

Age, Alienation and the Artist in Usigli's *Los viejos*

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With the recent death of Rodolfo Usigli, Mexico has lost one of its most eloquent dramatic spokesmen.¹ The controversy surrounding the man and his work, however, is still very much with us, as we continue to find new dimensions, previously unexplored, within his plays. Only in recent years has Usigli been correctly recognized as an essentially non-realistic dramatist, an evaluation that the author himself would probably have disputed.² Sensitive observers have identified a persistent strain of theatricalism in Usigli's work, beginning with his earliest efforts and continuing throughout his long career as a playwright.

Howard M. Fraser, for example, has attributed the beginnings of a "theatre of alienation" in Mexico to Usigli's *El gesticulador* (1937),³ basing his opinion on the importance of self-conscious role-playing by the principal characters, and the consequent stratification of reality such a device necessarily produces. It is not my purpose here to confirm or dispute Fraser's findings, since he does not define precisely what he means by "theatre of alienation" nor does he explore earlier treatments of such auto-contemplative theatre in Mexico.⁴ What is clear, however, is that Fraser is talking about *metatheatre*, to use Lionel Abel's terminology,⁵ and that his association of such metatheatre with Usigli is entirely justified.

Plays about the theatre and role-playing are not uncommon in Usigli. In addition to *El gesticulador*, which is a consummate example of metatheatricality, we see the presence of self-conscious drama in the 1949 work, *La función de despedida*. In this play, an aging actress, Verónica Muro, relives an episode of her past when she overhears a pair of young lovers conversing beneath her window. The conversation repeats nearly *verbatim* the dialogue which occurred many years before between Verónica and her own lover. In her semi-delirious state, Verónica cannot distinguish between past and present. The young girl, Marina, is replaying Verónica's life as it might have been—with a different *dénouement*. While Verónica had given up her own suitor to pursue an acting career (a decision which Usigli leads us to believe was misguided), Marina chooses both options. The idea of rehearsal

is paramount here, if we see Verónica's entire life as preparation for the final performance, with Marina in the starring role. The possibility of Marina's existing as Verónica's alter-ego must be considered, especially in view of Usigli's penchant for the theme of the double in general, and in particular, his insistence on certain parallels between the two individuals in question in the play.⁶ Verónica, far from being the true image her name suggests, is, rather, a hybrid creature, an inauthentic amalgam of all the roles she has ever played. Thus Usigli, in this somewhat melodramatic work, toys with the notion of role-playing and theatricality within the framework of a generational rift to suggest timelessness and universality.

Two still earlier works, *Mientras amemos* (1937-48) and *Aguas estancadas* (1938), reflect similar preoccupations and techniques. These are "sister plays,"⁷ in both of which the assumption of one character's role by another is of central importance. In the first work, Bernardo, a misanthropic recluse, has married for money and desires to produce an heir in order to gain his wife's inheritance. Since Bernardo is incapable of fathering children, he hires Fausto, an old acquaintance and former actor who bears an uncanny resemblance to himself, to assume his conjugal and procreative responsibilities. In truth, no one is deceived by the duplicity, but rather there is an elaborate network of pretense created and sustained by all involved. Aside from the obvious bedroom farce elements contained therein, *Mientras amemos* raises some serious questions, among them that of the authenticity of self, and the unnerving Pirandellian implications of a stage world in which the characters mold and create one another.

Similarly, in *Aguas estancadas*, a slightly demented man of means, don Arturo Arvide, adopts as his protégée the young Sarah, whom Arvide then attempts to convert into a double for the mistress he had killed in a jealous rage some thirty years before. Arvide then has the young woman assume all her predecessor's functions, including wearing her clothing and speaking her lines. Although both "players" enter into the pact in a casual way, each believing that the situation is controllable, inexorability soon takes over, and it quickly becomes apparent that neither one can extricate himself from the theatrical situation. Subtly, gradually, the distinction between the two women is erased, until Sarah loses sight of her own identity and in effect fuses with Dolores, the woman whose *persona* she has assumed.

Los viejos, Usigli's next-to-last published play,⁸ presents a startlingly abstract treatment of the *Selbstdarstellende Schauspiel* device and the resultant distortion of time, space and character development thereby created. This is indeed theatre of alienation in several respects. Technically, the non-realistic approach chosen by Usigli here, with its stylized repetitions, unidimensional characters and implausible coincidences, deliberately alienates the audience by impeding any affective identification with the characters. Thematically, on the most superficial level, one could consider *Los viejos* as still another example of Usigli's perennial preoccupation with generational conflicts, the estrangement of age and youth.⁹ Yet, the ramifications of this estrangement are much broader than this. Central to the piece is the ancient *theatrum mundi* metaphor. In *Los viejos*, the world is depicted as theatre, and consequently, the modern world, with its irrationality and instability, can best be portrayed

through the metaphor of the abstract theatre. Usigli calls the reader's attention to what he considers the chaotic state of the arts today by fixing the setting in a small, cramped apartment, strewn with ballet apparatus and "libreros desordenadamente poblados" (p. 9). Pop and op paintings compete with surrealistic art for display space on walls and floor. The weather report, transmitted by a portable radio precariously placed atop a pile of books, informs us that "la temperatura baja en nuestra capital. En cambio en Oslo hace calor y el barómetro marca treinta y cinco grados centígrados, lo cual hace de ella la capital más cálida de Europa por ahora. El clima, como el mundo, parece estar loco dondequiera" (p. 12). Within this distorted framework, a trio of algebraic characters plays out its games and combinations. By limiting the number of characters to three, reducing them to generic types (a Young Playwright, an Old Playwright and a Woman), and focusing on the quintessential twentieth-century problems of inter- and intra-personal alienation, Usigli has succeeded in creating a compelling *auto existencial* of great contemporary relevance.

The argument of *Los viejos*, a sort of inverted Faust story, can be summarized as follows: A Young Playwright, who earns his living as a newspaper theatre critic, has just been fired from his position for a breach of professional ethics. He is guilty of having walked out in the middle of the premiere performance of *Nunca se sabe*, a new work by the venerable Old Playwright, a man of considerable artistic reputation and clearly Usigli's *portavoz*. The Young Playwright's scathing review of the play brings the Old Playwright to his door in an effort to secure a retraction of the unfavorable, inaccurate review. The Young Playwright's mistress, designated only as La Muchacha, serves as mute witness to the confrontation between the two generations. The conflict itself is enacted three times, each time with significant variations in dialogue and tone. Usigli calls for lighting changes and pantomime to simulate the cinematic effect of a film being rolled in reverse: "Como en una película que se arrolla hacia atrás, los personajes volverán a pasos de pesadilla a sus posiciones originales" (p. 23).

The two original enactments serve as prelude or rehearsal for the final encounter between, and ultimate fusion of, the two artists. In the first meeting the tone is predominantly hostile. The Young Playwright appears supercilious and insulting: "¿Vino usted a hacer frases anticuadas, o tiene algo que decirme?" (p. 19). In the second version of their meeting, the two writers affect an attitude of sham cordiality, even to the extent that the Young Playwright addresses his visitor as "maestro" and toasts "por el encuentro entre Oriente y Occidente" (p. 26). It does not become apparent until the third and final "replay," however, that the two extremes will indeed meet, fuse and exchange places in a way that the Young Playwright could not have anticipated.

In this final version, the Old Playwright becomes more vital and aggressive. He takes the initiative, offering some of his own whiskey to the young couple and proposing an artistic collaboration to his scornful host. It is at this moment, when the Young Playwright rejects his guest's offer of association on an equal basis, that Usigli's alienation techniques become clearer and the inexorability of the role-reversal begins to manifest itself. Usigli insists on the "reverse Faust" imagery to emphasize the Young Playwright's imminent and irreversible damnation:

El Joven Dramaturgo—¡Vamos, hombre! Fausto y Mefistófeles al revés! ¿No es eso? ¡Valiente antigualla! ¿De qué le sirven sus maestros Marlowe y Goethe? . . .

El Viejo Dramaturgo—¿Debo entender, entonces, que no le interesa mi proposición?

El Joven Dramaturgo—No, mi querido Mefistófeles de petate, no. Mis ideas, encerradas en la jaula de su técnica, se agostarían, se secarían para siempre.

(pp. 39-40)

Here, as in the other versions of the Faust legend, there is an underlying theatricality. We are totally within the world of theatre *qua* theatre, in which all of the machinations and transformations are to be taken as histrionic—not tragic—occurrences. As Abel so astutely points out: "The transaction between Faustus and the Devil was essentially a theatrical one. Faustus, an old man, is asking the Devil to dramatize him as a youth."¹⁰ In *Los viejos*, similarly, the Young Playwright (a "reverse Faust") designs and engineers his own destiny when he insists on perpetuating a farce that he himself has devised. By putting on the mask of age (in this case, theatrical makeup), the Young Playwright intends to give his would-be mentor a lesson in the art of aging gracefully. He soon comes to realize that the mask, once applied, becomes one with reality—that is, it cannot be removed. As Octavio Paz has commented regarding *El gesticulador*: "Simulando, nos acercamos a nuestro modelo y a veces el gesticulador, como ha visto con hondura Usigli, se funde con sus gestos, los hace auténticos."¹¹

There is nothing thematically new here; the idea of the double and sudden aging is commonplace in the Western tradition, particularly among the German Romantics. Otto Rank has catalogued the appearance of the *Doppelgänger* theme in European literature and has correlated its frequency with major upheavals in society.¹² Perhaps the best-known example of the double theme coupled with the idea of sudden aging is Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). What is refreshing about *Los viejos* is that it does not rely upon mirrors, portraits or other artifice for its effect, but rather weds the theme to the atmosphere that most naturally enhances it, that of the theatre. That such blatant metatheatricality could be employed successfully by a playwright who for years had been considered the standard-bearer of straightforward, representational theatre in Mexico is a tribute to Usigli's versatility.

One wonders if Usigli was fully aware of the ontological implications of *Los viejos*. Very revealing is the dialogue between the two dramatists shortly before the metamorphosis scene:

El Viejo Dramaturgo—Tenga usted cuidado—se lo advierto lealmente. Esto no es la farsa que usted parece creer.

El Joven Dramaturgo—Tampoco es la tragedia de papel de estraza que usted parece pensar.

(p. 46)

In this instance, it is the Young Playwright who is closer to the truth. In no way can tragedy be admitted here, neither in the interior drama that the Young Playwright is about to perform, nor in *Los viejos* itself. The

metatheatrical or self-referring play, as Abel suggests, precludes the possibility of tragedy. When the Old Playwright remarks, "Estamos ya muy lejos de la literatura" (p. 46), one is tempted to reply, "No tan lejos como se imagina."

That the entire exterior play is to be viewed objectively by the audience, and that the interior and exterior dramas are soon to blend in a Pirandellian fusion of planes of reality, can be discerned from the outset. In an anticipation of his later role as a *viejo*, the Young Playwright speculates as to what might happen someday if the situation were reversed and it were *his* play that came to be reviewed by the Old Playwright: "A lo mejor estreno mi pieza y le toca hacer la crónica al pobre viejo idiota ése y me paga con la misma moneda y se larga del teatro antes del fin y . . ." (p. 17). Thus, the interchangeability of roles is anticipated; it comes as no surprise. There is no dramatic tension here, no catharsis. The role-reversals, constant variability and flux are natural to the theatrical process; Usigli makes us privy to the inner workings of the play as it creates itself before our eyes. When the Old Playwright exclaims "¡No es así!" (p. 23) just prior to the light change that signals the first re-enactment of his visit, he is, in fact, directing the action of his own personal drama. The second re-enactment, similarly, is heralded by the Young Dramatist's cry: "¡No! ¡Así no! ¡Así no quiero!" (p. 31). Ostensibly these cries of protest refer to the artists' dissatisfaction with one another and with their conflicting viewpoints.

On a more profound level, however, it is evident that their dialogue goes beyond personal dissension and the desire for artistic or social reform. As Abel suggests: "Any play written at a certain depth should have some other aim than to suggest social change or moral reform."¹³ *Los viejos* is a play of that "certain depth." The Young Playwright's "¡Así no quiero!" is an affirmation of a creative consciousness, the desire of the autonomous character to participate actively in his own development. It is a device at once alienating and seductive: alienating, because it disassociates spectator from spectacle, not in the collective, intellectual manner of the epic theatre, but rather in the disjointed, irrational style of the absurdists. At the same time, it seduces or attracts the spectator by creating a series of concentric rings of reality: the interior drama of the characters; the exterior drama, *Los viejos*; and by extension, a still larger drama in which we, the viewers, are participants.¹⁴

What, then, of the third character, the nearly mute Woman in *Los viejos*? What purpose does she serve, and whom or what does she represent? The first and only time we hear her speak, she too cries, "¡Así no!" (p. 56), echoing with perfect symmetry the protests of her fellow players. Her shouts are precipitated by the fact that her lover, the Young Playwright, has become a prisoner of his mask and has become one with the character he sought to represent. Like the others, she wishes to be a participant in the creative process. Unlike them, she is powerless to reshape the play to her specifications, for she is a Muse, romanticized into insubstantiality ("agua, aire, sangre derramada"). Throughout the play she vacillates wildly between the two men, as if trying to reconcile the two extremes. Reduced to pure function by the men who surround her, she is ultimately directed to choose between them. When it becomes apparent that her lover is trapped in his old man's costume, she leaves with the Old Playwright, the "viejo de verdad" (p. 64). The impression

is one of finality, of decision. Yet, shortly thereafter, there is another reversal, when the voice of the Old Playwright is heard announcing that he too has been abandoned by the Woman.

We are left within a solipsistic universe: nothing exists, neither youth nor age nor love. Both the Young Playwright and the Old Playwright must contend with their abandonment: they have lost youth, love and vitality. What remains to them is the ultimate reality of the theatre, for whose sake they must be willing to settle their differences.

La voz del Joven Dramaturgo—¿Y qué voy a hacer sin ella entonces?

La voz del Viejo Dramaturgo—Puede usted hacer lo que yo estoy soñando en este momento y espero poder aún. Una pieza para pagar la vida y el amor que perdemos y que quizá no merecíamos: para pagar el cuerpo agresivo, insolente, fuerte, poseedor, que perdemos también como agua y como aire porque él sí vuelve al reino, al vientre de la mujer.

(p. 73)

The Woman, then, represents timelessness and creativity, in whom all conflicting ideologies come to be reconciled. She belongs exclusively to no one, nor can she be shared or appropriated, but her presence can be felt in the fruit of artistic effort. "The play's the thing"—it alone remains for posterity when all else has long since vanished. Art transcends the generations. With characteristic wisdom, Usigli thus returns to his cyclical interpretation of reality,¹⁵ suggesting that in life, as in art, alienation is sterility, and that a synthesis of conflicting values is the only viable alternative if mankind and its creations are to survive.

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Notes

1. Usigli died in June 1979, as reported by Ramón Layera in *Latin American Theatre Review*, 13/1 (Fall 1979), 54.

2. "En lo que se refiere a la imitación de la vida . . . el realismo . . . ha conseguido mejor que cualquier otro estilo realizar este precepto clásico que es la convención original e inmutable del teatro." "Realismo moderno y realismo mágico," *Itinerario del autor dramático*, 1st ed. (Mexico: La Casa de España en Mexico, 1940), p. 121.

3. Howard M. Fraser, "Theatricality in *The Fanlights* and *Payment as Pledged*," *The American Hispanist*, III, No. 19 (Sept. 1977), 6.

4. I have dealt with the question of stratification of reality in the Mexican theatre prior to 1937 in my "Illusive Reality in the Twentieth-Century Mexican Theater: Villaurrutia, Gorostiza, Usigli, Carballido," Ph.D. Diss., Harvard, 1973.

5. Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969).

6. It is revealed that Verónica's real name is Marina, one of many implausible coincidences that lead the reader to believe that the two women are different avatars of a single personality.

7. Despite the disparity in the dates of composition, Usigli calls *Aguas estancadas* "la hermana mayor" of the pair, perhaps because *Mientras amemos* was not completed until 1948. In *Breve noticia sobre "Mientras amemos" y "Aguas estancadas"* (Unpubl., 1960, p. 2).

8. *Los viejos: diálogo imprevisto en un acto* (Mexico: Finisterre, 1971). All page references appearing in the text are based upon this edition.

9. For a good discussion of the theme of generational conflict in *Los viejos*, see Asela Rodríguez-Seda, "Las últimas obras de Rodolfo Usigli: Efebocracia o gerontocracia?" *Latin American Theatre Review*, 8/1 (Fall 1974), 45-48.

10. Abel, p. 63.
11. Octavio Paz, "Máscaras mexicanas," *El laberinto de la soledad*, 6th ed. (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1978), p. 38.
12. Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytical Study*, ed. and trans. Harry Tucker, Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), p. xix.
13. Abel, p. 62.
14. Robert Marrast has pointed out the implicit inclusion of the reader/audience in this scheme of concentricity of planes of reality, with regard to the theatre of Cervantes. See Marrast's "Pedro de Urdemalas, l'illusion comique," *Cervantès* (Paris, 1957).
15. Gerald W. Petersen discusses Usigli's circular structure and reconciliation of opposing moral values in some of the earlier works in "El mundo circular de Rodolfo Usigli," *Explicación de Textos Literarios*, 6, No. 1, 105-108.