

Reflections on the Career of Wilberto Cantón

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Wilberto Cantón, one of Mexico's most prominent dramatists and critics, died early in 1979 after a long, varied, productive and sometimes controversial career. He was born in the city of Mérida, Yucatán, on July 15, 1925, and finished his primary and secondary education there before moving to Mexico City where he attended preparatory school and obtained a law degree at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. During his law school years, Cantón became interested in literature and took several courses in the school of philosophy and letters. He was granted a scholarship by the Universidad de Chile to study in their summer school and later received a grant from the French government to pursue studies at the Sorbonne. Instead of entering the field of law, Cantón decided on a career as a writer. He worked on and founded several student newspapers and contributed over the years to all of the leading Mexican papers, including *Excelsior*, *Novedades* and *El Nacional*. His experience in the theatre, as an editor and as a critic, was broad and varied: he occupied many posts with the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, including Chief of Public Relations, Head of the Theatre Department, Director of *Cuadernos de Bellas Artes*, and Director of the television series, *La Hora de Bellas Artes*. He was president of the Asociación de Críticos Teatrales and edited several anthologies of dramatic literature.

From his earliest student days, Cantón's contributions to the literary world were significant—he enjoyed a moderate degree of success as a poet and essayist, and even wrote one children's novel. But his best and most consistent work was in the field of the theatre. Beginning with *Cuando zarpe el barco* in 1945, proceeding through the fifties with such successes as *Nocturno a Rosario* and *Malditos*, into the sixties with *Inolvidable* and *Nosotros somos Dios*, right up until his last published play, *Retrato de mi padre* in November, 1978, Wilberto Cantón's theatrical works exhibited a quality of poetry, craftsmanship, imagination and characterization that place him in contention to become known as one of Mexico's outstanding mid-century playwrights.

Critics generally divide his plays into two basic types: 1) those which employ

a historical setting as a background for dramatic action or which include actual historical characters in imagined dramatic situations, and 2) those which deal with contemporary Mexican social problems in a realistic manner. *Nosotros somos Dios* (1962) has been and probably will continue to be regarded as his best attempt in the first category. This durable piece which deals with individual responsibility set against a backdrop of the Revolution of 1910 has long been a favorite among American students and teachers, thanks to the fine student edition prepared by Cantón, S. Samuel Trifilo and Luis Soto-Ruiz. It was awarded the Juan Ruiz de Alarcón award for the best Mexican play of 1962 and later made into a movie under the title of *La sangre derramada*. In the second category there is *Malditos* (1958), chosen as one of the five selections of the Aguilar edition of *Teatro Mexicano 1958*. This play, which was revised considerably for a 1971 publication, is a stark portrayal of the problem of juvenile delinquency. Other awards include the first prize in the Festival de Teatro Latino in New York in 1970 and honorable mention in the Concurso Internacional de Teatro "León Felipe" in Paris in 1972.

In *Inolvidable* (published in 1961), Cantón created Marcela, one of the most fascinating and enigmatic characters of modern Mexican drama. He also created quite a stir with the censors because of Marcela's profession (prostitution) and the graphic descriptions of the effects of incest on a family. This play made its debut in Buenos Aires in 1962 and received critical acclaim there, but was banned from the Mexican capital until 1970, when a revised version with a new title (*Unas migajas de felicidad*) finally reached the boards. The author's early interest in poetry is evident in this play. The scene in which Marcela tells of her unforgettable night with her brother in the cemetery at Janitzio is exceptional for its descriptive beauty and emotional intensity.

It cannot be said that Cantón was an experimenter with new or radical theatrical techniques: he knew what he wanted to do and seemed to be able to judge what his audiences wanted to see. He did employ numerous interesting theatrical devices in order to gain and hold spectator attention. In *Todos somos hermanos* (1963), a children's play inspired by Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, *Nota roja* (1963), and *Retrato de mi padre* (1978), he employed a narrator who not only plays a role in the production but also addresses the audience directly, in the same manner as the stage manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. In *Tan cerca del cielo* (1961), *Nocturno a Rosario* (1955), and again in *Retrato de mi padre*, he experimented with multi-level or multi-scenic stages, switching the action back and forth in time, and creating a series of images and impressions which contribute greatly to theatrical effectiveness.

The overall impact of his complete body of writing on Mexican literature is yet to be satisfactorily evaluated. His theatrical criteria and aspirations were simple:

- (1) El teatro debe ser antes que nada, un espectáculo que divierte al público;
- (2) El teatro no es sólo un medio de diversión: es también una finalidad en sí, y por tanto, la obra debe ser una obra de arte;
- (3) El dramaturgo debe dar un testimonio de la época en que le tocó vivir;
- (4) El dramaturgo, por último, debe transmitir o suscitar en los espectadores, ideas que perfeccionen su visión del mundo, de la vida y de sí mismos.¹

He admired the work of many of his contemporaries in Mexico and often expressed his interest in the plays of Benavente and Ibsen. Of particular importance if one is to attempt to understand his aspirations are his opinions concerning the plays of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. In a brief interview published in *El Libro y El Pueblo*, in answer to a question concerning the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Samuel Beckett, Cantón stated:

Pienso, indudablemente, en Arthur Miller, cuya obra está fundamentada en grandes problemas de nuestro tiempo, reflejando esa influencia moral constructiva, de lucha, de renovación de valores o de mantenimiento de los mismos, a que alude una de las cláusulas del Premio Nóbel. [Miller es] un gran escritor . . . porque tiene un alto mensaje humano a través de toda su obra.²

Much later, in a personal letter to me, in answer to a query concerning the possible influence of Tennessee Williams, he stated:

Por supuesto que conozco las principales obras de Tennessee Williams, a quien considero uno de los autores claves de nuestra época: si otros pintan los problemas del hombre y del mundo contemporáneo desde el exterior, en su contexto social, él los sitúa en el alma misma de sus personajes: ahí encuentra las razones de su decadencia y destrucción.³

These quotes, I think, sum up his highest theatrical ideals. He sent me a copy of *Retrato de mi padre* only a few weeks before his death. As I now re-read this work, which he said was merely the middle act of a new play, I see a culmination of techniques, themes, poetry, characterization, and theatrical devices which he has previously employed, and I see him drawing ever closer to achieving his ideals. With his death, the Mexican theatre has lost one of its most vigorous voices.

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Notes

1. S. Samuel Trifilo, "The Theater of Wilberto Cantón," *Hispania*, 54, No. 4 (1971), 870.
2. *El Libro y el Pueblo*, No. 59 (dic 1969), 26-27.
3. May 7, 1973.