

César Vega Herrera: A Poetic Dramatist

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In addition to plays César Vega Herrera (born 1939 in Arequipa) has written occasional poetry,¹ children's literature—for instance, *La noche de los Sprunkos* (1974), which won the Premio Nacional Fomento de la Cultura in 1973² and *Pasakón* (no editorial data available)—and a book of six short stories, *Muerte del ángel* (1968).³ Vega cultivates the genre of the short story assiduously, but he has never issued collected editions of his stories after their publication in newspapers and *revistas* such as *Jornada poética*, *Creación*, *Haraví*, *Tebaida*, *Imagen* and *Rescoldo*. Quite generally, Vega Herrera is rather indifferent to the fate of his works once he has written and published them and, in the case of his plays, seen them produced. Vega is also an excellent writer of *feuilletons* (in *Correo*, Lima) on such topics or people as the day Perú's national soccer team lost against Chile, a policeman who lost his job, or a *zapatero remendón*. Among the prizes the dramatist has received are a "Mención Honorosa Casa de las Américas" for *Ipacankure* and the Premio Francisca Benavides de Benavides for his children's stories *La fantasía del soldadito de plomo* (1974).

Characteristic of virtually anything Vega Herrera writes is a pronounced sad tenderness, if this combination be permitted, vis-à-vis the world into which he places his characters. As one critic put it: "[tiene] una visión del mundo que oscila entre la ternura por los seres humanos y la ironía porque tal ternura fuese siquiera necesaria; una sensibilidad por lo poético que, para los que lo perciben, pueden descubrirle a uno lo maravilloso en el suceso más prosaico; un ojo por el detalle significativo y casi mágico. . . . Vega nos muestra [la] vida como algo que hemos visto mil veces sin hacerle caso, o sea que en verdad NO lo hemos visto, y que ahora, de repente y debido a las palabras de Vega, vemos como algo que vale la pena mirar."⁴

The four plays I shall discuss are: *Ipacankure* (1969), *El día de las gracias* (1969), *El tren* (1970), and *Gabriel* (1973).⁵ Vega's remaining plays are at this writing: *Un muchacho llamado Tim* (1970), *El diablo* (1970), *El pozo de la dicha* (1970), *El ascensor* (1973), *La chusma está de moda* (1974), *La muerte de Juan Pérez* (1974), *¿Qué sucedió en Pasos?* (1975), and *El padrino*, a play the date of whose

origin I do not know, although I saw a production of it in Lima at Christmas in 1981.

The first play, *Ipacankure*—the word is Vega's invention—takes place in a miserable *cuarto de alquiler* somewhere in Lima.⁶ In it live two young men called UNO and DOS. They share not only the rent but, as the very first stage-direction reads, “una cama . . . : uno [duerme] en la cabecera y el otro a los pies. Ambos comparten un mismo pijama: UNO viste el pantalón y DOS, la camisa” (7). The play consists of two acts and an epilogue. Throughout the two acts UNO does not leave the bed. However, in the *epílogo* he has moved out and DOS, in a long monologue, talks to himself, in the course of which he mentions for the first time his own name: Raúl.

The conversation between the two men is inconsequential and meant primarily to show what living at such close quarters means for each: how they get on each other's nerves, yet how they, though both extremely poor and lonely, tolerate and forgive each other's true or imagined defects, if only so as not to be alone. UNO is the more mysterious of the two, rather anarchic, an inventor of words or concepts that remind one of Fernando del Paso in *Palinuro de México*: “Ipacankure” itself, “todos los Ismos son unos Sismos” (32) or “Vitalitancia” (30). UNO is, moreover, self-contained, somewhat cynical, and surer of himself than DOS who is sentimental, talkative, soft, always conciliatory, not at all dominant, or arbitrary, as is UNO. As DOS says about UNO: “Desde que empezó nuestra amistad, ya no me siento tan solo. Pero él es incomprensible. A veces tengo que obligarme a soportarlo, sin embargo, sé que es mi único amigo, el único verdadero; y precisamente, también a veces, no lo soporto por esa condición de amistad. Pero en verdad, no sé cómo explicarlo” (p. 20).

To whom does DOS say these lines? To the audience. This kind of “aside”—frequent in Vega's plays—permits the author to inform us about the things DOS would never say directly to UNO. The latter, in turn, never talks to the audience, only to DOS. And it is DOS who says, to UNO: “por qué será que cuando uno se siente solo, más quisiera hablar con cualquier desconocido” (p. 10), i.e., the audience, to which UNO reacts by saying: “Tienes la Enfermedad del siglo” (p. 10)—loneliness, incommunication, because human beings hesitate to trust each other. On the other hand, these “asides” to the audience represent one of the defects of *Ipacankure*, mainly because they tend to be too long and are of a narrative or reflective nature, i.e. they are not dramatic.

Who or what is “Ipacankure”? The word is the first of the drama—“UNO. Ipacankure. ¿Sabes algo de Ipacankure? DOS. ¿Ipacankure? ¿Qué cosa es?” (p. 7)—and gets shouted the loudest at the end of the play, in the epilogue: DOS has read to the audience the note UNO left behind for him when he moved out and then tells about a dream he had—with “Ipacankure”: “llegué a verlo con cierta claridad, Ipacankure se volvió a mirarme” (p. 48) and “agitó las palmas, como buscando delante de una rara pared de vidrio un lugar por donde pasar hacia mí. Yo también hacía lo mismo. . . . Era imposible atravesar aquella poderosa e invisible barrera” (pp. 48-49). Finally, Raúl-DOS shouts, referring to the absent UNO, “¡[Ipacankure] eras tú! Eramos nosotros que no nos escuchábamos” (p. 49). Ipacankure is, then,

the ideal friend, perhaps friendship as an idea, one that the wear and tear of daily living makes impossible to reach. And thus we remain, over and over again, alone.

The second play, *El día de las gracias*, is by far less romantic and technically superior to *Ipacankure*, though it deals with the same topic—loneliness and betrayal—only now it is within the framework of love. Again we have two principal characters, EL and ELLA (also identified as Roberto and as Blanca González), with a brief appearance of her parents (p. 15) and her *padrino* (p. 11). Over long stretches EL and ELLA play themselves years earlier, a vacillation Vega is to use again in *Gabriel*. The scene is “un cuarto de hotel de tercera categoría” (p. 1), i.e., again the enclosed space of confrontation and the symbol of homelessness. Roberto and Blanca have made a suicide-pact: when morning dawns they will take poison. The reason is not explained. My reading, based on *Ipacankure*, is that again it is despair over the ephemerality of even the strongest interhuman emotions:

EL—¡Nos queremos, nos queremos, tú y yo nos queremos, eso es verdad!

ELLA—Cuando estemos muertos habremos dejado de querernos, y lo que ahora decimos, lo que ahora sentimos, quizá tenga sentido para nuestros cadáveres (p. 2).

ELLA—Me hubiera gustado ser eterna (p. 12).

Exactly as in *Ipacankure* there is one mysterious (one might even say capricious) figure, Blanca, and one who tries to accommodate himself, Roberto. And if in *Ipacankure* the dialogue is based largely on non-sequiturs, in *El día de las gracias* the associative progress of the play coagulates logically only in the author's mind. He leaves to his spectators and readers the job of making sense of life, a life he presents as wondrous, as a mixture of past and desperate present. In the second half of the play this mixture becomes threefold: as the two characters remember their days of courtship, a radio emits the noises of a *feria* and the election of a “Reina de la Primavera,” who of course turns out to be Blanca. As the drama approaches its end, so does the broadcast, the *concurso* for the *Reina*. Thus Blanca becomes again *Reina* over the loudspeaker of her memories, whereupon most unexpectedly she knifes Roberto: “quieres que vuelva a mi sucia existencia. Quieres husmearme como un perro. . . . ¡Cobarde!” (p. 24). Blanca could not stand the way her life has changed her since, at the age of fifteen or so, she seemed to have reached the zenith of her beauty and youth. *El día de las gracias* is marred by its abrupt and unmotivated ending: why does Blanca have to kill her lover, especially if both had made a suicide-pact? Is this another non-sequitur? Or do we have another version of “Man kills what he loves”?

El tren, the next and the longest play, is famous for its excellent, agile dialogue although the second act fails, if “act” it is, as a dream-sequence. In the dream, the principal figure, a little girl, remains realistic, while the adults, two judges and a policeman, become caricatures or puppets. (A good staging could probably remedy this.) The main scene of *El tren* is a railroad station, probably in Arequipa, where Nenúfar, the girl, and her father wait for the train to come to take them to the capital, i.e., Lima, where Nenúfar is to be

cured of some undefined illness. The train of course does not come, or leave, until the end of the play. Nenufar has a teddy-bear which speaks, though only to her. Its symbolic dimension is defined by the *oso* himself in the last scene, after repeated attempts by the grownups in the play fail to make the girl accept one of a long number of names for the toy: "Soy tu ilusión," the bear says, "Soy tu ilusión, soy la ilusión del mundo, pero soy una ilusión real" (p. 38). The bear even alludes to the symbolic value of the train: "es un tren casi tan largo como la vida, alístate, alista tu alma" (p. 38). In the character of Nenufar, Vega Herrera has created a delightful figure whose long conversation with her father (who tries to read his newspaper but she continually interrupts) reveals in the non-sequiturs that characterize Vega's dialogues in general. She says: "los trenes van y vienen llenos de pañuelos, de palabras y cosas, ¿qué dices tú, papa . . ." (p. 2) and "Qué feo debe ser un tren vacío" (p. 2), or: "ese reloj era tan grande que parecía que las horas le quedaban chicas" (p. 3.). At times, an ominous note is struck in Nenufar's words, as when her father consoles her: "verás que no recuerdas haber esperado [el tren]" and she answers: "¿No recordar haber esperado? ¡Uyy, es como haber estado muerta!" (p. 4.).

El tren is a beautifully poetic vision of childhood and its inherent ephemerality, of a child's fear of growing up and facing the world. "Llegará el día en que ya no serás una niña" (p. 14), says Nenufar's father, and she shouts that in that case: "olvidaré mi oso. ¡No quiero ser una señorita" (p. 14), for in the world of grownups—they appear in the dream-sequence as judges interrogating Nenufar in a Kafkaesque manner—these grownups "te confundirán con sus confusiones" (p. 13). And she will forget her *oso* because the "confusiones" will replace the "ilusiones." But the train of life will come, Nenufar will have to get on, and "El tren no se detendrá en ningún pueblo ni lugar" (p. 15).

In the last play, *Gabriel*, Vega Herrera attempts a Brechtian theatre: it is a one-act play in which two actors, in the roles, again, of ELLA and EL, constantly step in and out of their character in the process of evoking the life and death of one Gabriel. EL in this technique continually assumes the part of Gabriel, ELLA that of Gabriel's girlfriend, who was ELLA also, but younger. Vega has used the same method in *El día de las gracias* when the two protagonists slipped out of their skin, as it were, and back into the one they had years earlier, i.e., two different moments of life of the *same* persons. In *Gabriel*, only ELLA does this. EL steps into someone else's role: Gabriel's. In the text such role-changes are indicated by quotation marks for the lines spoken by what might be termed the "surface-actors" *qua* "background-actors," i.e., Gabriel and his girlfriend. With a few exceptions, most of the dialogue consists of one-liners, such as:

EL—¡[Gabriel] llegó el once de abril!
 ELLA—No, fue el diez de abril.
 EL—¡A las cinco y medio de la tarde!
 ELLA—A las seis (p. 2).

The role-changes are thus:

EL[*qua* Gabriel]—"¡Le contaré mi vida!"

ELLA—Me la contó durante tres horas (p. 4).

As in all his plays, in *Gabriel César Vega* frequently uses, or "abuses," the technique of having his character speak to the audience.

Gabriel's life is told in the "surface"—and the "background"—dialogues from his arrival in Lima as a *provinciano* to his death, which may or may not have been a suicide. Gabriel, in this span, begins to suffer from reality more and more: "He querido ser realista, normal . . ." (p. 12), he is quoted, but "nosotros no somos aunque queremos ser auténticos, porque han enmascarado nuestra realidad . . . nuestro amor es triste y débil porque no tenemos raíces, porque nos roban y nos utilizan, así como compraron y vendieron a nuestros padres . . . estamos perdidos en esta ciudad repleta de direcciones . . . ¿Crees que mi sueño y la imagen de la mujer de mi sueño han nacido porque sí . . . ?" (p. 11). That sueño turns into Gabriel's refuge from reality. It is filled with another world and becomes, as ELLA says, "como si su sueño fuera la verdadera realidad del mundo" (p. 11), a dream in which even ELLA *qua* Gabriel's girlfriend figured "como si fuera un habitante más del mundo de su sueño" (p. 10). And then comes a new twist to an old theme—alienation: Gabriel, who had been trying to sleep as much as possible, because "me siento tan pobre y tan solo cuando no sueño" (p. 10), cannot sleep any more, or at least not dream his *sueño* any more: "Se mataba por soñar, y nada nada" (p. 12). What is left? EL gives the answer: "Tal vez el camino de la muerte era el único para llegar a su país soñado" (p. 14). The play ends on a conciliatory note: "ELLA— (*Con tristeza*) Sí, [Gabriel] pudo haber sido mejor . . . EL— (*Tomándola de la mano*) Nosotros lo seremos, por nosotros, por él . . . ELLA—Por él, por nosotros, por los demás (*Salen sin soltarse*)" (p. 14).

Again, the poetry is evident, as is the technical progress César Vega Herrera has made since *Ipacankure*. Also, his vision has become more complex. Only one more thing needs to be said: my overview of these four representative plays by Vega Herrera may give the impression of being clear statements. This is not so. In Vega's plays a residue of mystery always remains, something that refuses to yield to any interpretation. The use of non-sequiturs contributes to this final uncertainty of the interpreter. In the theatre, this uncertainty contributes to the suspense; the spectator constantly waits for a *final* explanation which never comes. It is as though one were reading poetry, in which something always eludes the reader, leaving one more with an image than with a statement, for in a poem there is always more between the lines than the words convey. In César Vega Herrera's plays, this quality resides more in the spaces between the non-sequiturs. It is ultimately ungraspable but "senseable."

During long conversations with the author, both in Arequipa and in Lima, I found him to be a most captivating teller of anecdotes about his own life, no less poetic than his writings, self-ironical and palpably tentative about life and people. To conjecture about the mysterious, inaccessible insinuation in his plays, I would say that the intimate suspicion on the part of the author is that living is essentially pain, or at any rate sadness. Joy, too, of course—there are the children about whom and for whom he has written such tender texts—but joy does not last, just as childhood does not, or love or friendship. The train

comes and transports us, without stops to the terminal station, while we sit there, like Nenufar, incubating the illness that will be cured at the end of the run. All of Vega's plays are about a painful *loss* of one kind or another. Depressing? Well, Peruvians are known to be sad people.

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NOTES

1. In this genre, César Vega must not be confused with his older brother, Alberto Vega Herrera, whose poetry has been published in, among others, such a memorable little book as *Clithorys: Poesía* (Lima: Juan Mejía Baca, 1975), pp. 15-22. César's poetry in the same book is on pp. 31-38.

2. Arequipa: Editorial "El Sol," 1974.

3. Arequipa: Editorial Miranda, 1968.

4. *La Prensa*, Lima (9/11/75), p. 27.

5. None of the author's plays (and few of his other writings) are in print. They exist mainly in mimeographed versions, or of course in the ephemerality of their stage-productions. I possess only four of the mimeographed versions. Still, as they are fully representative of Vega's dramas, they give an equitable idea of his total dramatic *oeuvre*, all of which I was able to see over many years in Lima in more or less adequate stagings, some of them done by the author himself.

6. On Vega Herrera's advice I used the mimeographed version he had corrected himself by hand. There is an edition, also mimeographed but in book-format, that was published in Arequipa by the Casa de la Cultura de Arequipa in 1970. It contains—unfortunately illegibly—a facsimile of the "cable con el que la Casa de las Américas anunció al escritor César Vega la Mención a que se hizo acreedor" (p. 3). The other plays are also mimeographed copies. The page-indications in parenthesis follow in all four cases these mimeographed editions.