

The Influence of the French Theatre in the Plays of Xavier Villaurrutia

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Before Xavier Villaurrutia became involved with the Mexican theatre, he had already gained fame as a poet and was associated with the avant-garde literary group Los Contemporáneos. Before he produced his first play in 1933, he had been intimately connected with a new trend in the Mexican theatre, the experimental movement. For Villaurrutia the experimental theatres provided first a learning experience and then a testing ground for his theatrical ideas. Villaurrutia acknowledges the importance of this experience, admitting, "I . . . would very likely never have written plays without the *Ulyses* experience."¹ His apprenticeship as a playwright took him through the roles of actor, director, and translator of many of the contemporary foreign plays admired by the avant-garde. Thus, when critics refer to the influences which played a role in the formation of the theatre of Xavier Villaurrutia, the most common procedure has been to link Villaurrutia's name with the dramatists whose works he translated and leave it at that. For example, Rafael Solana, in discussing "Villaurrutia, comediógrafo," says, "Este trato estrecho con dramaturgos de primer orden contribuyó a enriquecer el talento dramático de Xavier y le permitió adquirir un conocimiento a fondo de la técnica de algunos autores bien escogidos para maestros . . ."² One cannot disagree with this statement. However, it would be of value in understanding the originality of Villaurrutia's theatre if we could determine more specifically what lessons he had learned from the dramatists he had chosen as his teachers.

In treating the critical problem of influences, especially in the case of an artist already established, as Villaurrutia was established as a poet, we should be aware of the contrasts between the concepts of tradition and polygenesis.³ That is, we should inquire whether the element which is

similar in the works of two artists is a result of the example set by the first artist, the tradition that he has established, or whether the similarity is purely fortuitous, the result of an independent act of creativity reached unknowingly by different people at different times. Clearly there are many examples of both phenomena in the annals of literary history. Our problem here is to determine how we should consider some of the similarities which link Villaurrutia's work with the dramatists whose plays he translated. Because this discussion is necessarily limited by space, I have chosen examples from the works of playwrights who were important not only to the experimental movement in Mexico, but who were important innovators and renovators of the theatre during the period of Villaurrutia's formation as a dramatist; they are Henri-René Lenormand, Jean Cocteau, and Jean Giraudoux.

Through the plays of Lenormand, Freudian subjects and outlook were first given dramatic expression in the French theatre.⁴ Today Lenormand is generally remembered for his treatment of the abnormal personality; it is in relation to this subject that Professor Dauster has linked his name to Villaurrutia's theatre.⁵ At the time Villaurrutia was writing his early one-act plays, he was also engaged in translating Lenormand's *A L'Ombre du mal*, an analysis of evil and superstition. Translated as *A la sombra del mal*, this play was presented as part of the repertoire of *Teatro de Orientación* in 1934, the same year the second of Villaurrutia's one-act plays was produced. In this play, *¿En qué piensas?*, and in *Parece mentira*, which had been given the previous year, we can see the direct influence of one of Lenormand's works. Before translating *A L'Ombre du mal*, Villaurrutia had already become familiar with Lenormand's *Le Temps est un songe*, translated by Celestino Gorostiza as *El tiempo es sueño* and presented in 1929 under the auspices of *Teatro Ulises*. This play associates Lenormand's name with innovations in the dramatic treatment of time.⁶ The play revolves around the idea of the relativity of time. Relativity of time is not a unique concept introduced by Lenormand; rather, it is Lenormand's treatment of time on stage that inspired Villaurrutia when he also dramatized this concept.

In tableau two of Lenormand's play, *Romée*, one of the three principal characters, witnesses an accident which appears to be occurring at some distance from where she stands. As the play progresses, this distance is revealed to be a remoteness of time rather than of space. The explanation for this phenomenon is expressed by another character, Niko. He describes to *Romée* a new concept of time that he has learned from the wise men of Java. They believe that all time is coexistent. Thus, the past, present, and future are on one plane. The events of the future exist in a different spatial position, for example, but occur simultaneously with the events normally

designated as present time. Depending on one's perspective, the aspects of time can be seen as a whole or only in part.

Villaurrutia also dramatizes this concept of time. In *Parece mentira* the three women of identical appearance who are seen in the lawyer's office are either three women who enter at different times on that same day, or are the same woman who makes her appearance on three different occasions. In the latter explanation, the three visits of the one woman, like the event of the future which Romée had seen as an occurrence in the present, are perceived as existing at the same time although they do take place in different chronological periods.

In *¿En qué piensas?* we meet María Luisa who loves three men, each one representing a different aspect of time—past, present, and future. When she declares her love for all of them, one of the men remarks that it is impossible for her to love them all “a un tiempo.” María Luisa responds, “a un tiempo, no; en el tiempo.” For her, the words past, present, and future do not convey the meaning of separation of time, but as Niko expressed it in *Le Temps est un songe*, “le passé, le présent et l'avenir coexistent.” Villaurrutia has María Luisa express the coexistence of time to her three lovers: “Pero qué son, en este caso, pasado, presente y porvenir, sino palabras: Si yo no he muerto, el pasado está como el presente, y del mismo modo que el futuro, en mí, dentro de mí, en mis recuerdos, en mi satisfacción, en mis deseos, que no pueden morir mientras yo tenga vida” (Scene VII). María Luisa, a sensuous creature, has expressed the coexistence of time in terms of her own internal feelings. The three men whom she equally considers to be her lovers are the physical manifestation similar to the three women in *Parece mentira* and the accident in Lenormand's play.

Although Villaurrutia's later plays do not continue the dramatization of this interesting concept of time, he does use a technique which is reminiscent of this early experiment. In *La hiedra* (1942) and *Invitación a la muerte* (1947) he effectively restages later in the play scenes which occur early in the action, just as the accident occurs twice in *Le Temps est un songe*. The repeated scenes in Villaurrutia's later plays, however, do not suggest the coexistence of time, but rather act as premonitions of what is to come in the future. In *La hiedra* one of the reasons the living room scene has been kept static, unchanged in all the years of Hipólito's absence, is to enable Teresa to go back to that past time and try to recapture Hipólito's love. Her failure can be predicted by the enactment of their final encounter in the same setting which saw her failures so many times before. In *Invitación a la muerte* we also see the presentation early in the play of a scene which is to be repeated in the future. In the last scene of Act I, Alberto sits alone, waiting for his father. When this scene is again repro-

duced at the end of the play, the earlier scene is recalled as the prefiguration of the future event.

In this example of Lenormand's influence we have seen that Villaurrutia was able to accept the model presented before him with two results: in his early plays he incorporated the element into his works without much change. But as he gained greater experience as a playwright, it seems that he no longer merely accepted the model, but developed the acquired technique until it became refashioned in a unique Villaurrutian way. This same kind of refashioning of an already established technique can be seen in Villaurrutia's dramatic use of objects. It is Jean Cocteau, whose *Orfée* (1926) was among the first plays produced by the Teatro de Ulises, who revitalized for the experimental theatre the trend towards the use of objects, not for their realistic value, but as a means to elaborate the dramatic action.⁷ Although more work still needs to be done concerning the relationship between Cocteau and Villaurrutia, let us consider now the use of objects by the two dramatists.⁸

In the preface to *Les Maries de la Tour Eiffel*, Cocteau alluded to a special kind of "poetic language" for the stage which would reveal the hidden meaning of objects. The presence of objects on stage, used in new and unusual ways, remained a part of Cocteau's theatre. For example, in *La Machine infernale*, one of Cocteau's reworkings of the Oedipus myth, dramatic irony is present—as always in the enactment of a myth—because the situations are known beforehand by the audience but not by the actors. More significantly, Cocteau also creates dramatic irony by the use of certain objects which he endows with dramatic existence by associating their actions with actions in the plot. Jocasta's blood-red scarf, for example, leaves threatening imprints of fingers on her throat; it is with this very scarf that she later hangs herself. Her brooch, which she innocently describes as "cette broche que crève l'oeil de tout le monde" later becomes the instrument with which Oedipus literally scratches his eyes out. An extension of this technique of focusing on objects and creating a dramatic existence for them can be seen in Villaurrutia's use of the shawl in *La hiedra*, the picture of the mother in *La mujer legítima*, and the oversized coffin in *Invitación a la muerte*. As a representative example of this technique, let us consider the use of Teresa's shawl.

The shawl, which surrounds Teresa and gives her protection, is a reminder of her adherence to the past. She is given the shawl in a conspicuous manner just before Hipólito's entrance in Act I. As he embraces her for the first time, the shawl falls away from her as his arms replace it. Teresa recaptures the shawl as she expresses her feeling of distance towards him. At the end of Act I the shawl falls again from her shoulders. In his stage directions, Villaurrutia comments on the importance of this action: "El movimiento hace que el chal resbale de los hombros de Teresa hasta el

suelo. Toda la belleza, toda la audacia, toda la madurez vital de Teresa resplandece en ese momento. Hipólito la contempla atónito." When Teresa is without her shawl, she appears to be moving away from the past towards a future with Hipólito. Whenever he leaves her, the shawl surrounds her once again, replacing him as the protective force and situating her again in the past. The article of clothing thus becomes a dramatic entity whose actions reveal the state of the relationships in the play.

Our discussion up to this point has uncovered the role which tradition has played in the formulation of Villaurrutia's dramatic techniques. We have been able to identify some of the links between Villaurrutia and Lenormand and Cocteau which would justify the statement that he was influenced by the works of these two Frenchmen. When we come to analyze the reasons for the association of Villaurrutia's name with Jean Giraudoux's, the task becomes more complex. A superficial comparison does lead to the conclusion that the similarities are plentiful, and that, perhaps, Villaurrutia was, after all, the attentive pupil of Giraudoux, as Ángel Estivel has designated him.⁹ But we cannot necessarily interpret these similarities as the result of the influence of Giraudoux.

Villaurrutia, like Giraudoux, utilizes the Electra figure. Giraudoux's *Electre* was presented in 1937; Villaurrutian characters who recall the Electra figure are Marta in *La mujer legítima* (1942) and Antonia of *El yerro candente* (1945). But while justice and uncompromising conscience are the themes of Giraudoux's work, Villaurrutia is more interested in exploring the psychological relationships among the characters. Another similarity in relation to characters is that both dramatists have created plays in which women are the chief protagonists and the forceful figures. In Giraudoux we find Judith, Electre, Alcèmène, Lucile. Some of the outstanding female roles created by Villaurrutia are María Luisa, Teresa, Antonia, Carmen, and Irene. Yet, except for the Electra figures, the women do not resemble each other; we can attribute this similarity to the phenomenon of polygenesis.

The subject of the couple is also a recurring preoccupation in the works of both writers. The happy couple of Giraudoux's *Amphitryon trente-huit* (1929) and the adulterous pair of *Sodomme et Gommorrhe* (1943) represent the extremes with which Giraudoux envisioned the couple. In Villaurrutia we see the subject of the couple beginning with his first play, *Parece mentira*, and reappearing throughout his work until his last plays, *Juego peligroso* (1950) and *El solterón* (1954). Always, the couple is connected with the problem of adultery. More than Giraudoux, however, Villaurrutia presents the complication of the children involved in the problems of the couple, as we see in *El yerro candente*, *La mujer legítima*, and *Invitación a la muerte*. However, the presence of these subjects in the plays of both

writers reflects their link to the larger literary context and cannot be considered as an example of influence.

A striking parallel between the two artists can be noted in their use of language. Most noticeable are the many examples of word play which are common to both. They reveal their wit not through situations but through a nimble juggling of the literal and figurative meanings of words.¹⁰ In relation to this question of language, we should remember that before turning to drama, Villaurrutia had already revealed his literary style in his poetry. Villaurrutia's predilection for word play is characteristic of his poetry. Thus, we would say that as for style, the similarities between Giraudoux and Villaurrutia can be attributed to polygenesis. It would seem, then, that from the evidence available at this time, Villaurrutia was attracted to the theatre of Giraudoux because they shared some of the same interests, but that Giraudoux did not exercise any direct influence. Perhaps we can say that Villaurrutia in Mexico was trying to follow the same path that Giraudoux paved in France: to create plays which were not mere after-dinner spectacles but were worthy of being considered literature and thus, to revitalize the state of the theatre. These were the aims of Jean Giraudoux and Xavier Villaurrutia.

In conclusion, these examples reveal that in relation to dramatic technique, Villaurrutia did enrich his work with the lessons he learned from his association with the avant-garde movement. His presentation of time and his dramatic use of objects link his name to Lenormand and Cocteau. While he apparently was not openly influenced by Giraudoux, that great renovator of the French theatre was perhaps a stimulus for Villaurrutia to continue his own important contribution to the Mexican theatre. For although Villaurrutia was an apt student of these dramatists, he was not only capable of absorbing their lessons but was able through his creative genius to produce an original theatre.

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Notes

1. "Experimental Theatre: as a source," *Theatre Arts Monthly*, XXLL (August 1938), 607.
2. *Hoy*, No. 727 (Jan. 27, 1951), p. 38.
3. See Dámaso Alonso, "Tradition or Polygenesis," *M.H.R.A.*, No. 32 (November 1960), 17-34. Professor Alonso discusses the critical problem of influences with specific references to Spanish poetry, as well as offering important comments on the problem in general.
4. Thomas Bishop, *Pirandello and the French Theater* (New York, 1960), p. 66. Henri-René Lenormand has been called one of the most important playwrights of the years 1919-1930 by Jacques Guicharnaud in *Modern French Theatre, from Giraudoux to Beckett* (New Haven, 1961), p. 6.
5. "The Literary Art of Xavier Villaurrutia" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1953), p. 171.
6. See Serge Radine, *Anouilh, Lenormand, Salacrou* (Geneva, 1951), p. 84; Paul Blanchart, *Le Théâtre de Henri-René Lenormand* (Paris, 1947), p. 42.
7. David Grossvogel, *The Self-Conscious Stage in Modern French Drama* (New York, 1958), p. 59, refers to Cocteau's "poetry of objects."

8. The influence of Cocteau on the poetry of Villaurrutia has been noted by Alí Chumacero, "Prólogo," *Obras de Xavier Villaurrutia*, 2^a ed. (México, 1966), xix, and Elías Nandino, "La poesía de Xavier Villaurrutia," *Estaciones*, I, Núm. 4 (January 1956), 462.

9. "Opiniones escritas ex-profesamente para esta edición por los críticos teatrales de México," in *El solterón* by Xavier Villaurrutia (México, 1954), p. 41.

10. For an analysis of the style of Giraudoux, refer to Laurent LeSage, "The cliché basis for some of the metaphors of Jean Giraudoux," *Modern Language Notes*, LVI (June 1941), 435-439; *Jean Giraudoux, His Life and Works* (Pennsylvania State College, 1959); *Jean Giraudoux's Use of Metaphor* (Urbana, 1940). Merlin Forster in *Los contemporáneos: 1920-1932* (México, 1964), refers to the frequent word play by Villaurrutia (see p. 87). Antonio Moreno in "Xavier Villaurrutia: the Development of his Theatre," *Hispania*, 43 (1960), mentions Villaurrutia's wit and his use of oxymorons (p. 513).