

Rodolfo Usigli's Concept of Dramatic Art

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Rodolfo Usigli, whose plays have caused so much controversy on the Mexican stage, has become one of the best known contemporary Spanish American dramatists. Frank Dauster, for instance, calls him “. . . uno de los grandes dramaturgos hispanoamericanos . . .”¹ and Armando de María y Campos, a Mexican journalist, called *El gesticulador* “. . . una de las mejores piezas dramáticas escritas en México.”² In addition, Usigli's works have been presented or published in many different countries. It is strange therefore that so little critical attention has been dedicated to the careful examination of his plays and even less to the essays and extensive prologues in which he defines his concept of dramatic art.

Perhaps because of this lack, there has been a tendency to classify Usigli's work socially and psychologically as realistic or as social satire, in spite of the fact that Usigli himself has regularly denied such assertions.³ Usigli does not view man exclusively as a social animal. In this area he tends to reflect the thinking of Ortega in asserting an essential duality. The artist, says Usigli in his “Ensayo sobre la actualidad de la poesía dramática,” must “. . . poner en evidencia luminosa aquellos elementos de la condición humana que trascienden del hombre. . . .”⁴ At the same time “. . . la obra de arte es también hija de su ambiente. . . .”

The difference between this conception of man and that of literary realism is further enhanced by Usigli's conviction that there is no such thing as a universal, scientifically definable truth about men or society. In his “Discurso por un teatro realista” Usigli observed that “. . . es imposible delimitar la realidad porque no es una ciencia exacta, y cada quien tiene su idea personal de ella.”⁵ Reality in this sense is a personal, subjective phenomenon and therefore the artist must remain true to the nature of this subjectivity. According to Usigli, the application of universal norms to the

construction of a work of art must result in an essential falsification. Therefore, he explains in his "Ensayo sobre la actualidad de la poesía dramática," almost all Mexican literature to date has been a "gesticulación" because it has not derived its truths from the particular national subjectivity that is Mexico. This idea is one of the major premises of his play *El gesticulador*.

The emphasis by Usigli on the importance of expressing the national subjectivity seems to indicate some kinship with the *criollista* orientation of the modernists and the many essayists who followed Rodó in their need to define the national spirit or culture as a distinct and positive contribution to civilization. Usigli more than once refers to his determination to express, through the vehicle of his theatre, this "espíritu de la nacionalidad" ("Discurso," p. 252). Because Usigli sees the cultivation of this spirit as the primary goal of theatrical art, he arrives at the logical conclusion, in his *Anatomía del teatro*, that the theatre in a given country will be good, mediocre or grandiose in the degree to which its citizens possess these qualities.⁶ The potential of a play then is limited in part by the spiritual qualities that form the basis of its subject matter because for Usigli a work of art derives from a reality ". . . que simplifica, depura y perfecciona, cerrando su curva, pero que nunca inventa" ("Ensayo," p. 251). Usigli was very explicit in his rejection of a theatre of social realism when he said in 1936, referring to *Medio tono*, ". . . no creo en el teatro realista. Tampoco sé si volveré a escribir piezas de este estilo" ("Discurso," p. 332). In the same reference he explains that *Medio tono* was written as an exercise which however held no great interest for him.

Among the few scholars that have studied Usigli, the tendency has been to label works like *El gesticulador* as political satires. Antonio Magaña Esquivel, for instance, calls it a ". . . sátira contra la política provinciana."⁷ Vera Fisherova de Beck calls it a political satire whose main purpose is to criticize "gesticulación."⁸ Alyce de Kuehne asserts that the work's main purpose is to expose hypocrisy.⁹ Gordon Ragle comes closer to Usigli's view of his own work in saying that the latter's main intent is to "express Mexico."¹⁰ Octavio Paz, on the other hand, in his essay "Máscaras mexicanas," instinctively recognized a kinship with Usigli in the course of his existential interpretation of "gesticulación" as a basic attribute of the Mexican personality. Paz praises Usigli for the profundity of the latter's understanding of this trait in *El gesticulador*.¹¹ Clearly for Paz the play is not primarily social realism.

Usigli asserts very strongly that the theatre should not merely reflect or mirror society. In *México en el teatro* he says: "El teatro no es natural. Si lo fuera, yo no iría al teatro. Las obras modernas no son, dichosamente, naturales. La imaginación no es natural. . . ."¹² For Usigli, the dramatist has a much higher purpose. The exposure of human suffering and weakness, or of the limitations of society, are not his proper goals. Usigli's

theatre “. . . estudia o imagina la tragedia del hombre al desnudo entre cuatro paredes. Cuatro paredes para amar, para nacer, para asesinar, para soñar, para morir, para todo lo que no podemos hacer decentemente ni con sincera plenitud en mitad de la calle en ninguna parte del mundo” (p. 195).

In other words, Usigli advocates the study of man's most essential intimacies, not his conventional existence as a social animal. Nor does the dramatist stop here; his goal is not merely to criticize or to destroy, but to ennoble, to elevate man by holding out to him models of his own potential greatness. Usigli stresses this concept in his “Discurso por un teatro realista when he says: “. . . la verdadera meta del drama realista no es la realidad ilimitada, sino su espíritu. Lo que la genera y no lo que la deforma; el estudio del problema que la mejora y la ennoblece, y no la vida sin sustento ni selección, ni la superficialidad ni la vulgaridad que hacen de ella un monstruo intolerable por lo real” (“Discurso,” p. 335).

Such a theatre, bound as it is to and by the intrinsic qualities of the national audience that it seeks to elevate, must inevitably reflect its spectators. Therefore the imposition of alien artistic norms or cultural values are obviously falsifications of the dramatist's art. What may well be artistic truth for the Frenchman cannot possibly serve the same role for the Mexican. Therefore, Usigli says in *México en el teatro*, “Reflejemos, pues, al espectador, pero artísticamente: con un poco de aumento, de convexidad o de concavidad. Hagámosle reconocerse en un reflejo más noble que lo conduzca a la ambición de su propio ennoblecimiento. El padre de familia que, en vez de enseñar a hablar tradicionalmente a sus hijos, aprende a balbucear como ellos, tendrá que verse despreciado por ellos cuando alcancen edad de razón, aunque lo aplauden al principio” (p. 192). Magaña misunderstands this goal completely when he says: “Su realismo ni siquiera pretende salvar al hombre ni a la sociedad, sino analizarlos o ironizarlos.”¹³

In such a play the actor cannot be natural, that is, he is not a typical member of the world of the spectator. In *México en el teatro* Usigli explains that “La naturalidad de un actor no puede ser la misma del público que lo contempla. Si lo fuera, el actor debería comprarse una luneta y confundirse con el auditorio. . . . El autor ha fabricado un país nuevo y, para tener derecho a vivir en él, es necesario que el actor se sature de ese país, que copie sus colores en las auroras y en los crepúsculos, que se someta a sus horizontes, que NAZCA [sic] en ese país y que viva y muera en él con la fuerza de un hombre antiguo. De otro modo no es en él sino un extranjero indeseable” (pp. 193-94).

This distinction between the “world” of the play and that of the audience is also reflected in Usigli's differentiation between history and poetry. The function of the historian is to discover and present precise data and to eliminate unfounded superstitions. On the other hand, “El deber, la vocación en realidad del poeta, es diferente: consiste en . . . interpretar con una

verdad poética, superlativa por lo tanto, los sentimientos básicos de su pueblo, que son sus alimentos básicos.”¹⁴ Objectivity then plays no part in the dramatist’s role. He deals in the highest truth of all, poetic truth, and he applies it, not to the events of the historian but to the sentiments, to the spirit, to the most basic dreams of his people. Usigli describes the status of this type of theatre in the following terms: “Cuando a la buena producción dramática europea de todas las épocas, organizada en forma de repertorio, se sume un buen teatro realista mexicano, será posible ir hacia un teatro poético que será la más grande hazaña del espíritu nativo” (“Discurso,” p. 334).

The end product of the poetry of this theatre, which at the same time draws its vitality from its native roots and attempts to sublimate those roots, is a model of citizenship, which Usigli defines as a society or an individual “. . . que conjugan en un mismo plano el sentimiento de lo bello, el sentido de lo moral y la conducta política” (“Ensayo,” p. 254). This fusion of “sentimiento” and “sentido” in equal parts and the sense of social responsibility demonstrated by the superior man who is its product certainly cannot be labeled as realism. In fact, it bears a much closer kinship to romantic idealizations like Daniel, the hero of Marmol’s *Amalia*, who is the perfect blend of spiritual delicacy and rational vigor.

Essentially, Usigli is interested in the birth of ideas much more than in the creation or recreation of life. As he says in his introduction to *Corona de luz*, “Lo más importante para mí es inaugurar, con un tema mexicano vivísimo, la comedia de ideas en México” (p. 59). Therefore, for Usigli, the proper function of the theatre is “. . . alegorizar la vida. . .”¹⁵ The underlying allegory should never be explicit, however, because the theatre cannot be an abstraction, nor can it present argument, as does the essay. “En general, las ideas se ven excluidas del teatro, cuyo juego y telar son las pasiones humanas.” On the other hand, the theatre can and should present “. . . de bulto y en movimiento ideas y personajes.”¹⁶ In order to accomplish this Usigli favors “. . . caracteres ideológicos o ideístas, cuyo movimiento físico y social es reflejo del movimiento de la idea” (p. 56). According to at least one critic, Usigli has been successful in his efforts to create this type of character. Gordon Ragle considers that Usigli’s characters are not archetypal symbols; they live and are known by their actions. Ragle judges further that Usigli’s is a better theatre precisely because he does avoid the flat methodical symbolizations of so much of contemporary ideological drama (p. 310). Other critics, like Enrique Anderson Imbert, assuming that Usigli is basically a realist, find fault with what they consider to be a complete lack of humor or an excessive solemnity in his characters.¹⁷ If Usigli were a realist, this would certainly be a valid judgement. Humor, however, is improper to a theatre of ideas as Usigli conceives it.

The sobriety of Usigli's conception of his work is nowhere more evident than in his explanation of the relationship between the theatre and what he calls the "sentido religioso." For Usigli the "sentido religioso" is a spiritual communion in the broadest sense of the term, one which has no particular relationship to the church. If anything, the idea is more closely related to the classic concept of catharsis. Usigli suggests, for instance, that both "espectador y feligrés comulgan." Both embrace the truth of what they behold by a process of faith, not reason, which brings them to an awareness of a greater reality. Also, both in their faith reach out to the greater truth that they behold with a "deseo de superación."¹⁸ As with tragic catharsis, the spectator, like the worshiper is able to transcend his own personal limitations by allowing himself to become absorbed into the world of the play, to participate in its vision and in its passion.

In this sense, according to Usigli, the "sentido religioso" is the ". . . verdadero padre de la poesía dramática en sus tres formas, mística, estética y ética" (p. 13). Underlying the blend of "sentido" and "sentimiento" that constitutes Usigli's ideal character is this essential attitude of faith. In fact, Usigli insists that all good theatre is poetic precisely because it is religious and he refers to ". . . la necesidad de obras teatrales que, por su religiosidad en el sentido extraeclesiástico de la palabra, hagan reaparecer el sentido y el sentimiento de la *comunión* del público. . ." (p. 22). Only through this direct appeal to the public's faith, its religious instinct, can the theatre accomplish its real mission, the creation and demonstration of superior culture symbols.

It is with this concept of faith in mind that Usigli applies the term "antihistórico" to his *Corona* trilogy (*luz, sombra* and *fuego*). By "antihistórico" Usigli does not mean either to defy or deny history. His plays are not really opposed to history. It would be more accurate to say that they are conceived by a different process, that they represent simultaneously an act of faith by the author and for the audience. In his introduction to *Corona de sombra* Usigli condemns the Mexican writers of the past specifically for what he calls their "obcecado historicismo."¹⁹ According to Usigli the dramatist has no business dealing in the reproduction of events, ". . . el poeta no es el esclavo sino el intérprete del acontecimiento histórico" (p. xv). For the dramatist, the events of the past have relevance only so far as they impinge on the present and even more particularly, on the need of the audience to commit an act of faith in itself. As Usigli observes in the same introduction to *Corona de sombra*, "No se trata, pues, de alterar los hechos de la historia, sino de alumbrarlos con la luz de un sentimiento contemporáneo a nosotros; de interpretarlos en términos humanos, esto es, teatrales, de acuerdo con una sensibilidad no contagiada de partidismos políticos, raciales o ideológicos. De ver, en fin, mejor que el hecho histórico en sí mismo, los frutos que ha venido a dar en nuestro tiempo" (p. xv).

It is possible therefore that some part of the dramatist's effort may coincide with that of the historian, even though his purpose is very different. The playwright is not required to utilize all the facts or all the considerations that may have pertinence to a particular historic situation because he has no interest in studying its genesis, as does the historian. The playwright has use only for those elements that help him to structure his act of faith. This is the method and the purpose that underlie Usigli's trilogy, which he explains in *Corona de sombra* as follows: "Para mí, el episodio del Segundo Imperio mexicano . . . sigue siendo uno de los tres elementos básicos de nuestra soberanía. . . . Cuauhtémoc representa el factor culminante, el mito—en el más místico y respetable sentido—de la soberanía material; la Virgen de Guadalupe . . . el mito—en el mismo sentido—de la soberanía espiritual; y Maximiliano, por su sangre vertida, y Carlota, por su tridimensional locura, los elementos determinantes de la soberanía política de México" (p. xvi). In his dramatic composite portrait of "lo mexicano" Usigli recognizes one other moment or event, although it is not technically a part of the *Corona* series. I refer to the Revolution, the theme of *El gesticulador*. Usigli offers the following explanation in the essay which follows the play: ". . . para salvar a la revolución como intención, como elemento de tránsito y de metamorfosis, hay que limpiarla y que podarla. Este es el espíritu que dictó cada página de *El gesticulador*" (p. 285). In this way Usigli would elevate the Revolution and make of it a permanent symbol of change and growth. If the *Corona* trilogy represents the spirit and the flesh of Mexico, then César Rubio, the incarnation of the Revolution in *El gesticulador*, is the genetic mold that stimulates and guides the growth of the cultural organism that is Mexico. When Antonio Magaña and Ruth Lamb remark that Usigli's plays are really ". . . ensayos sobre cuestiones históricas, sociológicas o políticas . . ." (p. 133) they come fairly close to the mark. On the other hand when Alyce de Kuehne, in her study *Teatro mexicano contemporáneo*, calls *Corona de sombra* ". . . estudio sobre las ambiciones insaciables de una mujer . . ." (p. 167) she ignores the playwright's stated intentions in the work.

Within Usigli's treatment of history through a process of dramatic faith, the central characters, Cuauhtémoc, the Virgin of Guadalupe, Maximilian and General Rubio become transcendental myth figures. Usigli himself applies this term to them on a number of occasions. In *Corona de luz*, for instance, he refers to the *Corona* trilogy as the ". . . tres mitos que considero superlativos . . ." (p. 22). For Usigli, the value of dramatic myth lies in the dramatist's view of man as ". . . un animal primariamente religioso, pero sujeto al oscuro destino de buscar fuera de sí los elementos de la fe que lleva dentro" (p. 62). It is the dramatist's duty then to interpret for the audience those vital myths to which he hopes they will reach out with their inner faith. Usigli defines myth as the synthesis which results from

a conflict. In speaking of the conquest, for instance, he observes that ". . . los intereses divinos y los intereses humanos en conflicto deben converger en la necesidad de una síntesis. Y el mito, en su sentido superior, es exactamente eso: una síntesis" (p. 21). In cultural terms, a myth is a transcendental synthesis, incarnate in some individual, which offers new optimism and direction for a nation's future growth. Such a myth evolves at a key crossroad in a culture's development when major conflicting forces threaten either to impair or to destroy it.

Usigli himself acknowledges his debt to Hegel in his development of this concept when he explains: "Ningún mito nace por sí mismo porque todo mito es engendrado por un conflicto, por una conjunción de elementos opuestos entre sí. Y el mito, con su valor eterno, viene a ser lo que Hegel define . . . en términos dialécticos, como una síntesis" (p. 21). His conception of *Corona de luz*, dealing with the Guadalupe myth, may be cited as a case in point. Usigli sees the conquest as an open war between two religions with internal dissensions and political overtones on both sides. As the situation evolves, apparently without immediate solution, the two lines converge in a manner unforeseen by any of the participants, and the myth of the Virgin of Guadalupe is born. It is important to note here that Usigli's myth figures are not the conscious creations of any individual or group. Neither Guadalupe in the sixteenth century nor general Rubio in the twentieth, as Usigli sees them, were invented. They evolved naturally as conflict created a need for them at a given moment in history. Therefore Usigli is not the inventor of any of these myths. It would be more accurate to describe the dramatist as the high priest of the faith encompassed by them, and the theatre as the temple in which the audience is brought to adore them, seeing in them a part of the audience's own inner being. Once the myth synthesis is established, ensuing events and conflicts must inevitably revolve about it as the focal point of the new reality. Usigli's theatre is intended to stimulate the audience's faith in the myth figures that he holds before them.

This concept of myth formation lies at the heart of Usigli's ideological theatre. Here he differs from the realists who focus on the observation of social norms. Usigli's conception of society is more Hegelian in that he views the historic process as a series of syntheses that revolve about certain transcendental figures, such as Maximilian and Montezuma, who constitute superior culture symbols. The goal of this theatre is to make it possible for the audience to perform an act of faith in itself, by experiencing a catharsis with those national sentiments and values that most ennoble it. The excitement aroused in Mexico by Usigli's *Corona de sombra* and *El gesticulador* stands as an eloquent testimony to the effectiveness of his dramatization of these ideas.

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Notes

1. *Historia del teatro hispanoamericano* (México: Ediciones de Andrea, 1966), p. 55.
2. *El teatro siempre está en crisis* (México: Ed. Arriba el Telón, 1954), p. 121.
3. Eunice J. Gates, for instance, finds that Usigli's works offer ". . . an incisive analysis of Mexican national traits, politics, society." "Usigli as Seen in his Prefaces and Epilogues," *Hispania*, XXXVII (1954), 432.
4. In *El gesticulador* (México: Stylo, 1947), pp. 250-51.
5. In *Medio tono* (México: Editorial Dialéctica, 1936), pp. 320-21.
6. *Anatomía del teatro* (México: Editorial Ecuador 0°0'0", 1967), p. 23. [1st ed., 1943.]
7. *Medio siglo de teatro mexicano (1900-1961)* (México: INBA, 1964), p. 77.
8. "La fuerza motriz en la obra dramática de Rodolfo Usigli," *Revista Iberoamericana*, XVIII, No. 36 (1953), 374.
9. *Teatro mexicano contemporáneo (1940-1962)* (México, 1962), p. 71.
10. "Rodolfo Usigli and his Mexican Scene," *Hispania*, XLVI (1963), p. 307.
11. *El laberinto de la soledad* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1959), p. 36.
12. (México: Imprenta Mundial, 1932), p. 193.
13. A. Magaña Esquivel and Ruth Lamb, *Breve historia del teatro mexicano* (México: Ediciones de Andrea, 1958), p. 134.
14. *Corona de luz* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967), p. 101.
15. *México en el teatro*, p. 196.
16. *Corona de luz*, p. 55.
17. "Tres notas sobre el teatro de Rodolfo Usigli," *Sur*, No. 244 (1957), 58.
18. *Corona de luz*, p. 14.
19. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1961), p. xv.