

Invasions from Outer Spaces: Narration and the Dramatic Art in Spanish America

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When playwrights, in defiance of tradition, began to abandon verse for prose in the composition of their plays, the battle of the genres was set in the encampments of drama along lines that had already troubled the ancients.¹ For many years and well into the twentieth century, the adherents of a simon-pure poetic theatre—of theatre as poetry—clung to the technicality of verse, if not rhymed at least blank, as the only defense of a true dramatic expression in the face of a naturalistic onslaught that enveloped subject matter, character, staging, and language. Bankers and merchants and their bourgeois consorts trapped in unhappy marriages still spouted perfect hendecasyllables in a marriage of genres unhappier yet in some samples of the Spanish *alta comedia*, and T. S. Eliot minced no words when he claimed that a good play is a verse play, while a prose play is a novel gone wrong. The poet from Missouri practiced what he preached until the very end, but other poets of the stage—Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Maeterlinck, Synge, García Lorca—proved definitively that "poetic theatre" does not depend on its composition in verse, and so that matter was laid to rest.

In more recent decades, and with continuing intensity, the most insistent aggressor against drama's generic purity has been narrative. Whether that development constitutes a newly joined battle of the genres or an inevitable and happy union is an issue that has fired the modern and postmodern critical community. Any exploration of the nature of narrative in the theatrical setting must, therefore, strike a distinction between two phases in the development of drama: its inborn, germinal essence on the one hand and its newer practices on the other. Narrative is inseparable from both phases; consequently, it is possible to demonstrate how an inert ingredient has become, of late (and very much so in Latin America), a highly active option.

If, since time immemorial, *poetry* has been considered intrinsic to drama, whether composed in verse or prose, *narrative* has traditionally been regarded as its counterpoint. The split has given rise to rumors of familial incompatibility,

even to a strong public bias against a theatre regarded as "wordy" or discursive, and to a running feud between those two powerful clans, the Mimeses and the Diegeses. Back in the cobwebs of Creation, in the distant days of generic genesis, our great white classical father, hallowed be thy *Poetics*, begat Drama, which was an imitator, and he begat Narrative, which was a storyteller. And in the process of time it came to pass that Drama brought of the fruit of its act an offering unto Lord Aristotle. And Narrative, it also brought of the firstlings of its flock of tales and of the fat thereof. And Lord Aristotle had respect unto Drama and its offering. But unto Narrative and its offering, he had not respect. And Narrative was very wroth, and its countenance fell. Until finally one day, the great pink prophet, Mikhail Bakhtin, with his speedy steeds, Hetero and Glossia, rushed to the rescue of Narrative and retrieved it from its exile in the land of Not. But that parable skips a few steps. Bakhtin will have to wait.

The point is that Aristotle was not entirely misguided. There is, after all, a difference between a play and a novel, and that difference is significant, and it has to be addressed in some fashion. Aristotle proposed an alluring distinction based on the two genres' modes of communication, and one of the most cited of all contemporary theoreticians of the drama, Keir Elam, relies on Aristotle as he builds his contrast between "imaginary worlds which remain explicitly remote"—the novel—"and others which are presented as *hypothetically actual* constructs"—the drama (110). As Elam puts it, "Dramatic performance metaphorically translates conceptual access to possible worlds into 'physical' access, since the constructed world is apparently *shown* to the audience." Drama, Elam insists categorically, is "without narratorial mediation" (111). The practical consequences of that absence have caused the most "literary" of dramatists—Shaw, O'Neill, Valle-Inclán—to strain against the shackles of generic bondage. In brief, dramatic representation ostensibly involves no description, no commentary, no point of view, no frame, no inside and outside, no shifts of perspective. Stated another way, the difference between drama and narration is the difference between experience and the reflection on experience, between present event and past time, between immediacy and mediation, between a tale that tells itself and a story that has a storyteller.

Attractive and plausible as that balance of opposites may be, it is also, as we shall see, too sweeping, too reductive. What narrative and drama have in common as fictions is that they are both, each in its own way, performative and that, from given perspectives, both are representation. Yet I phrase this seemingly axiomatic observation in cautionary redundancies because performance is a slippery term, all things to all critics these days, and because representation can be mimetic, as it is in the theatre, or it can be a temporal refiguration of experience, as it is in the novel. And I seesaw between alternatives because the

novel's and the drama's respective generic constitutions store fodder for a possible perception of commonality as well as for an insistence on the uniqueness of each genre. Over the years, as the novel gained ever greater force, the inroads of theory as well as their own survival instincts have led critics of drama to a recognition of the complex dual nature of the dramatic text as script and performance, as a literary text that is realized not in a reading but only through a live, actual representation. That recognition, at its extreme, has produced the position that theatre is not even literature.

Having transcended the Dadaist aggressions against plot and the Artaudian banishment of the word and having subsequently absorbed the insights garnered from narratology, modern theoreticians have come to regard all theatre as narrative, even as it holds the stage in jubilee. Early on, Brecht, in anti-Aristotelian fervor, had thundered: "narrative is the soul of drama" (183). A felicitous example of the consequences that accrued to theatre studies from the ascendancy of narrative since the 1960s is the recent book by Stanton Garner, *The Absent Voice: Narrative Comprehension in the Theatre*, which treats theatre as a narrative form. And Brian Richardson writes that "complex, elaborate embeddings of quotation and narration are present both in drama and in fiction" (197). He goes on to make that point in absolute terms: "drama, like the novel, is and always has been a mixture of mimetic and diegetic representation, and any theory of narration that ignores stage narration may be considered needlessly limited, if not seriously impoverished" (212). Yet, while Garner and Richardson seem to agree, the reader delving into their perceptive disquisitions on drama and narrative realizes that between them there stretches a conceptual and terminological field so expansive as to suggest two widely differing approaches to the subject. One deals with the narrative nature of theatre, the other with narration in the theatre. The first subscribes to a synchronic revision of the genre; the second records a lingering feature of drama that this century's iconoclastic drive towards experimentation has energized.²

What Garner in relation to Beckett's theatre calls "heightened narrative activity" (154) is the focus of Richardson's pursuit. Although the two terms are readily interchanged, it is useful to draw a distinction between "narrative" and "narration" for the purpose of clarifying related but divergent concerns. Narrative, the broader category, begins in the theatre in advance of the word, with the bare stage on which everything is to unfold. It signals the dynamics of revelation that a novel and a play share. Garner, in his tellingly titled book, investigates the cognitive mechanisms that lead an audience to make sense of a performance.³ The spectator witnesses discourse, language in time, verbal and paraverbal or nonverbal language that tells a story. By *that* token, the theatre *is* narrative. Take a moment to consider a resounding and disturbing contradiction:

In the novel, dialogue, that is, spoken language, can never be spoken, because it and its speakers exist only in a written text. Which of the two has the deeper voice, Don Quijote or Sancho Panza? How good is Anna Karenina's accent when she speaks French? When these characters converse, their dialogue is pure textuality, as they are themselves. Granted, when the theatre audience listens to Hamlet's words, it actually hears and knows that it is hearing Laurence Olivier or John Gielgud or Dustin Hoffman, but the actors' fleshly presence, along with their accents and the timbre of their voices, superimposes itself on and washes away abstract textuality. Hamlet does not by that token live more fully than Don Quijote or Anna; he merely comes to life differently; and all three are the offspring of narrative. The historicizing act of narration that we ascribe to the novel as its defining trait exists in the theatre in the composite of all the audible and visible theatrical components that the spectator accumulates and translates into a story, precisely as a reader gathers the written evidence from a book. Narrative structure is not alien to drama's singular lineaments and common denominators. Garner affirms that the narrative basis of theatre "hinges upon the imaginative transformation of theatrical space into dramatic space, of a physical here and now into an imaginative here and now" (7). The critical exercise of analyzing a play is in itself a narrative reconstitution that substitutes for the representation, engraves itself on the performance, perhaps stifles it (as Carballido suggests to his audiences and his academic critics in *Yo también hablo de la rosa*). Of course, narrative that is uncontrolled, not locatable in a concrete or abstract human source, is difficult to conceive. The narrative voice in drama tends to be smothered, suppressed, as even the stage directions dissipate in performance. Therefore, the theatre's narrativity rests on its telling of a tale, and the spectator's act of watching, hearing, and comprehending the evolution of that tale narrativizes the theatre.

Narration, by contrast, presumes the presence of a voice, an authoritative, primordial voice. It is, consequently, the tangible act of narration rather than the idea of narrative that appears to fly in the face of drama. The absence of a narrating entity is the basis for Scholes and Kellogg's definition: "A drama is a story without a story-teller" (4). Narration in the drama is an optional activity contained within the narrative totality, an unconventional mediating opportunity in an unmediated medium. Narration requires articulation of the word either by an actor, through a voice offstage, or with other technical devices. Richardson in his article seeks out those means available to the playwright to make concrete, visible, and audible the act of telling a story. It is those metadiscursive means or moments that, because of their current preponderance in the Spanish American theatre, as in the theatre elsewhere, have attracted my attention as well.⁴

Narration on stage is not an invention of the vanguard, although the vanguard playwrights' introduction of narration into the dramatic space has caused the modern spectator to take special note of it. The hybridization of drama by narrative in the form of onstage narration actually marks the drama from early times and stems from the urge to counteract the hindrances that the dramatic form with its truant narrator imposes. Narrative devices were introduced in circumstances where direct representation would have proved impossible or clumsy (such as temporal jumps or confections, psychological interiorization, ironic inflection), though in time the solutions themselves came to be looked on as clumsy. In other words, it is necessary to distinguish a narrative streak in drama that is relatively unobtrusive and normative and by now causes hardly a stir from the modern intensification or transformation of that tradition into a sometime feature that registers with the spectator as disruptive, invasive, subversive. The surprise that attends to this awareness of difference is what makes the particularity useful for a critical analysis and allows students of genre to talk about the "mixing of modes" in modern art.

Richardson insists "that narration is a basic element of the playwright's technique, that it appears throughout Western drama" (194). Indeed, a sweeping historical panorama reveals that the recourse to overt diegetic voices dates back to the theatre's origins in classical Greece, and it reaches an apex in the drama of Renaissance England and Spain. Opposition to narrative expedients grew as an esthetic grounded in mimesis began to regard narration as unnatural to drama. Then, in modern times, narration is reintroduced into the theatre as playwrights rebel against the practices and prohibitions of naturalist staging. The poetic function and the narrative function have worked in partnership to dominate the stage except for those periods when an illusionist impulse held sway.

Within that tradition, the innocent level of the narrating character is distinguishable from the more unsettling impact of a framing narrative. Contemporary audiences understood and accepted the chorus's expository, sententious, and proleptic functions in the Greek tragedy. The minor character whose major charge is to provide an account of events that take place beyond the enacted dramatic time or space is a common stratagem inherited from epic poetry and useful to the playwright for the purpose of recounting past events, simultaneous action, or offstage occurrences. The avoidance of onstage violence in the Greek tragedy calls for such narrative substitution (see Carlson). The restrictions of the theatre constantly press for narrative solutions, and these leave the spectators no more nonplussed than the narrative interventions in their own lives: "Hi, honey! How was your day?" is a typical invitation to such narrative. In fact, since people are always telling each other stories, it is not surprising that, even in the most rigidly realistic of plays, one will find characters narrating

events to other characters, just as interior narrations are common in the novel. The theatre thus offers up a combination of narrations: some that correspond to normal discursive patterns along with others that stem from its particular generic needs.

The ploys used, for example, for the psychic penetration that comes so easily to the novel but runs into the drama's surface barriers are also familiar to audiences. These are the measures, like monologues and asides, that fell into disfavor as the realist drama came into vogue, since, unlike narrations carried on among characters, they violated the frontier between stage character and audience, brazenly in the case of asides, tacitly in the case of characters apparently talking aloud to themselves.⁵ The old tricks resurfaced in Eugene O'Neill's daring experiments with point of view, as in *Strange Interlude*, where a technique that had come to be considered a weakness was turned to uncommon advantage. It is easy to understand why critics often refer to O'Neill's theatre as "novel-plays," but the designation does an injustice to his plays' generic integrity as well as to the genre's broad capacities.

Such instances of narrating characters—and they are no more than instances contained within the dramatic framework—may momentarily jar the audience's expectations of verisimilitude, but they do not seriously stretch the bounds of the dramatic genre itself. Other radicalizing techniques, even those that have by now become conventional, do threaten stable definitions as narration obtrudes glaringly onto the dramatic turf. Prologues and epilogues that frame the dramatic action fall into this category, yet they, too, belong to a custom that harks back to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. How impoverished Shakespeare would have felt had they been forbidden fruit! They also lurk in the East in the Japanese Noh drama (where the narrator as *raisonneur* is a regular feature as well). And then they reemerge full force with the vanguard, as in García Lorca's theatre or in the best such example in Latin America, Dragún's *Historias para ser contadas*.

The continuity of active narrative intervention in drama, to the point that a full separation of the two looks specious, gives way, in this century, to a veritable invasion of the dramatic space by the forces of narrative. Why is this so? If we now return to Bakhtin, we find him painting a canvas on which the literary genres engage in an epic battle from which the novel, brash newcomer to the scene, finally emerges victorious, eager to colonize and convert the poetic and dramatic natives of a long-established and finally vanquished tribe. "In an era when the novel reigns supreme," he writes, "almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent 'novelized'" (5). He gives Ibsen and Hauptmann as examples, and then he valorizes this development: the other genres, he says, "become more free and flexible, their language renews itself" (7). Finally he caps his argument: "From the very beginning, then, the novel was made of different clay than the

other already completed genres; it is a different breed, and with it and in it is born the future of all literature. Once it came into being, it could never be merely one genre among others, and it could not erect rules for interrelating with others in peaceful and harmonious co-existence. In the presence of the novel, all other genres somehow have a different resonance" (39). Bakhtin's prejudice in favor of the novel is quite apparent, as is his penchant for picturesque hyperbole, but his historical assessment is not unfounded, particularly when he says: "In an environment where the novel is the dominant genre, the conventional languages of strictly canonical genres begin to sound in new ways, which are quite different from the ways they sounded in those eras when the novel was *not* included in 'high' literature" (6)—an observation to which one must add the impact of the cinema.

Again and again, an overarching, sovereign narrative voice has become an active part of the modern drama. The identity of that voice (also its relationship to the implied author) is complex and variable, as is the case in the novel. Richardson contrasts it with a narrating character and describes it astutely as "the speaker of consciousness that frames, relates, or engenders the actions of the characters of a play" (194). Good examples are the narrators in Thornton Wilder's influential play, *Our Town*, in Cocteau's *La Machine infernale*, or, later on, in Tennessee Williams's *Glass Menagerie*. Such instances of narration differ from dialogue in the theatre insofar as they presume a relationship between speaker and receiver quite unlike the relationship between characters and unlike the usual relationship between actors and audience. That shift in level of communication often produces a tone more neutral and impersonal or more ironic than that of the characters, and it is frequently accompanied, as in the novel, by a realignment of the speaker's filiation with the time frame of his or her subject. Unless the dramatic action or a self-ironizing rhetoric undermines it, that voice also carries an authority not usually vested in dialoguing characters. An interesting example of such a structure in a Spanish play is to be found in Antonio Buero Vallejo's *El tragaluz*, where two scientists of the future, Él and Ella, address directly the audience that is both theirs and Buero's, bring to life a past action, and realize the playwright's difficult challenge of conquering time.

What the spectator and the critic have come to observe in the modern theatre, then, is not so much the convulsion of its essence as the manifestation of its ample capacity for appropriation. In this respect, the trend reflects the blurring of generic frontiers and the elimination of constraints in all the arts. The currency of a term like "total theatre" is evidence that the theatre is an amalgam, and not only the tilyard, of differing and contrary models of artistic expression. The theatre has not been assaulted by the invasion of forms and norms from outer spaces; it has welcomed them and sought them out in order to realize its full

allusive and investigative potential. Drama's intensified recourse to narrating figures, first on the modernist and then on the postmodernist stage, is perfectly synchronous with its times and endlessly open. One needs to mention no more than Brecht and Beckett, the avatars of narration in the modern theatre, to prove that point. A poetics of modern drama, therefore, if not of *all* drama, must, willy-nilly, incorporate into its definitions both poetry and narrative. A complex of interlacing fibers constitutes the muscle of drama.

Even if drama's narrative essence becomes a matter for critical debate, the deliberate unfurling of narration is obvious even to the most casual observer of the Latin American theatre of the past three decades or so. An exhaustive survey of the examples and of their multifarious modalities would fill the pages of a thick book. Since the figure of the narrator has become such a pervasive presence on the world stage, it would be a distortion to single out the exposure of a narrative voice as the index of Latin American drama, but the ubiquity of that element in the dramaturgy of the American continent does signal its modernity and aligns it squarely with the most sophisticated stagecraft. The very titles of some of the plays already confess to their self-designation as narratives: *Historias para ser contadas*, *La crónica*, *Vida y muerte del fantoche lusitano*, *La pasión según Antígona Pérez*, *Yo también hablo de la rosa*, *Almanaque de Juárez*, *Ésta no es una obra de teatro*, *Información para extranjeros*. A brief and arbitrary sampling of several canonical works of the Spanish American repertoire leads towards a minimal typology of "heightened narrative activity" and hints at the range of uses to which playwrights across America, in strokes of unbridled creative freedom, have put the enticements of narration.

Luis Rafael Sánchez's *Quintuples* contains six characters, members of a theatrical family played by one actor and one actress, each of whom carries on a monologue in six separate scenes. Sánchez's divertimento is an updated offspring of a romantic tradition of narrative in the theatre that boasts forebears as distinguished as Rousseau, Goethe, and Chekhov and that has received due critical scrutiny (see, e.g., Culler). The subgenre takes remarkable turns in the hands of Beckett, its neoteric master, and Sánchez, too—just as modern painting does with its historical antecedents—both expands and flattens the form to extract its ironic potential. Sánchez dramatizes the monologue's capacity to sound individual consciousness all the while that he fractures the histrionic domain and its denizens, who unmask themselves without doffing their masks. Because there is more than one character and more than one actor, *Quintuples* is not an orthodox "monodrama," but it generally adheres to the practice of the "monodramatic narrative" insofar as it is an accumulation of minimonodramas, each complete unit being presided over by the actions and speech of a single

character/actor. Every section bears a descriptive title, as in some romantic dramas and in Brecht's work, by way of narrativizing the action.

Each narrative is preceded by another narrative, a lengthy stage direction, and is punctuated by many other stage directions, and the whole packet is externally wrapped in a "Prólogo a la representación" (xiii-xv), a written rehearsal of the stage performance signed in bold letters by one "L.R.S.," presumably the implied author's persona. The reader of the script—and no one but the reader—is privy to this illusion of access to the author in the only narrative space that the dramatic script provides for the authoritative creating voice to express itself before it is subsumed, for better or for worse, into the acting. L.R.S., in the prologue, confesses to the prolixity of the stage directions but undercuts any attempt to sustain that narrative level directly in production: "De ninguna manera, bajo ningún pretexto de experimentación, distanciamiento o muestra de originalidad, deberán dichas acotaciones ofrecerse al público" (xiv). Of course, no matter how emphatically he puts it, the author's control is limited, and, short of a lawsuit, Sánchez can do nothing about it if some future director of a Brechtian or original stripe decides to project those stage directions on a screen or a placard. In these sections that are by tradition italicized (emphasized?) yet suppressed (ignored?), Sánchez, with a gesture that is at once self-effacing and self-aggrandizing, calls attention to the role of the stage direction in the conduct of the theatrical experience and of the author's relationship to the receiver of the dramatic script. In the experimental realm of *Quintuples*, which the author (or, rather, L.R.S.) describes as a parody and "una aventura de la imaginación" (xv), the stage directions are designed not only to assist the director, the actors, and the technical team but to exercise an unusual measure of control over the audience. The spectator is dealt a specific part: when to light a character's cigarette, when to leave the hall and return. Such an assignment is risky, and its successful outcome can be guaranteed only if actors are surreptitiously planted among the spectators, but such a recourse could dilute the thrust of this play. The narrator of the stage directions in *Quintuples* in any event exceeds the usual bounds of that discourse in his active displacement of the audience from context into text, even at those moments when, ironic and almost vengeful in his grasp for power, he excludes the audience, as in the following striking example: "Sus manos tiemblan pero el público no lo sabe" (34).

Narration presumes the telling and the reception of a story, and in the absence of an onstage receiver for the dialogue, the audience fills the vacuum. Sánchez emblazons his play of monologues with its inherently narrative form and bestirs the spectator into active receivership. To begin with, the audience is clandestinely handed a double role: "Aunque no lo sabe de inmediato, el público espectador de *Quintuples* interpreta al público asistente a un Congreso de Asuntos

de Familia," warns the prologue (xiii), and the first stage direction refers to "espectadores o congresistas" (2). The lighting does not distinguish the acting space from the spectatorial arena, and soon the characters' discourse masks the paying clients as conventioners. In monkeyshines typical of metatheatrical narrative, the actors alternate between their persons and their roles. An early stage direction confirms this antimimetic duality that parallels and incites the audience's: "Dafne Morrison entra y sale del relato central mediante unas coqueterías fogosas" (3). The theatrical—metatheatrical—dimension gains in complexity in this and all instances in *Quintuples* because the character is an actress (by expecting applause, she so identifies herself), and thus the masks she shifts are of actress as character who is an actress and character who is an actress as actress. From that spatial expansion and fusion it is but one small step outside the hall, and the narrative script in fact presses the supratheatrical space into the service of the performance. The monologist after the intermission says: "¡Que les aproveche hasta sus más hermosas consecuencias el trago que apuraron durante el intermedio! Ron antillano desde luego, para que la tentación de vivir los encandile. ¿O se fumaron un cigarrillo? Mandrake el Mago les dice bravo, bravísimo" (45). The public realizes that it is part of a performance even while the stage action is dormant.

The theatregoers cannot mistake the "ustedes" they hear for anyone but themselves, but their continuing comfort in their collectivity quickly slides from under them as they hear appeals to a spectator of a certain sex or in a given seat. The stage directions frequently require the direct involvement not only of the group en masse but of individual audience members, for example as Dafne Morrison in the first scene stretches out her hand for someone to kiss and climactically in scene five, entitled "Instrucciones generales al público y unos versos," where Carlota Morrison tells spectators, one by one, what to do and say in particular circumstances. The character here plays the part of director, and the spectator is converted into potential actor. Near the end of the scene, two spectators (planted actors?) literally jump into action.

The narrating character in *Quintuples* informs the public, instructs it, molds it, incites it, confides in it, strokes it, hectors it, entertains it. What remains for the audience to do is to respond—or not—within its means and according to its formed or reformed self-perception. As with any narrative experience, the audience must also, quite on its own, assess the reliability of the narrators. It must separate in the monologues of *Quintuples* the factual information and the plausible explanations from the characters' distortions, inventions, and self-deceptions. These human beings, even though they speak in the first person and arrogate unto themselves the authority of narration, are not the implied author's masks or his deputies. On the rare occasions when they appear to speak

for him, they contradict themselves. They are not reliable narrators. When Dafne Morrison brags three times that she is "la voz en español de la Novia del Super Ratón," the audience senses the pathos in her statement and concludes that her self-deconstructive comportment is a trap of irony that the implied author has laid for her and the spectator. All of *Quintuples*, including the implied author's own statements (is it the vaudeville that he says it is?), requires a recognition and decoding of its ironic overlay.

In its final words, more than at any other point, the spectator has cause to have faith in the play. There the two actors' voices, speaking as actor and actress, members of the same professional world as the author, and in concert with the public, coalesce into a fugal monologue that unfurls the fabulation, the invention that *Quintuples* is. Like the final scenes of Sánchez's early *Farsa del amor compradito* and Carballido's *Yo también hablo de la rosa*, *Quintuples* develops into a celebration of the magic of theatre, of "la hermosura de su mentira" (78). Sánchez does not resolve his characters' debate as to whether the theatre is improvisation or premeditation, but his play ends as it began, as critique of the theatre and as dramatic theory.⁶ The play declares itself as artifice, "relatos," "diversión" (35, 44) and accentuates the process of narration over the narrative product: "¡El cuento no es el cuento! El cuento es quien lo cuenta" (46); each of its monologues exists not only to tell a story or even one-sixth of a story but to monologue about monologuing. Any noticeable narrative intrusion onto the dramatic surface will induce a shift in attention from the story to its telling. Narration in the theatre is automatically a metatheatrical stroke, and Sánchez in *Quintuples* turns that formula into the stuff of his play.

Salient internal narration also characterizes the most applauded of Sánchez's plays, *La pasión según Antígona Pérez* (see, among others, Waldman). True to the needs of his classical source, Sánchez employs a chorus in latter-day dress, a group of five journalists who provide temporal markers, peripheral information, and editorial commentary. In this last capacity the chorus becomes the butt of the playwright's irony insofar as the Periodistas are automatons who speak the official lines of a dictatorial regime. With briefer appearances, *La Multitud* and a group of *Mujeres* and *Hombres* also perform choral functions. The principal narrator of the play, however, is the title character herself, who for her mythical stature, rhetorical tone, and distancing impact could be designated an epic narrator.

Powerful as she is because of her indomitable spirit in Sánchez's tragedy and because of her legendary status, which resurfaces in literary versions across the ages, *Antígona* acquires greater power yet in Sánchez's play by narrating her own story. The significance of the preposition in the title, "según" rather than "de," should not be lost on the observer. In other words, she creates herself, and,

though she risks the perils of unreliable narration, she—not the dramatist, she—controls the story that is made into history or the story of that history. If she is not her history's prime mover (she cannot be, since she is its victim), she is at least its chief commentator. For the outside audience (though not for the players that accompany her), she determines the reception of its course as long as she is alive to recount it, and she evaluates its incidents. The dramatist, to the extent that he is able in his own narration, announces to the reader with the first words of his long introductory stage direction—"La crónica [. . .]" (11)—that his play is to be history, narration, which is the message that the spectator also receives immediately. Technically, Antígona wears two hats, that of narrator and character, histor and participant. Her shifting discourse has two sets of receivers: the audience directly when she is narrator and other characters (actors) when she is in character, at which point the audience indulges in its customary eavesdropping. In her first lengthy expository address to the audience, with which the play opens, she both proclaims herself as story and asserts its veracity ("Traigo una historia para los que tienen fe" [13]), but the duality of her role also relativizes the truth ("Los periódicos han inventado una historia que no es cierta [. . .]. Habrá, pues, dos versiones de una misma verdad" [14]) and injects into the drama the question of point of view, of which Richardson makes so much.

Antígona, narrator, becomes Antígona, character, as soon as her mother enters the stage, but in the midst of their conversation Antígona stops to make a judgmental comment to the audience, which is presented in such a fashion that her mother appears not to hear it, in the manner of an extended aside, whereupon their dialogue resumes. This stepping in and out of character, this vacillation between first and third person, becomes Antígona's mode of operation in the play. Her extraterritorial status is particularly pronounced at the beginning of the second act, where she underscores the representational nature of the unfolding events: "La segunda parte es más corta que la primera. Es lógico. El conflicto ya está planteado. También las motivaciones. Lo que falta es que los demás personajes entiendan que para mí no hay alternativas" (87).

A disquieting paradox to which Bruce Robbins has pointed in a broader context bears application to *La pasión según Antígona Pérez*: "narrative becomes a source of authority for critics while and in part because it *undermines* authority—because it acts as an agent of relativism, unreliability" (42). Sánchez introduces a familiar, strong, and trustworthy narrative voice into his drama about the abuse of authority and the pitfalls of authoritativeness. The very voice that injects truth and moral purpose into the play blunts the trustworthiness of truth. By the same token, narrative, which carries the weight of authority into drama, disrupts and erodes the play's generic stability. Here and in other instances in the theatre, narrative is both authoritative and corrosive.

It comes as no surprise that in a play whose theme is the disappearance of a former way of life and its replacement by a new order narration should be the ideal vehicle of representation, since narration is the carryover of history into the present. That is the case of René Marqués's *Los soles truncos*, whose manipulation of time is carried out narratively through some of the most complex and effective uses of flashback in the annals of Latin American drama. The flashback, like a dream, is always drama within a drama, narration within a narration, second-level discourse, the fiction of a fiction. Like a play itself, the flashback is action that never takes place except in the fields of the imagination. It is a created scenario. Doubly fictitious, it must be told, narrated, because it cannot happen; it can only be reconstituted as a dramatic action embedded in a narrative. Yet, the flashback, like dream, like fiction, can bring into being events, persons, and states of consciousness beyond the reach of material experience. Pointedly, the dead sister in *Los soles truncos*, Hortensia, can come back to life only in memory, in the dramatization of memory, which is flashback.

The flashback takes on special significance when the story of the present requires the story of the past to become clear, complete, or meaningful. Absent their past, the present of the sisters in *Los soles truncos* is, in different ways, without meaning both to the sisters and to the audience: without value for the sisters, without sense for the audience. When the story of the past becomes more important than the story of the present, when time nudges people from their role as protagonists, then flashback moves from a peripheral to a central function. Such, again, is the case of *Los soles truncos*, where the narrative of flashbacks occupies three key moments in the dramatic structure of the play.⁷

The first comes soon after the play's opening (21-27). The action slides verbally from present to past as Emilia in dialogue with Inés utters the words "¡Oh, Dios mío, qué horrible es el tiempo!" and begins to recall and asks Inés to share ("¿Recuerdas?" she says to her) a scene that justifies her sentiment. Accompanied, like all the flashbacks, by music and a change in lighting that serve as sensorial codes for the audience, Emilia lapses into a historical monologue. A brief, grating return to the present then leads immediately into the reenactment of a dialogue between Inés and Hortensia at the age of nineteen that presumably takes place now in Inés's mind. The initial flashback thus retraces time, projects mental action, fulfills expository purposes, and reveals hidden conflicts in the lives of the three sisters. The second, which begins with an object that, straddling past and present, incites memory, is a dialogue between Hortensia, aged thirty, and Emilia, in whose mind the retrospective projection is staged (30-36). When their conversation turns to their mother's funeral, there is a flashback within a flashback, a daring and demanding *mise en abyme*. Set off by the martial sound of clarions, a separate snatch of dialogue bores deeper into

time and enacts the scene that its framing dialogue, itself already framed in memory, has evoked. Emilia and Hortensia operate in this instance as what Richardson calls "generative narrators," narrators "whose diegetic discourse engenders the ensuing mimetic action" (197), of which the Stage Manager in *Our Town* is a prime example and which Dragún and others were to develop more fully.

The final flashback, a brief but no less important one (46-49), develops out of a conversation between the two surviving sisters in which Inés recalls a specific afternoon and, clearly working as a generative narrator, sets the stage—virtually writes the stage directions—for the scene that is about to be dramatized: "Y aquel día . . . Fue una tarde de octubre. Estábamos tú y yo en la sala. Poco después bajaba de su habitación Hortensia" (47). With the word "Efectivamente" Marqués's stage direction confirms Inés's stage direction, and, as Inés, with her back to the audience, continues to recite the narrative, Hortensia, assisted by the stage technicians, acts it out. In a further stage direction, Marqués leaves no doubt about his design to convert narration into dramatic action and even identifies himself with the audience that receives the narration: "A través de las reacciones de Hortensia y Emilia, *visualizamos* con exactitud lo que se narra" (47; my emphasis). In the midst of her narration in the past tense, Inés turns and steps into the narrated action, performing in the stage's past for the audience's present, speaking in the past tense in the present time as narrator, while acting in the present of that past as participating character, addressing in a state of exaltation the specter of a dead sister for whom there exists no more present, fusing moments in time, turning past into present, present into past in a defiant display of synchrony of which only art, or the imagination, is capable.

The constructive device that the flashback is for Marqués in the building of the story of *Los soles truncos* becomes deconstructive when it operates self-consciously to unveil the narrative process and to destabilize the dramatic illusion, as occurs in Osvaldo Dragún's *Historias para ser contadas* and Emilio Carballido's *Yo también hablo de la rosa*. These are two established plays of the Spanish American repertoire in which narration is deployed with utmost daring, complexity, and effectiveness. The two together, widely separated in geography, theme, and style, both of them eminently theatrical and stageable, are an apt demonstration of the apparently limitless capacities of narration's service to drama. They have for good reason attracted considerable critical commentary.

The pleonastic title of Dragún's play, carried with triumphant redundancy into its opening unit ("Prólogo para ser contado"), foregrounds narration to its very limits in drama. (See Gladhart for the most recent discussion of this feature in Dragún's theatre.) After that opening, it would come as a surprise to the audience *not* to find itself narrated at. The narrated prologue, an internal segment

of the dramatic structure, carries no indication as to its speaker (one actor? a group of actors? the director?). It is certainly not the speech of any of the characters that are to appear but rather of the actors who are to portray them. It is unlike the usual such introduction, where the prologist speaks for the author: an authorial position can be discerned in its contents but not in its tone, which carries the pure voice of theatre. Instead of establishing an opposition between fiction and frame, it becomes a mirror for the inner dramas (cf. Richardson 195). Blending Brechtian theatre with the *commedia dell'arte*, it inscribes the audience into a double time and a double space ("¡Público de la Plaza, buenas noches!"). Then, enveloping the whole history of the art of Thespis, this metatheatrical tract that weds poetry, drama, and narration into an idyllic triangle expounds a theory of the theatre in historical terms and invites the audience to consider its own indispensable role in relation to the actor's potential impersonation. When the prologue has finished exalting art and established the importance of telling stories, the show can go on.

When it does go on in its several guises, the actors explain to the audience how they will proceed. Behaving as if the spectators had never been to a play before, the actors highlight their identities as players of roles and thereby subordinate the characters they play to the players that they are. Their agency as generative narrators in these "historias" corresponds to the actors' professional enterprise: they animate staged fiction. *Historias para ser contadas* becomes a dazzling and sometimes dizzying flux and reflux of narration and dramatization. The levels alternate and multiply, producing narrations within narrations, actors who narrate what others act out or what they enact, characters who alternately narrate and act, speaking in the first person and in the third, spectators whose distance between themselves and the action constantly shrinks and expands, time frames that shift, spaces that never are only what they are.

Narrative insertions in the drama of course tell two stories: the plot around which the dramatic action revolves and the tale of subversion that these interruptions or deviations represent. Narration in the drama is an ironic, not a straightforward, means for unfolding a story. It is a curious but appealing contradiction that flagrant narration in the drama prevents the narrative movement from being actualized while the narration is underway. The alternation of modes (whose specific tenor here varies from story to story) seems to make the dramatic incident functionally secondary to its narrative frame even if the thematic impact lies in the dramatization. Although both levels are cast as dramatic dialogue, the narration appears to hold priority, on the one hand, because the enactments are merely the illustrations of the narrative and, on the other, because reenactment, since it is perforce past, is by nature narrative. All this farce of narration and representation in *Historias para ser contadas*, however, is at the service of a

single demonstration: the profoundly human tragedy of being human. The movement from narration to enactment produces a clash between the (confessed) fictionality and the (presumed) reality of the characters: the play-within-a-play structure fictionalizes individuals whose social and economic plight as humans in a concrete environment could not be more tangible. Reflecting the dramas being played out beyond the confines of the theatre, Dragún's play is a series of exemplary tales. Not the least of its exemplary moves is its strike at theatre's narrative potential, at theatre's ability to tell anyone's story and therefore to be an effective instrument of ontological inquiry.

In *Yo también hablo de la rosa* the pronounced narrative component is aimed more directly at itself; it is more intensely inward in its examination of the operations and reception of narration—of narration as such and in a theatrical context—and, fully self-critical, it turns its irony and parody against itself. Highly cinematic in its execution, *Yo también hablo de la rosa* defies the injunctions of the dramatic art with cuts and fade-outs, with false leads, fleeting characters, alternate scenarios, and an array of narrators—close to a dozen—who tell many stories but not the story of the play.

The repetition of the play's central incident is probably the most disconcerting element for the viewer, who soon realizes that its rehearsal matters more than the event. Repetition affords the playwright the opportunity to multiply points of view, to create the perspectivism that is second nature to novelists and that experimental filmmakers have favored (*Rashomon* is the classic example). In *Yo también hablo de la rosa*, the repetition mirrors the retelling/rereading potential of narrative. Each repetition, however, since it is a recurrence of the same event in successive moments of apprehended time, builds on the previous enactment (or telling) and induces fresh perspectives, deeper insights, new interpretations. The experience of the work of art is the reception of it accompanied, or immediately followed, by analysis, and repetition is the dramatization of the analytical process. Carballido's play is an open-ended study of that process, not a story of an accident perpetrated by a pair of mischievous young innocents but the story of the problem-ridden reception of stories about a potential story.

What might have been an intriguing technical option for Carballido becomes the core theme of his play. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising to find so many narrators in *Yo también hablo de la rosa* nor to discover, as the stage lights go on, that the space is occupied by the play's principal narrator, a woman who bears the significant designation of *Intermediaria*. (Kerr has devoted a study to this figure.) This conduit between emitter and receiver, between implied author and spectator, whom she addresses directly, appears four times in the play. Her introductory speech, an explosion of images and metaphors, is a paean to the

imagination and to its vital, esthetic, chaotic processing of the information it receives. Here and in her later interventions, she exercises fully the privileges that accrue to her from the power-sharing contract between creator and narrator: she is the creature of someone else's imagination, but she has the power to control the narrative, and that is exactly what she does, first by choosing the material of her narration, peremptorily disregarding its aptness if that suits her purposes, and then by teasingly selecting, postponing, censoring, and curtailing the components of her account. In stark revelation of the diegetic process, she celebrates her limitless knowledge ("¡Sé muchas cosas!") but also flaunts what she maliciously withholds ("guardo parte de lo que he visto" [129-30]). Her reading from a book about animals and her abruptly truncated story about two dreamers in her succeeding irruptions seem absolutely gratuitous on a first, unanalyzed hearing but resonate with meaning for the spectator who, in inevitable defiance of the proscription on interpretation, links them to the play's self-reflexive contexts. As a narrator who incarnates narrative, the *Intermediaria* wears clothing that becomes lighter—clearer—with every appearance. And naturally, it is she who has the last word in the play. In fact, in her final entry, she mischievously promises to get to the grain of the matter, but she generates and joins the other characters in their collective dance of life and art.

Just prior to this scene, another narrator, the *Locutor*, in his only appearance before the closing ritual, puts directly to the audience, even singling out individuals, a series of questions and hypotheses that invoke the titular rose and whose consideration—not answers—clarifies the links between the train and the rose, the *Intermediaria* and the characters, the story of the play and the stories in the play. One is tempted to read into the *Locutor*'s pirouettes a message, a solution from the mouth of a higher author-ity; one is tempted to embrace his idea that all language is invention and to let the following words ring true: "Hay tan sólo un conjunto de ficciones milagrosas, y una se llama rosa y otras se llaman de otros modos, un milagro tras otro, por todas partes, sin posibilidad alguna de explicación" (170-71); and one inclines to believe that therefore Carballido is issuing a clarion call to pluralism. Maybe so. And maybe not, for the lesson is ambiguous, and the lesson is that narration, intrinsically untrustworthy, is as much a trap as it is an illumination. The narrating voice speaks for the author no more than Willy Loman speaks for Marilyn Monroe's ex-husband. But no less so, either. The human inclination to seek origins, find order, outline jurisdictions, and trace teleologies vests divine rights in a voice that seems to issue from creation. Carballido's play frustrates that comforting sense of closure because there are so many narrators, so many contradictions, so much irony. The author's voice is too splintered, removed, and amused to share the podium with the narrators he has created.⁸

Two other narrators, the Profesores, had already prepared the way for the Locutor's performance with their interpretations of the same actions that they, in circular fashion, generate as examples for the audience's benefit. Since their own absurd texts implicitly subject them to parody, irony, and scorn, their words become entirely untrustworthy and, by further implication, cast another ironic shadow over the spectator's inclination to find a solution in the propositions of the Locutor and of all those who profess. If the interpretation of received narratives—a train wreck, a rose, a story, a play—is the object of *Yo también hablo de la rosa* and if the spectator extracts from the drama the author's reservations about the interpretive activity, the spectator, alas, can arrive at that conclusion only through an intense, trying process of interpretation. The narrative circle requires a receiver for its completion, and the reception cannot be divorced from the effort to attach meaning to the narration. *Yo también hablo de la rosa* simply does not allow itself to be the pure, joyful celebration into which it dissolves at the end.

If in *Hamlet* or in *La vida es sueño* the soliloquy was the narrative solution to entering a character's consciousness, all of *Yo también hablo de la rosa* is a narrative approximation toward the very consciousness of fiction and of the interpretive processes that engage imaginative creation. In short, Carballido makes his spectator think. Narration in the drama—in all the plays discussed—brings a metatheatrical turn to the stage. (See Priscilla Meléndez's wide-ranging book on this subject.) At once the servant of story and its undoing, narration underscores the theatricality of the stage event while it creates in the spectator the distance necessary to provoke both critical scrutiny and increased esthetic pleasure. Narration frees the spectator to puncture illusion with the awareness that Falstaff is an actor, that Lady Windermere's fan is a prop, that Cyrano's nose was neither long nor short, that no murder took place in the cathedral because the cathedral never existed, and that the fruit of *The Cherry Orchard* is digestible but not edible.

This cursory run through a handful of the innumerable Spanish American plays in which direct narration is an essential component of their fabric and whose deepest secrets and pleasures lie in their narrative components opens the door onto the range of options available to the modern playwright who wishes to dramatize a narrating voice. Narration has become such a pervasive force because, sundering the bonds with tradition, it effects a grandiose liberation of drama from its shackles. Narration makes visible what would normally remain unseen, and it returns to the dramatist a degree of control that had been ceded to the spectator all the while that it kindles or engrosses that spectator. The chorus, the aside, the soliloquy, the dream, though still unexhausted, are techniques that pale by comparison with the cornucopia of modern narratorial guises. The

narrator can function technically, thematically, or ideologically. The narrator's voice may be epic, reportorial, apocalyptic, cerebral, affective, parabolic, or ironic. The narrator may provide editorial commentary, historicize events, activate history, foreground states and actions, provide warnings. The constructive narrator may serve as a unifying channel that assists the spectator in assimilating and translating segmented stage components; that is, the narrator may be an aid to cognition as the spectator accumulates signs into a gestalt. But the narrator may also serve the opposite purpose, perniciously fracturing the dramatic structure and blocking or postponing comprehension so as to fashion a new mode of comprehension. The narrator frames, explains, probes, comments. Literally or figuratively, the narrator may speak from the margins or from the center. The modern narrator, such as Brecht's, is echo, exposition, editor, guide, transition, timekeeper, enacter, conscience, oracle, therapist, mediator, spy, and saboteur. The narrator may be single or multiple. The narrator may frame the entire play, as in a prologue, or appear intermittently, or accompany the full course of the action. The narrator may remain outside the action or enter the play within the play. The narrator may carry the identity of the implied author or of a character speaking for the author or of a character speaking as a character or of an actor speaking as a character or of an actor speaking as an actor or of an actor speaking for the implied author or of a collectivity speaking as the voice of consciousness. If a character, the narrator may be both narrator and character, that is, the character may step in and out of character, as happens in all the plays discussed and in others like José Triana's *La noche de los asesinos*, Sánchez's *Farsa del amor compradito*, or momentarily in Jorge Díaz's *El cepillo de dientes*.

Narration, of course, foregrounds the domain of reception in the performative contract and thereby enhances the audience's apprehension of its indispensability and of its spectatorial responsibilities. As Garner observes: "In one of the theatre's paradoxes, the spectators observe a performance field of which they are a part" (25). Again, a wide spectrum of options prevails. The play with a narrator or a narrating structure may have an interior audience that is part of the play's action as well as of its space (think of *Hamlet*) or an interior audience that represents the outside audience or no interior audience at all. The outside audience in attendance may be addressed directly as the paying customer at a specific performance or as the abstract body that completes the theatre's communicative circle. The audience so addressed may be allowed to retain its independent identity, or it may be drawn into spectatorship within the anecdotal frame of the play, or it may be asked to assume both roles at once. The audience may be invoked organically, or, in a more unhinging gesture, individual spectators may be addressed. The audience may be allowed to live its own time, or it may be asked to displace itself imaginatively into the past or the future or to fuse

temporal states. The audience may be moved to laughter or to fright, flattered or reproached, indulged or offended, imbued with power or rendered docile, distanced into the pleasure of a ludic experience or distanced into the reasoned awareness of a human reality. More likely, these conditions prevail in tandem, for always in such circumstances the tension between the knowledge of artifice and the illusion of belief is heightened beyond the breaking point. That is, the narrative element places into suspension the audience's willing suspension of disbelief, and it forces on the audience a fertile simultaneity of experiences.

Whereas in the novel the narrative voice, no matter how ironic or unreliable, is always in some respects a consoling presence, in the theatre it is, even for the most ripe and experienced public, unorthodox and hence aggressive, assaultive: it destabilizes the genre and the definition of spectatorship. Particularly the narrator who steps from frame to inner play, from third person to first person, from commentator to actor and from actor to character—that narrator fuses spaces, breaks the rules, addles the customer. Whatever the nature of the intrusion, the narrator in a drama radicalizes the receiver's relationship to the text far more profoundly than the narrator of a novel can. The inevitable defamiliarization or alienation effect incites a heightened awareness—an awareness that may be social, political, existential, or artistic. Finally, this cross-gendering always, in some fashion, creates a play within a play that lays bare the play behind the play. The double play results in two concurrent reflexive levels: metatheatre and metanarrative. The device draws attention to the representation and its theatricality, the ludic essence of the theatre, its nature as a stage on which roles are played; and it also draws attention to the presence of narration and its processes.

That everything I have said here not only applies to the contemporary Latin American theatre but can be extracted from its texts is testimony to the astonishing variety and complexity of the narrative resources that the spectator, the reader, and the critic find in the plays of one country after another in Latin America, testimony to the richness and maturity of the theatre all across the continent. But it should surprise no one that Latin America in this respect, as in others, is a participant in a human and artistic scenario without geographical bounds. Theorists like Hayden White have made the claim that the urge to narrate stems from our need to affirm and legitimate ourselves. Narration, whether in a novel, in a historiographic account, in a play, in a critical analysis, or in a ritual, gives voice and shape to the human sociolect. Where there is no narrative there is no history. If in the rise of theory narrative has ruled the roost, it is because, to the modern Western mind, the telling of the story matters more than the story that is told. The lesson to be drawn is that, whatever the form that stories take, the telling of stories saves the human being from the condemnation

of silence, so that as long as there are stories to be told, human creativity will find the means to tell them.

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Notes

1. I would like to thank George Woodyard, who prompted the performance of the rudiments of these ruminations at the Conference on Latin American Theatre Today that he and Vicky Unruh organized at the University of Kansas, April 28-May 2, 1992. Rosalea Postma-Cartar deserves a special word of gratitude for her meticulous attendance to the conferees' every need. To Priscilla Meléndez and Amalia Gladhart I owe thanks for the lengthy conversations that provided me with the opportunity to test and hone my thoughts on this subject.

2. See Cesare Segre for a disciplined though formulaic description, at once Aristotelian and formalist, of theatre in contrast to narrative. He concedes that one approach to the semiotics of theatre considers it an "incontrovertible fact that a theatrical text narrates" (95).

3. Interestingly, no one questions the narrative nature of film (see, e.g., Wilson), while the theatre, to be regarded as narrative, requires a relational or optical shift. In cinema, as in the novel, there is an outside force that commands the gaze: the camera, which functions as silent narrator and sometimes as character. That a human being determines and guides the operations of the camera only injects a further complication into the issue. Where, one might ask, lies the responsibility and the capacity for the close-up of a tortured face or a jar of Taster's Choice? A mechanical instrument is required for both the production and the reproduction of the film. In the theatre, the spectator occupies the plane of the camera or projector. Although audiences are occasionally moved to the bizarre impulse of applauding a void, silicon-coated surface the way they always reward live actors on stage, in the theatre the spectators witness what is ostensibly tantamount to a spontaneous occurrence right before their eyes, while moviegoers know that the spectacle is actually played out behind their backs.

4. Narration as the principal structuring device and glaring metatheatricality, including conversation with individual spectators, have reached even into a frothy drawing-room comedy like María Manuela Reina's *Un hombre de cinco estrellas*, performed on the Madrid stage in 1992.

5. Richardson mentions several interesting instances where the convention of the violating monologue is itself ludically violated as one character overhears another's soliloquy or the soliloquist acknowledges the audience's eavesdropping (199-200).

6. The first lines spoken, in a triple repetition, are "Aplausos," which are requested and presumably received because they are acknowledged and then discussed. The last lines are: "Y el teatro es, por más que lo embelequen, una maroma audaz, un feroz riesgo," after which the two actors proceed to remove their make-up on stage.

7. Though the most striking, flashbacks are not the play's only narrative feature. Deserving of attention are the extraordinarily long stage directions, the monologue that Emilia directs to her "caballero" and that Inés overhears, and the constant review of the past in the sisters' dialogue.

8. For the sake of thoroughness, these are other narrators worthy of note in Carballido's play: the Voceador, a reappearing voice throughout the piece; the Maestra, who enacts one monologue; and

some of the characters themselves as they relate events. A twist is Maximino's telephone response to a narration that the audience does not hear.

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