inflame los cachetes.
(*Martín lo hace y Juan se los revienta*).

MARTÍN: Me tenés podrido con los cachetes.

JUAN: Un vicio hay que tener, ¿no? Si vos me tenés podrido con la revolución y no te digo nada.

MARTÍN: Bueno, dormite. . . Hasta mañana. . .

JUAN: Martín. . .

MARTÍN: Dormite.

JUAN: Mañana vamos a hablar con papi.

MARTÍN: Ahora dormí y no pensés. Mañana veremos. No te preocupes. . . Te apago la luz. . .

JUAN: Martín, inflame los cachetes.

MARTÍN: Hasta mañana. . .
(*Sale y apaga la luz. En la oscuridad se oye la voz de Juan*).

JUAN: Toda blanca era. . . toda blanca. . .

Escena Segunda

(*Una intensa luz verde inunda el escenario. Juan está parado con el torso desnudo en el proscenio. Una música electrónica mezclada de tormenta y de tic tac de relojes va creciendo. Es el sueño de Juan. Dos sogas como péndulos bajarán del techo*).
(p. 43).

Against the patterned juxtapositions of the value systems represented by Martín and El Padre, patterned juxtapositions whose recurrence is a necessary emphasis to enable the spectator to accept fully the extent to which Martín is his stand-in as witness, commentator, and agent for change, there is a corollary axis based on verbal (and theatrical) signs clustering around the notion of change. Verbally, change is made explicit in Juan's growing self-awareness and his steps toward the mature independence preached by Martín and in El Padre's inverse loss of control over the situation, culminating in his petulant abandonment of Juan. Theatrically, the signs of change are evident in the growing accumulation of books and in the disorder that marks Juan's rebellion against the "home" his father has made for him.⁴ The most theatrical sign of change comes at the end of the first act. Although in its expressionism it is somewhat dissonant with the general texture of the scene, it does serve to mark well the first elements of disruption in El Padre's Gothic household; as Juan settles in to read the first book Martín has given him, the mirror in which his father has arranged his drag costume suddenly shatters:

(*Juan se acomoda y sigue leyendo. De tanto en tanto busca en el diccionario.*)

MARTÍN: (*Entrando*). Perdoná que te interrumpa. Es que encontré un libro muy lindo y te lo quiero regalar. (*Le da un libro*).

JUAN: Gracias. ¿A ver? ¿De qué se trata, che?

MARTÍN: Algo sobre el sexo . . . es muy interesante . . . estoy seguro: te va a gustar . . . (*Juan toma el libro y el espejo estalla*).
Telón (p. 26)

There are numerous verbal references, however, to change.⁵ From one point of view, they all have a common meaning related to the transformation Martín imposes on Juan. From another point of view, each reference represents a gradual change in meaning, until we move from circumstantial change through revolutionary change, to the fundamental alteration of patterns of thought and behavior (among others, uses of *cambio* and related lexemes on pp. 12, 23, 27, 33, 38, 41, 46, 49, and 52). The following quote is representative of the confrontations between the characters related to the concept of change; once again, Martín is basically an observer of this exchange between father and son:

PADRE: (*Bajando las escaleras*). ¿Qué pasa?

MARTÍN: (*Cacheteando a Juan*). Ya pasó . . . Fue sólo una pesadilla.

PADRE: ¡Nene! Nene querido. ¿Qué te pasa? . . . (*Lo abraza*).

JUAN: Quiero ser padre . . .

PADRE: Bueno, querido . . . ¿cómo no? . . . Ya pasó . . . La culpa es suya, Martín. ¿Se da cuenta de lo que hizo?

JUAN: ¡Dejame!

PADRE: ¡Nene! ¡Yo soy tu papi! Soy yo, querido.

JUAN: ¡Dejame! . . . ¡Quiero un hijo! ¿No entienden? ¡Quiero un bebé! (*Hay un profundo cambio en Juan*).

PADRE: ¡Nene! . . . ¡Estás loco! . . . (*A Martín*). ¡Usted y sus libros de mierda! . . .

MARTÍN: No diga estupideces.

PADRE: ¡Váyase! ¡Váyase de esta casa! Agarre sus libros y váyase.

JUAN: ¡Callate!

PADRE: Nene, no te permito que me levantes la voz.

JUAN: ¿Qué es lo que vos no me permitís?

PADRE: ¡Nene! Te desconozco (p. 46).

Gentile's *Hablemos a calzón quitado* is not a completely successful example of a drama that appeals to audience participation both in its semiological structure (the incorporation of the spectator as witness and agent) and Juan's theatrical appeal to the spectators in the final scene. Martín's relationship to an explicit ideology is manifestly clear from the moment he walks on stage, but yet El Padre's embodiment of degenerate, perverted sociocultural values of a sick

Argentine society is much more an abstract and expressionistic symbolization. Moreover, the final scene is not altogether satisfactory in the ambiguity of Juan's behavior and it is not clear if his direct physical and verbal appeal to the audience is a sign of his new maturity or of the degree to which his situation is, as the subtitle says, "Amorfo 70."⁶ But, in spite of these limitations, *Hablemos* is an effective example of a contemporary Argentine theatre that attempts to challenge accepted values through the use of violent theatrical contexts that leave no doubt as to the meanings at issue.⁷ In this sense, Gentile's play is far from ambiguous, and the structures of audience identification and the patterns of verbal signs that this paper has examined are clear functions of this lack of semantic ambiguity. The opposition between Martín and El Padre could not be any more transparent, and herein lies the success that the play has had in directing itself toward an Argentine audience—and subsequent larger Latin American and Spanish audiences—experiencing times of pronounced uncertainty and ambiguous change:

PADRE: ¿Sorprenderme? ¡Estoy perplejo! ¡A primera vista! ¡Como en las novelas! ¡Que emocionante! ¿No le parece? No hay nada que hacerle. La vida es una novela. Una novela como esas de la televisión donde siempre aparece algo, un hecho, una situación y la novela cambia y al cambiar se va estirando. Yo siempre le digo al nene que sin darnos cuenta todos los días escribimos un nuevo capítulo de nuestra vida, y que todos somos protagonistas de nuestra propia novela . . . Lo importante es triunfar. Usted es joven y se sentirá seguro, eso es natural, pero no crea que es fácil convertirnos en los héroes de nuestra propia novela. . . . Por eso me apasiona ver los teleteatros . . . Uno aprende tantas cosas . . . Hay momentos en que uno siente . . . que uno . . . ya no es uno, y vive toda esa pasión de la actriz . . . o del actor, y se inflama . . . y se inflama . . . qué quiere que le diga, yo me inflamo. ¡Esos dramas tan reales! . . . ¡Esas complicaciones tan actuales! . . . ¡Tan de nuestra época! . . . Y qué época nos ha tocado vivir . . . ¡Fascinante! Realmente no sabría cómo llamarla . . . Es tan eléctrica.

MARTÍN: Yo diría simplemente que estamos en el setenta (p. 13).

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Notes

1. Concerning the relationship between general discourse theory and literary performance (the latter considered as a special subset of the former), see Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977). The papers contained in Teun A. van Dijk, *Pragmatics of Language and Literature* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1976) contain many ideas that would provide a fruitful application to the theory of dramatic structure, particularly the implications of systematized distinctions between the real world of language (by extension, the audience) and the postulated world of literature (by extension, the theatre).

2. Guillermo Gentile, *Hablemos a calzón quitado. Marica 70 (Amorfo 70)* (New York?: Ediciones Latinoamericanas, 1972?). All quotes are from this edition, which, to the best of my knowledge, is the only printed text of the play. It should be noted that the text is plagued with printing errors, which I have corrected in the passages quoted.

3. There is very little criticism on Gentile's play (and to the best of my knowledge he has

no other published or produced work to his credit). Some brief excerpts from reviews published at the time of the 1970 performance may be consulted in *Anuario del teatro argentino, 1970/1971* (Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 1971), p. 33. Virginia Ramos Foster discusses *Hablemos* (along with plays by Ricardo Monti and Víctor de los Solares), in "Theatre of Dissent: Three Young Argentine Playwrights," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 4/2 (Spring 1971), 45-49. Gentile is discussed in two monographs on contemporary Argentine drama: Néstor Tirri, "Los parricidas: Monti y Gentile," in his *Realismo y teatro argentino* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones La Bastilla, 1973), pp. 185-213 (see pp. 192-202, where the sociopolitical message of the play is discussed in detail); and Lilian Tschudi, "La situación-límite; la esquematización por la imagen," in her *Teatro argentino actual (1960-1972)* (Buenos Aires: Fernando García Cambeiro, 1974), pp. 75-77. A brief discussion of Gentile's drama is also included in Judith Ismael Bissett, "Consciousness-Raising Dramatic Structures in Latin America's Theater of Commitment" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Arizona State University, 1976), pp. 62-63.

4. Gentile has written concerning the original staging of the play: "Antecedentes y notas para la puesta en escena," *Teatro 70*, Nos. 4-5 (1970), 41-55.

5. Another rhetorical procedure for establishing audience-identification with Martín is the use of linguistic register. Where Juan talks like an impetuous schoolboy and his father like one would expect a middle-aged man who dresses in drag and is addicted to soap operas to talk, Martín's language is the only one that is conventional and socially appropriate for his age, background and ideals (and at the same time it lacks the features of inflammatory revolutionary harangues).

6. It is interesting to speculate on the extent to which Gentile is familiar with contemporary American experimental theatre concerning moral and social conflicts and the extent to which he may have been influenced by a work like the Living Theatre's *Frankenstein*. Many of the defects that Margaret Croyden notes for this powerful work are similar to those I have noted for Gentile's *Hablemos*: "In *Frankenstein*, Man is turned into a repressed monster as payment for civilization: his Apollinian ego had created a world prison. The Becks' answer is to destroy the prison and re-create Man, but how Man was to flourish, unhampered by his driving ego and institutional life, was never raised." *Lunatics, Lovers and Poets, the Contemporary Experimental Theatre* (New York: Dell, 1974), p. 123. *Frankenstein* was first performed at Yale during the 1968-69 season. Tirri also notes the vulnerability of *Hablemos*'s closing scene (p. 198).

7. Tirri writes the following concerning the success of *Hablemos*: "Las causas por las que *Hablemos a calzón quitado* se convirtió en un éxito, habría que dejárselas a la sociología de los públicos; lo cierto es que la pieza guarda las apariencias de una estructura simple, pero cierta complejidad interior va abarcando un interés en niveles más profundos. Sea como fuere, a partir de una teatralidad potente—permítasenos las instancias fenoménicas que se producen—la pieza y su autor-actor apelan al espectador con una inmediatez sorprendente, y ganan rápidamente todos sus grados de comunicación con el personaje central y con el asunto" (p. 193).