

Violence and the Sacred in a Den of Thieves

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In the mid-sixties, Puerto Rican theatre began a constant vigil over the daily life of the Puerto Rican who was formed out of a set of cultural circumstances in full crisis, more specifically in reaction to the Vietnam War in which many young Puerto Ricans participated. Dramatists most often associated with that initial period are Jaime Carrero, whose work *Flag Inside* won the Ateneo's theatre prize in 1966, and Lydia Milagros González and the group El Tajo del Alacrán. With the pull-out of United States' troops from Vietnam in 1975, many dramatists began a more profound delving into the daily, specific manifestations of the Island's social, economic, and political problems. The theatre of recent years presents dramatic situations totally extracted from daily reality, thematically encompassing the subjects most influential within that reality. Everything from homosexuality to marital infidelity to the police and other forms of institutional repression has been starkly represented on the stage with varying degrees of success.

Roberto Ramos-Perea's work has developed within this second cycle of what has often been called "New Puerto Rican Dramaturgy."¹ His first work of importance, *Revolución en el Infierno* (1982), was produced as part of the First Encounter of Puerto Rican Dramaturgy supported by the Theatre Department of the University of Puerto Rico in 1983. This work initiates a trilogy which *Módulo 104 (Revolución en el Purgatorio)* and *Cueva de ladrones (Revolución en el Paradiso)* (1983) complete.² All of these works are based on actual events due to the author's wish to bring to the public view the three most important aspects of the Puerto Rican life which he lives--the political, the social and the religious. *Revolución en el Infierno* is an historic drama based on the 1937 Massacre of Ponce, while *Módulo 104* is based on the more recent fights and assassinations that took place in Puerto Rican prisons during the years 1981-1982. In 1982, this latter work was awarded the Puerto Rican Atheneum's highest theatre prize, the Premio René Marqués. The third play of the trilogy, *Cueva de ladrones*, followed in 1984 with the same prize and was

presented in April, 1985 at the Bayamón Municipal Theatre as part of a cultural exchange between the Atheneum and the municipalities of the Island. This work was inspired by the corruption within some of the many evangelical religious groups that have made their presence known on the Island in recent years.

Violence plays a major role in each of these works as well as in other works by Ramos-Perea such as *Ese punto de vista* and *Los 200 No*,³ and is, in fact, the focus of his own critical point of view. For example, in the first play of the trilogy, the Ponce Massacre is put on stage in all its stark brutality; the prison play revolves around violence as a means of maintaining the social structure within prison walls and includes on-stage beatings and murders. *Cueva de ladrones* also stages beatings and murders in addition to a less stark but no less brutal psychological violence. The author's stance in respect to violence is a somewhat paradoxical one, however, since despite the fact that violence is a major staging device for Ramos-Perea, the critical point of view that he communicates through these plays is one of antiviolence. A closer look at the trilogy's final work, *Cueva de ladrones (Revolución en el Paradiso)*, illuminates Ramos-Perea's paradoxical position in respect to violence and helps to clarify the perspective from which violence enters the theatrical world of this Puerto Rican author.

According to René Girard, "Violence and the sacred are inseparable" (*Violence and the Sacred* 31). His definition of the sacred as "all those forces whose dominance over man increases . . . in proportion to man's effort to master them" (31), places human violence at the forefront of those forces and defines violence as "the heart and secret soul of the sacred" (31). His definition of sacrifice as "primarily an act of violence without fear of reprisal" (31) explains the use of ritual sacrifice among primitive societies as a means to control the violent tendencies of humankind and to maintain order within the society. A primitive society, according to Girard, is one that has no firm judicial system, is based on daily ritual, and often has a god/king type of ruler. Violence itself, in this view, has a dual nature: there is a beneficial side which provokes no reprisals; and a harmful side, based on personal vengeance, making an act of reciprocal violence inevitable. Girard admonishes that "beneficial violence must be carefully distinguished from harmful violence, and the former continually promoted at the expense of the latter" (37). The violence which is at the heart of a live sacrifice, human or other, assuming the proper rituals are followed, benefits the community in that it keeps in tow the violent tendencies among individuals of the group and prevents the disintegration of the society. This system, however, according to Girard, needs obscurity to function effectively. "A clear view of the inner workings indicates a crisis in the system; it is a sign of disintegration. . . . The underlying truth breaks through, and we find ourselves face to face with the specter of reciprocal reprisal" (23). Further, he says that "religion in its broadest sense, then, must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man's efforts to

defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence.... this obscurity coincides with the transcendental effectiveness of a violence that is holy, legal, and legitimate successfully opposed to a violence that is unjust, illegal, and illegitimate" (23).

In *Cueva de ladrones*, the audience witnesses a society in which sacrificial violence, as the foundation of the Reverend Agustín Mojica's tyranny, maintains the order. However, the arrival in the coastal fishing village, where the play develops, of the San Juan reporter, Mario, initiates a process of revelation through which the spectators perceive the impure nature of the violence which maintains the particular order of that community and points to the society's inevitable disintegration. The reporter's questioning of the "peace" in which the Reverend's faithful followers live creates a tension which forces the subjugated characters into action. In the end, however, the society permits the sacrifice/murder of another victim, that of the Reverend himself. The final act, based on personal vengeance rather than on the ritual control of violence, plunges the society back into its order of ignorance and passivity and opens the way for the repetition of that act at some point in the future.

The play takes place in a small fishing village with inhabitants who are members of the Reverend Mojica's congregation. The Reverend, who exercises complete control over his subjects, has accumulated large quantities of wealth by persuading his community to turn over to him all that they own. He receives favors from powerful politicians in return for the votes of his flock. The people, reduced to will-less puppets, blindly accede to Agustín, supposedly in the name of faith. However, the play makes clear that in reality they submit to him out of fear of what would become of them without his leadership. Agustín, on the other hand, while he fanatically preaches God's love as well as his fire and brimstone, lives a life of leisure, drives a Cadillac, enjoys the services of a prostitute, and necessitates those of a bodyguard.

The dramatic conflict revolves around the efforts of the various characters, who are either employees or followers, to rid themselves of the Reverend's control: Carmen, the prostitute, and Alejandro, the bodyguard, plot to rob Agustín of his money--a loss he will not wish to reveal out of fear of his followers' discovering certain truths about their leader. Eva, the Reverend's daughter, continually tries to escape her father's firm hand by running away and doing almost anything to embarrass him publicly in the face of his congregation. Juan, one of his young followers, openly defies the Reverend by requesting that a small portion of land donated by Juan's now-deceased father be returned to him so that the young man may marry and establish his own business. The arrival of the city reporter, Mario, with his never-ending questions, precipitates the Reverend's downfall, especially when Mario learns that Agustín arrived where he is through political payoffs and murder. The building tension finally erupts in two on-stage murders as Carmen shoots her cohort, Alejandro, just after Juan shoots the good Reverend. The play does not end at this point, however, and Juan goes on to

name himself God's appointed successor to the Reverend, thus ensuring the continuing cycle of violence.

The stage set in which the work develops represents at once all four spaces where action occurs: Mario's motel room on stage right, the Reverend's office on stage left, a main street of the town at front stage, and at center stage, the Reverend's pulpit from which he mesmerizes his subjects with his emotional sermons. Since no changes of set are necessary, the action moves from space to space with cinematic celerity and at times suggests simultaneity without the events taking place on stage actually being simultaneous. The rapidity of the move from scene to scene in addition to the proximity of the four spaces intensifies the sensation of an enclosed, completely dominated world which the total work corroborates.

Throughout the play's development, we can see several of the key components of harmful violence as Girard's theory presents it and the dangers it brings to society. First, it is apparent that this is much more a primitive society than a modern one for the following reasons: there is no judicial system *per se*; the daily life revolves around the ritual of attending the Reverend's sermons in a large tent at the center of town; and the Reverend himself exercises complete control over the community. When the reporter asks, "¿Pero en qué mundo viven ustedes?" (MS 36), the young man Juan's words describe it well: "Este es el mundo del reverendo. Esa es la ley. Un gobierno sin constitución, sin votos, sin muchos derechos donde usted puede fácilmente pasar por un terrorista . . . un terrorista de la fe . . ." (36). Clearly, the people of the community have no participation in any kind of "modern" legal system and are under the total domination of their leader.

The play text's opening scene introduces the element of ritual pervading this society as Margarita, Juan's sister, is alone in front of the closed curtain singing a song to the congregation about God's love. The author's stage directions are as follows:

Está parada frente al 'podium' de frente al público; entona la canción con gran vigor y fe. MARGARITA tiene 20 años, no es fea; guarda en su rostro el misterio de la devoción; que no es otro que el de la duda de lo que se adora. No usa sus brazos; está casi congelada, solo sentimos el calor de su voz que aumenta y aumenta según la música. La canción termina. Luego se escuchan vítores de una masa concentrada. Unas voces sueltas que apasionadamente gritan "Amen", "Aleluya", "Gloria al Señor." (3)

Interestingly, in the play's premiere, this scene was broadened to include members of the church choir, and it was Juan rather than Margarita who actually sang the song. Despite the change from the original directions, the effect of demonstrating the "obscurity," the apparent blind following, was achieved, and possibly was even more effective.

The total control and mysterious appeal of the Reverend is aptly described by his daughter, Eva, when she attempts to explain to Mario why she keeps returning to her father's world:

Cuando oigo su voz, sus berridos de bestia que no me dejan dormir ilo odio! cuando se para a dar el sermón, si vieras como escupo los relatos, como paleo sus biblias . . . si fuera tan fácil salir . . . pero sé que tan pronto salga por la puerta, algo me va a decir que vuelva, que mi casa es aquí, que no tengo vida. ¿Tú sabes cuál es la única vida que él dice que yo tengo segura? La vida eterna. (SE RIE.) ¿Tú te imaginas estar viviendo así toda la eternidad? (29-30)

Her inability to disengage herself from this community of faith is representative of that of the other characters, each of whom actually does "see" the same paradox between the Reverend's words, his actions, and the slave-like existence of the people, but does not have a strong enough will to resist his domination.

According to Girard, the disintegration of a cultural system comes about by means of what he calls a "sacrificial crisis" or "the disappearance of the sacrificial rites." This in turn coincides with "the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence. When this difference has been effaced, purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community" (49). And he adds:

The sacrificial distinction, the distinction between the pure and the impure, cannot be obliterated without obliterating all other differences as well. One and the same process of violent reciprocity engulfs the whole. The sacrificial crisis can be defined, therefore, as a crisis of distinctions--that is, a crisis affecting the cultural order. (49)

A crisis of this type is already evident within Agustín Mojica's self-created society when Mario arrives. This latter character, because of his status as an outsider, serves as catalyst to the forces already at work and focuses the play on the strengthening of those forces. Mario's questions force the various characters to acknowledge openly the truth about the impurity of Agustín's so-called "holy" actions. Once that truth is admitted, the pure and the impure begin to fuse so that they are difficult to tell apart. This fusion, then, results in the breakup of the harmony among the group's members making necessary some step to restore that harmony.

The fusion of the pure and the impure is most apparent in a supposed purification rite which Agustín initiates when alone with Juan's sister, Margarita, in Mario's hotel room. The Reverend admonishes Margarita for

not having informed him of a sexual encounter between his own daughter and Mario and for her brother Juan's "impure" thoughts of wanting the return of their father's land. He then promises to protect the young Margarita from the Devil's temptation as follows:

AGUSTIN: El diablo siempre se acerca a los débiles. Perdóname por gritarte. (LA LEVANTA.) Tienes que ser fuerte, no puedes dejar que el diablo te tiene a ti. (MIENTRAS MARGARITA LLORA, EL PASA SU CARA POR EL CUELLO DE ELLA. UNA EXTRAÑA INCITACION LE INUNDE.) Yo voy a cuidarte del diablo. Tú serás mi santa hija . . . (MARGARITA SOLLOZA SOBRE EL HOMBRO DE EL.) Yo soy tu pastor, nada te faltará . . . mis manos, las caricias de mis manos rompen las cadenas del diablo. (LA TOCA POR LA ESPALDA.)

MARGARITA: (TRATANDO DE ZAFARSE.) Tengo mucha vergüenza.

AGUSTIN: ¡En nombre de Dios paso mis manos por tu cuerpo para sacar los excrementos que el diablo arroja sobre ti! (SUS MANOS RECORREN CON MAS CONFIANZA EL CUERPO DE MARGARITA PRIMERO LA ESPALDA, DESPUES SUS CADERAS Y SUS SENOS.) ¿Sientes las manos de Dios? (REZA.) Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo . . . MARGARITA SOLLOZA PROFUNDAMENTE.) No veo alegría, ni gozo en tu rostro.

MARGARITA: (TRATANDO DE SONREIR, POR ENCIMA DEL SOLLOZO.) Estoy alegre. ¡Dios! ¡Dios! Bendito sea su santo nombre. ¡Aleluya!. . . (33)

The combining of forbidden sexual contact, and exorcism during the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, together with Margarita's reluctant acceptance of the Reverend's actions, indicates to the spectator the disappearance of differences between the pure and the impure. The factor which makes this fusion known to the rest of the characters and moves the play forward, however, is the presence of a witness. Margarita's friend who is also Juan's fiancée, Raquel, observes the entire scene from the window. The revelation of this knowledge, then, requires some kind of retribution, at least on the part of Margarita's brother. However, because the Reverend is in effect an "untouchable," there is such frustration among the other characters that they begin attacking each other, starting with Juan's attempt to beat his sister. This is the first of several violent scenes which include a physical attack on the town mayor, and on the

bodyguard Alejandro, and an altercation between a drunk Juan and Alejandro in which the latter tricks the former into the fatal attack on Agustín.

Throughout the latter part of the play, Juan's path toward vengeance becomes ever clearer. He has told Raquel that he will not leave because the land is his and he will claim his right to it. At no time, though, is his path any clearer than at the moment he actually murders Agustín as he shouts: "¡Agustín Mojica! ¡En el nombre de mi padre!" (91). The idea of reciprocal violence follows immediately when in the next scene Carmen shoots and kills Alejandro, indicating the continuing violence, while almost simultaneously Juan steps into the pulpit and takes the Reverend's place using the same artifice as his predecessor to deceive the faithful. He tells them: "La última voluntad de nuestro santo pastor me ha sido revelada por el espíritu santo . . . y ésta es que yo los guíe . . . (VOCES DE INCREDULIDAD.) ¡Calmen su corazón! Cristo Jesús ordenó la muerte de Agustín Mojica. ¡No puede haber odio! ¡Sólo amor en Cristo!" (93). The audience, who has served as observer throughout and even sometimes participant, at this point is forced to perceive the loose ends--the fusion of the pure and the impure---as well as the fact that Agustín leaves behind his daughter who, because of her ambiguous opposition to her father, might serve as his avenger at some future time. Moreover, as Juan finishes his first sermon and turns to tell Mario that his job there is over, the reporter asks the definitive question with which Roberto Ramos-Perea finishes each work of the trilogy: "¿Estás seguro de que es la mano de dios?" (94).

Mario is the key to understanding the role of violence, as he, in his position of observer as well as participant fortells the same crisis that Girard discusses. Even without Mario's final question (which was omitted in the play's premiere), his tenacious questioning throughout the play establishes among the audience the tendency to doubt the legitimacy of this society's organizing principles. With the question or without, the spectator feels the same uneasiness at the end, applauding Juan's act on the one hand since the Reverend has been such an unrelentless and pathetic villain, but at the same time recognizing in Juan's actions the similar pattern as well as the terror that remains among Raquel, Mario and Eva, who do not blindly follow the new leader as does Margarita. This awareness directs the spectator's attention away from the derision of the villain, which at moments threatens to undermine the play's serious side, back towards the role of the conscientious observer.

What has happened in terms of Girard's thought is that when the inner workings of the Reverend's system are revealed to be faulty, the society begins to disintegrate which the increase in violent attacks indicates. Juan's killing of the Reverend, were his action carried out according to a system of ritual accepted by all, would have the effect of putting an end to the violence and restoring the harmony. However, his action is based solely on personal vengeance and does not restore complete harmony. Even though some of the previous followers continue as before, the ultimate direction toward

disintegration of the group is certain because of those who do not and cannot follow him. Their consciousness of the truth renders them incapable of plunging themselves back into the "obscurity" necessary for the system to continue without challenge.

All things considered, Ramos-Perea's perspective on violence in his society corresponds very closely to Girard's observations. Girard says:

In the evolution from ritual to secular institutions men gradually draw away from violence and eventually lose sight of it; but an actual break with violence never takes place. That is why violence can always stage a stunning, catastrophic comeback. The possibility of such an occurrence conforms to the dire predictions of divine vengeance that are to be found in every religious system. (307)

There can be no doubt that in the society founded by the Reverend Agustín Mojica, based on the reality of an actual situation, violence does stage a stunning and catastrophic "comeback", and then retreats to the wings waiting once again to rear its head as a threat to man's harmonious modernity.

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Notes

1. Ramos-Perea has used the term repeatedly in his own articles and in May of 1987 the *Sociedad Nacional de Autores Dramaticos* (SONAD) sponsored a seminar on "Dramaturgia Puertorriqueña," which included a session on "La Nueva Dramaturgia." However, during the seminar, several dramatists from previous years expressed opposition to the use of the term out of the belief that the motivations of the so-called "new" dramatists are not all that different from those of previous generations and are therefore not "new." Later that year, SONAD, jointly with the Ateneo Puertorriqueño and the Centro de Bellas Artes, produced the works of several dramatists of this period (including Ramos-Perea) under the title *Primera Muestra de Teatro Puertorriqueño Contemporáneo*.

2. *Cueva de ladrones*. In press. San Juan de Puerto Rico: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1988. *Módulo 104 (Revolución en el Infierno)*. Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Editorial Cultural, under the auspices of the Fundación René Marqués, 1986. *Revolución en el Infierno*. Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Editorial Edil, 1983.

3. *Ese punto de vista*. Cuadernos Puertorriqueños de Teatro Breve. Número 1. Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Producciones Calibán, 1984. *Los 200 no*. San Juan de Puerto Rico: Ediciones Gallo Galante, 1984.

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