

Metatheatrical Histories in *Corona de luz*

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Critics have interpreted Rodolfo Usigli's *Corona de luz* as a dramatization of a historical event that contributed to defining the Mexican character. They contend that Usigli wanted the public to observe the recreation of the miracle of the Virgin of Guadalupe and to examine critically the importance of this past event in terms of the present Mexican reality.¹ This valid interpretation, however, overlooks another more universal reading and ignores subtler thematic levels in Usigli's complex work. *Corona de luz*, a dramatization of the process of writing a historical play, not only traces the gradual progression toward a fusion of reality and fiction, but establishes a theoretical groundwork for comparing dramatic, historical, and philosophical texts. Usigli weaves these apparently disparate elements into an intricately textured drama.

Corona de luz dramatizes the process of playwriting by focusing on the conception, development, and performance of a play. Seen in light of this emphasis on the steps taken by a playwright to create dramatic fiction, *Corona de luz* is not merely a chronicle of sixteenth-century Mexico, but a metaplay. In his study, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*, Lionel Abel discusses works that highlight the artistic imagination of the playwright as well as his characters. A technique common to many of these pieces is the play within a play, a structure that underscores the creative genius of the characters. Nevertheless, Abel does not reduce metatheatre to this most obvious example, but deals with a broader concept of this dramatic form. He points out that "the plays . . . do have a common character; all of them are theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized" (60). The characters in those pieces recognize theatrical elements in themselves and in their world. As a result, a representation of this theatricality is the essence of the pieces. As Abel explains, "Such plays have truth in them, not because they convince us of real occurrences or existing persons, but because they show the reality of the dramatic imagination, instanced by the playwright's and also by that of his characters. Of such plays, it may be said: 'The play's the thing'" (59). The public witnesses scenes in which the characters, consciously or unconsciously, exercise dramatic imagination and become artists.

"Dramatic imagination," patent in *Corona de luz*, provides the incentive

for Usigli and his characters to create fiction out of everyday reality. The first extratextual level of dramatic imagination consists of Usigli's artistic treatment of a historical event. The second textual level involves Usigli's characters who dramatize a religious event. Comparisons between the playwrights' roles are obvious. Both groups of artists create a drama in order to present historical or religious events. During the creation of these dramas, the playwrights confront demands placed on them by two seemingly opposite concepts—reality and fiction. These demands compromise the playwrights when they realize that they cannot faithfully portray reality if their created fictions are to be convincing. Nevertheless, both Usigli and his characters justify this creative license for the sake of offering artistic and religious messages to the public. Their plays unite fiction and reality; the distinction between the two becomes unclear and, finally, unimportant.

The gradual blending of fiction and reality occurs within the text of *Corona de luz* when several priests adopt the role of playwright in order to stage a miracle. Their attempts at playwriting involve three steps inherent to the dramatic process. Each step of this process brings the characters closer to a fusion of reality and fiction. By the end of the play they have lost their ability to distinguish between the two. In an initial moment of inspiration, one character defines the basic dramatic problem to present in the play. Next, another group of characters deliberates over the details of the production. The process culminates with the performance of the work, a phenomenon that is neither fiction nor reality, yet is both.

Act I, entitled "Prólogo político," corresponds to the first step of the dramatic process, the identification of the dramatic problem. Carlos V grants an audience to several ministers from the New World. The dignitaries inform their emperor that speedy conversion of the pagan Indians is crucial to the well-being of the Church and the Empire. The slow and painstaking missionary tactics have yielded few converts. The ministers' report provides the king with the basic dramatic problem: he must find a way to hasten the conversion of the pagans. A secular minister, who pinpoints the shortcomings of the clergymen's efforts, also alludes to a possible solution to the problem. The laic states, "Vosotros les quitáis a sus dioses de piedra y les dais en cambio, un dios de palabras. Les quitáis la realidad que tocan y les dais un paraíso que no ven, una mañana que no llega" (133). The missionaries' intent to substitute abstract concepts for concrete idols has failed. After the king decides that the solution is to make the Indians see God, he seeks his wife's advice. Queen Isabel responds that only a miracle will resolve the problem and promises to ask the Virgin of Guadalupe for help. The mention of a miracle and of the Virgin of Guadalupe further directs the emperor toward a solution by supplying him with the foundation for the newly required missionary tactic. At the end of Act I, a smiling Carlos states, "La Virgen de Guadalupe. . . . Eso sería un milagro" (142). This first act, then, delineates the process in which the playwright, in this case, Carlos V, focuses on a particular dramatic question and considers possible techniques to present the action of the play.

In the second act, "Los siete por México," the playwrights, a group of clergymen in Mexico, elaborate on the basics initiated in Act I. The scene

opens with the religious men's reactions upon receiving unorthodox orders from their emperor. Carlos V demands that they fabricate a miracle. A virgin with Mexican features is to appear before the Indians and roses are to grow in heretofore infertile soil. These orders confront the ecclesiastics with a moral quandary; they question their right to create a miracle. Nevertheless, the liberal Fray Motolinía compares their tasks to the *autos sacramentales*: "Digo que . . . he pensado siempre en la necesidad de organizar representaciones sacras para apresurar la evangelización de nuestros hermanos indios . . . para enseñar al indio cómo se abre paso la Cruz de Cristo" (165). The allegorical *autos*, created by medieval ecclesiastics, developed by Lope de Vega, and perfected by Calderón de la Barca, became especially popular in Counter-Reformation Spain. These dramatizations of Christian dogma simultaneously fulfilled religious and aesthetic functions. The Mexican priests, like their Spanish predecessors, contemporaries, and successors, recognize the urgent need to revitalize Christian truths by framing them in a fictional context. According to Motolinía, this miracle would make religion and God more visible to the Indians. Sahagún supports Motolinía's ideas of providing a more accessible religion to the Indians by simplifying it. He asks, "¿Acaso los hermanos . . . no simplifican los sagrados textos para hacerlos comprender mejor a sus ignaros fieles? . . . No españolizan el latín a menudo? . . ." (174). This reasoning affords the priests the opportunity to justify their actions.

Motolinía's reference to the *autos sacramentales* not only addresses the moral issue of a fabricated miracle, but points to the inherent dramatic nature of the priest's task and suggests the interdependent relationship between fiction and reality. Motolinía expounds on the benefits of the theatre: "Los autos sacramentales, el teatro, en fin, suele alejar al hombre de sí mismo . . . lo hace olvidar el destino personal por el colectivo, la realidad por la ilusión" (178). The priest describes a process in which the faithless Indian will grasp Christian truths through a fictive illusion. This aesthetic form provides an objectifying distance that will encourage a doubting public to accept the religious message. With these comments Motolinía also unknowingly introduces a problematic facet of the dramatic process that will later confront these ecclesiastic playwrights. Fiction is a necessary steppingstone to reality. What will become difficult for the characters to determine is where fiction ends and where reality begins. Nevertheless, for the moment, the priests concern themselves with justifying and planning the miracle.

Offering the Indians a religious truth requires that the priests exercise dramatic imagination. Motolinía's and Sahagún's comments encourage the priests to reconsider their task. They tentatively debate how they would execute the miracle if they followed the emperor's orders. This hesitation, however, is short-lived. Soon the ecclesiastics readily adapt to their roles as playwrights. They plan the details of the religious production by resorting to the same theatrical techniques available to any playwright. Three actors will play the principal and secondary roles. A Spanish gardener, noted for his expertise in roses, will play a peripheral role by cultivating the flowers in an infertile spot. A Spanish nun, supposedly endowed with visionary powers, will be the Virgin. An unsuspecting Mexican Indian will play a major role by reacting with all due surprise upon seeing the unexpected roses and Virgin.

The playwrights also reckon with the text of the play and the best language to convey that text. The Virgin will relate a message to save the Indian's soul and those of his fellow Indians. The priests will teach the nun a few words of Nahuatl so that the Indian will understand her lines.

A few remaining details require the ecclesiastics' attention. They agree on December 31 in an open field in southern Pedregal as the most propitious date and location for the premiere. While making these arrangements, the priests, aware of their roles as playwrights, describe the religious production in theatrical terms. Motolinía states, "Entonces, . . . tenemos ya el lugar de la acción, el escenario, los personajes, y el diálogo" (177). The usage of this vocabulary underscores the creative process experienced by the priests. They are conscious of their ability to create fiction by drawing on a reality filled with theatrical potentials.

Act III, "La corona," deals with the premiere and several unexpected events that disconcert the ecclesiastical playwrights and that focus on the problematic distinctions between reality and fiction. The playwrights, who initially believe that they control their artistic creation, confront a situation that undermines their artistic omnipotence. On December 12, four Indians, all named Juan, announce that they have seen the Virgin and the roses in northern Tepeyacatl. When Fray Juan asks one of Indians if the nun is the vision he saw, the Indian responds that her voice and face differ from the Virgin's. This unanticipated opening performance departs from nearly all the careful playwriting done by the priests in the previous act. It occurs nineteen days before the planned December 31; it takes place in the north instead of the south; it includes different and more numerous actors. The clergy momentarily doubt the authenticity of this premature miracle. Nevertheless, Fray Juan ultimately negates the importance of determining the how, when, and where of the event. The miracle, whether fiction or reality, is a success. Indians outside his office have embraced the faith. Fray Juan states, "Veo que la fe corre ya por todo México como un río sin riberas. Ese es el milagro, hermanos" (223). The clergy have exercised their dramatic imagination and have achieved their goal. Acceptance of the true faith transcends the importance of distinguishing between reality and fiction. The action of the play, the miracle, erases the differentiating line between the two. The truth of the play, which initially required careful nurturing by the playwrights, becomes a powerful reality independent of its very creators.

This unexpected and independent premiere of the miracle forces a dual role on the clergymen, who are simultaneously playwrights and characters in the production. When they wrote the script for the miracle, the priests expected to be uninvolved yet forewarned spectators during the performance. Distance from the piece would have allowed them to view critically the spectacle and to await confidently the foreseen outcome. Nevertheless, unplanned changes in the script prevent them from maintaining this distance from the piece. The clergy become characters who must improvise with lines and actions not previously included in the text. The dual roles of the clergymen further strengthen the links between fiction and reality. During this period the priests cannot determine which elements of the performance belong to the fiction they have created and which belong to their own reality.

The priests' confrontation with the differences between the planned and performed miracles adds another dimension to the problematic distinction of reality from fiction. The Virgin's apparition and the four Juans' narration of that event suggest that the priests are characters not only in Usigli's play, but in an intertextual play created by another unidentified dramatist. Although the performed miracle has some elements in common with the priests' planned miracle, the differences between the two dramas confirm the artistic independence of the former. The anonymous playwright, not the priests, controls the performed miracle, thereby suggesting at least two coexisting facets of fiction and/or reality within the context of *Corona de luz*. Although the planned miracle remains a fiction for the priests, the performed miracle invades their reality. The similarities between the miracles may fuse reality and fiction; the differences may separate the two. Nevertheless, the priests and the audience cannot determine when they fuse or when they separate. The action of the play does not explicitly develop the idea of a third coexisting drama, but nothing in the play precludes the existence of multiple simultaneous dramas in which fiction and reality imperceptibly merge into and separate from each other.

The three steps of playwriting traced in *Corona de luz* parallel those taken by Usigli when he chose to write on a historical event. In the two prologues to the play, Usigli addresses these issues and discusses the inspiration for his piece, the mechanics of writing the play, and his anticipation concerning the public's reaction upon seeing the play. Several of Usigli's comments relate to Abel's ideas on dramatic imagination. The playwright elaborates on the differences between history (concrete facts) and antihistory (an interpretation of those facts). Aware that he deforms history or reality for the sake of antihistory or fiction, Usigli justifies this creative deformation by focusing on his responsibilities as a playwright. He states, "Si no se escribe un libro de historia . . . el primer elemento que debe regir es la imaginación, no la historia . . . sólo la imaginación permite tratar teatralmente un tema histórico" (70). The playwright's primary concern, to create theatre through imagination, often involves tampering with historical truth.

Usigli's prefatory comments that emphasize the artistic license exercised in his rendition of antihistory bring into focus the related question of metahistory. In *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Hayden White raises issues that parallel several problems confronting Usigli as dramatist of a historical event. White prefaces his study with two aims: "to establish the ineluctably poetic nature of the historical work and to specify the prefigurative element in a historical account by which its theoretical concepts were tacitly sanctioned" (xi). White's first goal corresponds to Usigli's hierarchy of dramatic imagination and interpretation over concrete facts. Both viewpoints recognize in the human science of history that nonscientific aspect which subjects the past to inconsistent and often capricious interpretations. Consideration of the historical interpretive act leads to White's second concern for the "prefigurative element in a historical account," which entails analysis of the tools used by the historian or the philosopher of history in their commentaries. White's discussion of how history is written compares to *Corona de luz*, in part, because of the historical

theme of the play, but more importantly because of the metatheatrical focus of the piece. White examines not only what a historian like Michelet and a philosopher of history like Hegel say, but how they convey that message. Since the most basic tool of the historian, like the literary artist, is language, White analyzes several nineteenth-century thinkers' modes of discourse.² After exploring the cause and effect relationship between a chosen mode of discourse and the data explained by that discourse, White demonstrates the unsettlingly illusive nature of history and accounts for different conclusions reached by studying the same sequence of events. The reader, exposed to a text in which manipulative language creates the historical account, confronts many possibilities concerning the meaning, importance or significance of past events. White describes the reader as being "indentured to a choice among contending interpretative strategies in any effort to reflect on history in general" (*Metahistory* xii). These contentions seriously undermine attempts to prove the existence of a definitive history. The entire field may fall into Usigli's category of antihistory, which often alters the particulars for the sake of the comprehensive interpretation. This brief overview of White's comments on modes of discourse also characterizes Usigli's translation of history into drama. In his efforts to mold a historical interpretation and dramatic representation into the verbal and visual language of the stage, Usigli juggles the role of historian and dramatist. His extratextual discussion on the basic nature of history and how to write about it adds yet another role, philosopher of history. These three roles converge in *Corona de luz*, a text that foregrounds the dramatic process, presents a historical event, and exemplifies Usigli's philosophical views on history and antihistory. The synthesis of these roles in Usigli's text implies similarities in the tasks facing the dramatist, the historian, and the philosopher, who rely on language to create worlds that contain elements of fiction and reality.

Although the preceding paragraphs explicitly comment on the extratextual concern of Usigli's writing of *Corona de luz*, they also offer a point of departure for comparisons between Usigli and the characters of the text. These considerations further underscore the affinity between the playwright and the historian and how they write their respective dramas and histories. Like Carlos V who discovers a need to make God visible to the Mexican, the playwright defines a miracle in the following way: "es una manifestación tridimensional de lo invisible suscitada por lo visible" (35). Perhaps the most explicit manifestation of this definition of a miracle is religious, like the one enacted in *Corona de luz*. Nevertheless, its application to Usigli's mission is obvious. Out of invisible history the playwright creates visible tridimensional antihistory on stage. He hopes that his fiction will illustrate the important role played by the Virgin of Guadalupe in determining part of Mexico's identity and in initiating Mexico's independence from Spain. This goal marks the first step of the playwrighting process.

The second step, the writing of the text, presents Usigli with difficulties similar to those faced by the priests in Act II of *Corona de luz*. Although the clergymen know that the nun is not the Virgin, they decide that she is the actress who will most effectively instill faith in the pagans. Like the priests, Usigli consciously ignores the distinctions between reality and fiction in order

to present effectively an artistic truth. For example, Usigli states that he is not certain that Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, one of the ecclesiastics in Act II, was actually in Mexico in 1531. Nevertheless, Usigli justifies this inconsistency; "considero a las Casas un personaje teatral incomparable, tan afirmativo en contra de la Conquista y los conquistadores y en pro de México" (72). Las Casas' impressive theatricality undermines the significance of any historical discrepancies that his presence may cause in the play. Usigli elaborates on at least nine other historical inaccuracies in his text. He justifies these alterations as necessary components for molding a unified and compact dramatic structure.

The performance of Usigli's drama includes several of the same uncertainties that characterized the performance of the miracle. The date, the place, and the actors are variable elements of any theatrical performance. Usigli, like the clergymen of the play, must disregard the importance of these variables because they do not distort the artistic truth he offers in *Corona de luz*.

Corona de luz, a multifaceted structure, simultaneously outlines the process of writing texts and reveals the interrelated nature of the dramatic, historical, and philosophical fields. The metatheatrical elements of the work suggest that a play exists, not only as an artistic artifice enclosed within the proscenium arch, but as an integral part of our already theatrical world. The "dramatic imagination" defined by Abel and exercised by Usigli and his characters permeates every facet of the playwrights' existence. This imagination allows them to ignore the distinctions between fiction and reality and to delve into a truth that surpasses both. The scope of Usigli's play, however, embraces not only the dramatic but the historical imagination, which also blurs the distinctive features of two apparently unique concepts: a sequence of past events and an interpretation of those occurrences. The historical imagination, like the dramatic one, exercises powerful influence on the shaping of reality. Usigli imposes a set of priorities on the value and function of his historical account. His primary concern, not to depict precisely a historical event, but to synthesize the importance of that event for the Mexican people, overrides any problematic disparities between what really happened and what Usigli presents as having happened. Finally, the emphasis on dramatic and historical imagination in *Corona de luz* underscores fundamental similarities between the aesthetic purpose of the playwright and the academic intention of the historian. Both aims entail linguistic manipulation in the writing of a text, which in turn, becomes a reality, whether fictional or factual, in and of itself.

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Notes

1. See Finch, Lomelí, and Rodríguez.
2. White's discussions of these modes of discourse resemble literary analysis. For example, in order to contrast different historians' modes of employment, White uses Northrup Frye's categories of romance, tragedy, comedy and satire. When discussing a particular historian's mode of thinking, White traces four phases: metaphorical, metonymical, synecdochic and ironic. Each phase characterizes the style of a particular historian and synthesizes his comprehension of the historical field.

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