

## Time, Space and the Refracted Self in Gorostiza's *El nuevo paraíso*

ANDREA G. LABINGER

Celestino Gorostiza, a Mexican dramatist best known for his studies of middle-class mores (*El color de nuestra piel*, 1952; *Columna social*, 1953), as well as for the historical drama (*La Malinche*, 1958), reveals less familiar, though more profound dimensions in his earlier plays. These works,<sup>1</sup> written during the 1930's for the innovative Teatro Orientación, transcend the mediocrity of the *costumbrista* pieces that plagued the Mexican stage until that time, to reflect the young playwright's concern with time, space, the personality, and other fundamentals of the human condition.

In this regard, Antonio Magaña Esquivel has pointed out the similarities between the early works of Gorostiza and those of his close associate and contemporary, Xavier Villaurrutia.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Villaurrutia, however, whose later works, both theatrical and otherwise, demonstrate a constant preoccupation with the enigma of the personality as situated in time and space, Gorostiza's later plays, that is, those written after 1950, leave us no such testimonial to his enduring interest in the theme of illusory reality. Indeed, his critical writings reveal a total repudiation of what he considered the elitist limitations of his earlier works. In a letter to Villaurrutia, Gorostiza refers to their joint activities in Orientación and in the earlier Teatro Ulises as mere *divertissements*, youthful slavishness to a vogue, without further artistic repercussions: "Los teatros de vanguardia, de minorías o experimentales, estaban de moda. El arte todo pasaba en el mundo por una época de revisión y ensayo, de manera que nosotros además de aprender y divertirnos, llenábamos en México una función de acuerdo con el momento universal."<sup>3</sup>

Apparently, the four early plays of Celestino Gorostiza were not held in much esteem by their author, except in their capacity as preliminary exercises, or "teatro a tientas," as Rodolfo Usigli called his own first, experimental plays. Why, then, accord them any more attention than the author himself does? The

fact remains that despite certain obvious defects in these plays—certain puerile excesses and lack of sophistication—these works remain with us as examples of a type of theatre almost unknown in Mexico before the 1930's and only occasionally cultivated thereafter. Regardless of the motivations behind their composition, they are indicative of the basic human concern with realities, particularly the reality of the personality in its dizzying multiple refractions.

Of the four, the most patently abstract is *El nuevo paraíso* (1930).<sup>4</sup> Gorostiza's first published play is a one-act work incorporating the symbolic elements of the *auto sacramental* with the conventional setting of a bourgeois drawing-room. The principal players, Adán, Eva, Judas (a Satanic figure) and his foil Doña Angela, are clearly *auto* characters. Rodolfo Usigli, in his 1933 introduction to Monterde's *Bibliografía del teatro en México*,<sup>5</sup> refers to an *Auto de Adán y Eva* known in sixteenth-century Mexico. Whether or not this might be a remote antecedent of the Gorostiza play is impossible to say, because of the *auto*'s unavailability to this reader at the present time. What is evident, however, is that the moralistic tone is largely absent from the Gorostiza play. The allegorical elements in *El nuevo paraíso* serve an investigative, rather than a didactic function; the play explores the reality of the personality and the authenticity of the self, a fundamental concern of all four of Gorostiza's early works. Both Adán and Eva are obliged to re-examine the images which they have formed of themselves and of each other, images which are not, as we learn, static, but rather ever-changing amalgams of past, present and future selves, repressed selves and potential selves. Doña Angela and Judas are antipodal characters, providing the framework within which Adán and Eva must struggle before discovering their authentic personalities. Rather than personifying the traditional roles of good and evil, Doña Angela and Judas represent, respectively, closure and openness, rigidity and flexibility, or more specifically, the confines of the one-dimensional self versus the vast spectrum of possibilities open to the multiple, refracted self.

Both Adán and Eva, like so many other Gorostiza characters, are self-deceivers, *farsantes*. Eva, guided by her mother, Doña Angela, believes herself to be a perfect wife, a model of virtue, living in a house which is no less than Eden, "el nuevo paraíso." She forces herself to obliterate all memories of her former personality, of her uninhibited, wanton girlhood and of her repressed desire to recapture part of this vanished self, until Judas, the old friend and tempter, makes his appearance and forces her to confront the past. The idea of the disparate manifestations of the self in past, present and future states, which was to appear some years later in Villaurrutia's *Parece mentira* and *¿En qué piensas?*, is stated here when Eva faces Judas. Eva at first is unable to recognize herself in the image her old friend evokes for her: "Pienso en aquella niña como en un ser extraño" (p. 24). Yet, the realization soon comes that "la niña y yo somos una sola persona." When, at the end of the play, she voluntarily leaves "Paradise" to go off with Judas, the author does not suggest that she is condemned, but rather fulfilled, for she has come to a realization of all the facets of her personality. She has acknowledged her debt to the past and her obligation to the future to be all those Evas she can possibly be. "Hay veinte años entre tú y yo" (p. 49), she says to Adán as she exits, leaving him trapped in the isolation of the present.

Adán, similarly, achieves some insight into his authentic self, although the result of his introspection runs counter to that of Eva. Adán's self-deception consists of imagining himself to be an adventurer, a frustrated Don Juan, when in reality he is the staid businessman and husband Eva always imagined him to be. Ironically, he is most authentic when he believes he is pretending; the role of contented husband, which he assumed was just a pose, turns out to be his genuine *métier*. Adán, however, unlike Eva, becomes a prisoner of his one-dimensionality, remaining at the end with Doña Angela in the bleakness of the house, the paradise-turned-prison, whose only window looks out upon a stark, white horizon. That Adán's renunciation of his dream of possible selves is not wholly without regrets is evident at the conclusion of the play. Adán, who began the play by looking in the mirror and hopefully reading his future in a deck of Tarot cards, ends the play in a similar way: "Cuando Adán se queda solo, va, idiotizado, a la ventana y se queda contemplando el horizonte blanco que ha sustituido el paisaje que antes se veía" (p. 49). He then closes the curtains on this blank horizon and begins to shuffle the cards mindlessly onto the table, "como un autómeta." The cards no longer reveal possibilities for the future, but rather a resigned nostalgia for those horizons he has closed by relinquishing his dreams.

Melchor Fernández Almagro, in a review of *El nuevo paraíso* written for *La Voz* (Madrid, 1930), states that the theme of the play is "la fatalidad de los recuerdos, que nos aíslan del momento presente, enajenándonos a nosotros mismos, permitiéndonos la voluptuosidad paradójica, sobremanera amarga y tentadora, de contemplarnos desdoblados en las anchas distancias del tiempo."<sup>8</sup> What Fernández Almagro seems to have missed is the fact that memories are by no means "fatal" in this play, nor is the vision of the refracted personality at all "bitter." It is Eva, not Adán, who is successful and contented at the end, precisely because she has embraced all possibilities of present, past and future and has seen herself in all her multiple perspectives. Adán, on the other hand, who renounces all but the present and all but his most prosaic, immediate self, remains trapped, desolate, an automaton.

As an aspiring director, Gorostiza was aware of the importance of staging as an effective symbolic device, and even this earliest play reveals a remarkable awareness of the dramatic potential of lighting and scenic effects. The single window in *El nuevo paraíso* is covered by "pesadas cortinas," which remain closed throughout the play to emphasize the insularity of the house. They are opened by Judas, when he invites Eva to free herself of all constraints and seek wider horizons. Adán's final loneliness at the conclusion of the play is accompanied by his resolute drawing of the curtains. The use of curtains to symbolize a barrier between the individual and the light of knowledge, while certainly not a new or startling idea, is interesting in its appeal to both Gorostiza and Villaurrutia. Villaurrutia uses the same image in his *Invitación a la muerte* (1944), when the young Alberto complains about the unending layers of drapery that separate him from truth (II, 6).

Gorostiza, who embraces this type of symbolism with considerably less restraint than Villaurrutia, manages to include a counterbalance for nearly every symbol in the play. *El nuevo paraíso* is constructed around dualities: Doña

Angela versus Judas, openness versus closure, Paradise versus Hell. The window must then of necessity have a diametrical opposite, which is, in fact, a mirror. While the exact function of the mirror here is not always entirely clear, one of its purposes seems to be that of reflecting inwardly, as contrasted with the window, which faces the outside world. An introspective device, the mirror tends to deform that which it reflects. Judas points this out to Eva as he attempts to lure her out of her seclusion: "Mira, la única ventana que ve afuera, a la vida, la han cerrado para no dejar otra que ese espejo, que sólo les permite asomarse hacia ustedes mismos. Y los espejos, cuando no se acostumbra a ver en ellos más imágenes que la suya, se vuelven mentirosos, acaban por deformar las imágenes" (p. 40). This is, indeed, no ordinary mirror, for the author specifies in his initial stage directions that it should have the property of becoming transparent to reveal whatever is behind it. Technically, this is accomplished by placing a simple glass over a dark camera and using appropriate lighting to achieve the effect of transparency. Symbolically, this procedure allows the audience to see a false reflection, as at the beginning of the play, when Adán looks into the glass, but sees Judas' image reflected back at him. Judas, the immoralist and *bon vivant*, is evidently Adán's idealized vision of himself at the beginning of the play. Later, when Adán finally renounces this repressed facet of his personality, he breaks the mirror in an attempt to destroy the false image.

Again, this visual deception with mirrors is nothing new on the stage, nor does it end with Gorostiza. Emilio Carballido, years later, was to use the very same procedure in his one-act play, *El espejo*. In the previously cited article concerning *El nuevo paraíso*, Fernández Almagro mentions "un acento nuevo, que acaso venga de Cocteau." Although Fernández Almagro specifies neither the particular aspect to which he is referring nor any individual work of Cocteau, the use of the mirror in *Orphée* bears some marginal resemblance to its function in the Gorostiza play. In *Orphée*, the mirror serves as a passageway through which Eurydice leaves the house to enter Hell. It is also the exit and entranceway for Death. In *El nuevo paraíso*, the mirror leads not to an exterior hell, but to an interior one, that is, the house itself, which although ironically called Paradise, is really an inferno harboring stagnation and death. There is also a window in *Orphée*, although its symbolic value is not as clear as is that of the window in *El nuevo paraíso*. *Orphée* was, in fact, one of the European plays translated and produced by the Teatro Ulises, and as a participant in this group, Gorostiza might conceivably have been influenced by the dramatic effect of window and mirror in the Cocteau play.

The view from the window is still another facet of the scene whose symbolic importance the author has chosen to emphasize. When Adán finally looks out the window, he sees only a blank horizon. Gorostiza is careful to explain that this effect is achieved by neutralizing a conventional green background with green lights. More important than the technique, however, is the connection this has with the play, namely, a static, one-dimensional view of reality contrasted with a mobile panorama of changing perspectives. Once more, Judas provides an exegesis of the rather obvious symbolism. Opening the curtains, he directs his remarks to Eva: "Mira, . . . es necesario que tus ojos se abran a la luz y se dilaten cuando menos en ese horizonte fijo, ya que no puedes perseguir el único,

el verdadero, que siempre huye de nosotros, apareciendo constantemente a lo lejos, como un horizonte" (pp. 40-41).

Despite the unnecessary artifice and overstated symbolism of *El nuevo paraíso*, a defect which, incidentally, becomes even more ponderous in *Ser o no ser*, the play has value as an initial exploration of a theme which becomes a constant in the three subsequent Gorostiza works. Reality, or more accurately, self-knowledge, is presented as perpetually in flux, elusive, sometimes unattainable. It is, however, a goal towards which all Gorostiza's protagonists must strive, with varying degrees of success in the various plays.

*Indiana University, South Bend*

## Notes

1. The works in question are: *El nuevo paraíso* (México: Ediciones de la Revista *Contemporáneos*, 1930); *Ser o no ser/ La escuela del amor* (México: Ediciones Artes Gráficas, 1935); *Escombros del sueño* (México: Letras de México, 1939).

2. Magaña Esquivel comments: "Junto a Xavier Villaurrutia, Celestino Gorostiza, en esta época de Orientación, se distingue por el juego de elementos oníricos que introduce en la acción . . . , y por los conflictos de conciencia que enuncia y que son, como en Pirandello, problemas unilaterales, problemas no precisamente, o no sólo, de la vida, sino del teatro." In "Celestino Gorostiza: Director y Comediógrafo," *Letras de México*, 2, No. 16 (15 abril 1940), 6.

3. "Lo blanco y lo negro," Carta de Celestino Gorostiza a Xavier Villaurrutia, *Letras de México*, Año VII, 1, No. 1 (15 enero 1943), 6.

4. All page references are based on the edition cited above (1).

5. *Bibliografía del teatro en México* (México: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1934).

6. Reprinted in *Nivel*, No. 17 (25 mayo 1964), 2.