

A Propos of Ricardo Rojas' *Ollantay*

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Apart from scattered comments in general works¹ and one major article,² the theatre of Ricardo Rojas has not excited much critical comment. This is not entirely surprising, for of his four plays, *Elelín* (1929), *La casa colonial* (1932), *Ollantay* (1939) and *La Salamanca* (1943), all but the third are of relatively minor interest as works of the theatre, although they have a certain importance in relation to Rojas' ideas on the literary expression of *argentinidad*. *Ollantay* is linked thematically and to some extent technically with Rojas' two earlier plays; indeed he wrote on 25 October 1937 to Roberto F. Giusti, when the latter published *La casa colonial* in *Nosotros* that "todas estas piezas forman una serie de dramas históricos que dan nueva expresión a temas de otras obras mías."³ But it would be a mistake to regard the play as belonging to the same aesthetic category as the others. De la Guardia was being no more than critically honest when he wrote of *Elelín*: "Es el claro pensamiento de un poeta. No es, en cambio, la realización escénica firme de un dramaturgo" (p. 381), and of *La casa colonial*: "El cuadro histórico y sus personajes auténticos se imponen y destruyen la ficción escénica y sus pálidas figuras fingidas. La obra pierde su equilibrio y no llega a cumplir con plenitud su misión dramática" (p. 382).

Ollantay on the other hand marks a much more ambitious attempt to break with the realist prose tradition of the Argentine theatre. Harking back deliberately to Lavardén and the tragedies of Juan Cruz Varela, Rojas proposed a return to poetic theatre with a historical setting. The prologue to *Elelín*, his first authentic stage play,⁴ amounts to a manifesto of his intentions. In it, as in the letter to Giusti mentioned above, Rojas voiced a sharp protest not only against commercial theatre of mere entertainment, but also against "los temas gauchescos y arrabaleros" and "la mimodia de tipos

cosmopolitos y de ambiente burgués"⁵ which prevailed without opposition on the Argentine stage at that time. "Nuestro teatro nacional," he asserted roundly, "tan fértil en su democrático realismo, corre peligro de esterilizarse si se reduce a la circundante realidad. . . . Debemos buscar la ampliación de sus temas, el afinamiento de sus formas, la trascendencia de sus ideas" (p. 8). This was his three-fold aim in *Ollantay*.

My object in what follows is to attempt to measure his success. A major difficulty which lies in the way is the absence of any real point of comparison, though this in itself is probably significant. Rojas' example failed to induce fellow-dramatists to follow his lead. The only other attempt of any note in Latin America to produce a poetic tragedy along classical lines is Alfonso Reyes' *Ifigenia cruel* (1924) which antedates the actual composition of *Ollantay*, though not its conception, for that goes back to 1909. Both plays represent attempts to renovate the Latin American theatre, and to extend its range, by turning afresh to the classical Greek theatre, but they have little more in common than this. In particular Rojas in *Ollantay* attempted a far bolder synthesis of American legendary material with the European tradition of verse-tragedy than Reyes' self-conscious hellenism permitted him to aim at. This constitutes the point of departure for a critical consideration of the play. It is in no sense a spontaneous production, an offshoot of sudden inspiration, like so many of the romantic plays to which Rojas specifically related it when he wrote that "la inspiración de que nace es romántica."⁶ We are in the presence of a conscious work of art, arising from premises which were Rojas' basic literary convictions, accompanied by a 6000 word *exégesis* prepared by the dramatist himself.

In *Eurindia* (1922) Rojas had elaborated the mystique, for such it is, of *argentinidad* in which the play is consciously rooted. The key-chapter for our purpose is chapter III, entitled "Indianismo y exotismo." It postulates a pendular movement throughout the course of Argentine history between foreign (European) and national influences. The contemporary phase of Argentine literature and culture was, in Rojas' view, one of "exotismo cosmopolita." This was after all the moment of *lutraísmo* and the *vanguardia* after Borges' return from Europe in the previous year. Güiraldes was still at the stage of *Rosaura* and *Xaimaca*. The theatre was dominated by European models. But Rojas already confidently forecast the resurgence of *americanismo* which was soon to produce *Don Segundo Sombra*, *La vorágine*, *Doña Bárbara* and *indianismo* in the novel, with parallel though less prominent developments in poetry and the theatre. "Ya se sienten los anuncios de una nueva reacción indianista," Rojas wrote with a rather unfortunate choice of adjective (he meant *americanista*), "que no debe ser xenofobia marcial, sino creación pacífica de cultura americana, reivindicación nativista por medio de la inteligencia, conquista espiritual de nuestras ciudades [bastions of foreign influence] por el genio americano. Hacia esta

síntesis nos encaminamos, y ella se consumirá por un renacimiento filosófico y artístico, cuya vecindad ya se advierte."⁷ *Ollantay* was deliberately written to illustrate the possibility of this synthesis. In the *exégesis* Rojas lays conscious stress on its combination of American legend with classical essence, romantic inspiration and modern technique.

Here we may already anticipate a criticism. There is a well-known phrase which asserts that a writer should not explain too much. Detailed comment on a work of art by its creator tends to imply one of two things: either that the work was coldly conceived in accordance with a conscious intellectual framework of prior ideas which the author set himself to underline in imaginative terms, or that it is so esoteric that a key to its meaning is required by the reader. In either case the result is the same: the reader suspects a certain lack of confidence on the part of the author about the ability of the work to speak for itself.

Two further features of the *exégesis* are especially relevant. The first is Rojas' slightly repetitive emphasis on the tragic nature of the drama, and more particularly his attempt to define the *kind* of tragedy which he was endeavoring to write. Here, as ever, he is extremely explicit. He makes four points: *Ollantay* has in common with classical tragedy the presentation of semi-divine personages, kings and heroes, the employment of fatality revealed by oracles, and the theme of man's struggle with destiny. Finally the play contains the unfolding in dramatic terms of a "mystery": what he calls "el mito telúrico del continente." We find ourselves confronted, that is, with a tragedy conceived on the *early* Greek model. This is a point of considerable significance, which the reference to Aeschylus at the end of the *exégesis* appears to confirm.

Secondly, Rojas attaches great importance to a further aspect of *Ollantay*: its "significado actual" (p. 13), its "interés humano" (p. 15), its "sentido ecuménico" [i.e. universality] and its use only of what is *living* in the Greek tragic tradition. All this is summed up towards the end in his assertion that *Ollantay* is not just a historical play but "una tragedia . . . con figuras humanas." It is arguable that a certain discrepancy subsists between the two ideals here enunciated: that of writing an American tragedy on Aeschylean lines and of maintaining the play's human dimension completely intact. Rojas' assertion of his success in harmonizing these two aspirations seems to me not one to be taken on trust. Indeed the critical problem presented by this play is precisely that of assessing the degree to which the dramatist manages to reconcile one aim with the other.

The difficulty emerges clearly once the character of *Ollantay* himself comes to be analyzed. He stands at the center of four conflicts. Two, that of lover against father and that of vassal against overlord, are human. Two others are symbolic. First, that in which *Ollantay* represents, at one historical level, the *runas* (the subject races whom the Incas oppressed), and at a

different historical level, the natives and *criollos* of Latin America under Spanish rule. Second, that in which Ollantay represents the spirit of progress, man's eternal rebellion against immobilistic tradition, the struggle of the future with the past. Already we perceive that the dramatic prerequisites of tragedy are present. Each of these conflict-situations arises, not from the struggle of good with evil, which is the source of melodrama, but from the infinitely more suggestive struggle of good with good, of right with right. They arise, that is, as true tragic situations must, from the perversity of life itself, which it is part of the function of tragedy to explore and to interrogate. Ideally in the process our insight into life's inner processes is extended and deepened.

Here we must enter a qualification. Conflict in tragedy, as in all drama, is indispensable. But the *kind* of conflict which is involved is of greater relevance in tragedy than elsewhere. In *Ollantay* it is important to notice that the conflict arises, as in *Antigone* or Corneille's *Horace*, from the collision of human will with a strong counter-force. If we look afresh at what Rojas has to say in the *exégesis* and *Notas para los intérpretes* about Ollantay, the character, we observe that there is much about his symbolism, but little about him as a man. The dramatist describes him as "cauteloso, leal y franco" and asserts that his psychology is complex. But in what this complexity consists is not convincingly stated. The most striking characteristic, the mainspring of the dramatic situation, is his *will*, which Rojas underlines by the remark in the *Notas* (p. 197): "En función de su voluntad actúan los demás personajes."

The more tragic conflict arises out of the will of the protagonist, the more we approach the concept of *heroic* tragedy. Tragedy, that is, which rests, not on the concept of a tragic flaw or error in the judgment or conduct of the hero, but on human grandeur defeated by the strength of the countervailing force. This has one specific advantage. Resting as it does on a virtually optimistic conception of man, if not of life, it tends to make the process of catharsis, of reconciliation with existence, easier. We leave the theatre inspired by the vision of a nobler being, albeit a martyr. Aeschylus' *Prometheus*, which was obviously a major influence on *Ollantay*, is a case in point. But there are also two disadvantages. First of all, there is the problem of identification. Within certain limits, the greater our sense of identification with a dramatic figure in such a play as this, the greater our possibility of experiencing tragic emotion, and vice-versa. Now, if we are called upon to identify ourselves with a monster of heroism, "un ser titánico," the possibility is diminished. Is this the case here?

To some extent it surely must be. For arising partly out of the predominance of will in Ollantay's character, there is a predominance of his symbolic role over his human one. Can Rojas' attempt (p. 18) to class him with *Oedipus* be accepted? Is he not really much closer to the "semidioses

libertadores," Prometheus, Hercules and Orpheus, mentioned in the previous paragraph? The test is his presentation by Rojas as a dramatic character. Here the position is plain. The tragic conflict is *exterior* to him as a personality. It does not take place to any significant extent within his own mind. There is in him no rending struggle between his love for Coyllur together with his respect and gratitude to the Inca her father on the one hand, and his sense of his own destiny on the other. There is no tragic evolution of character towards insight; no *victory over himself*; no tragic decision. In so far as a decision is made at all, it is made before the play opens. It is perhaps irrelevant to notice that Ollantay has no soliloquies, the usual dramatic expression of mental strife; for Rojas appears to have made a point of avoiding them, probably because he considered them old-fashioned. The trouble is, that nothing takes their place. Ollantay never questions his own *postura espiritual*. Rojas indeed presents his hero's actions as largely pre-determined, fated, basing himself as far as can be seen on a somewhat narrow interpretation of the relation between human beings and fate in Greek tragedy. "La rebelión del titán andino" he writes (p. 35), "es de índole fatal; proviene de la oscura región de las causas, y tal es el fatum del antiguo misterio." Such a predominance of ineluctable fatality, accepted without vacillation by Ollantay, surely limits his spiritual autonomy, and places him at a remove from humanity. He appears as a hero in a tragic situation, rather than as a tragic hero. He symbolizes man in his struggle for progress and liberty, but this does not necessarily make him human.

The second disadvantage is that the more we are called upon to be spectators of a heroic process (which provokes our *admiration*), the less we are able to feel a genuine sense of *pathos*, the tragic emotion itself. Part of the function of tragedy, we have said, is to explore the more perverse and pitiable aspects of the human condition, and part of its aim is to reconcile us to them through a greater awareness of their inevitability and of the resources which the human spirit possess to withstand them. Tragic solutions in drama are seldom completely negative with impunity—this is a problem of Strindberg criticism, for example—but equally they cannot conflict too obviously with a tragic vision of life. A sense of waste, of the unjust fatality of events, of the inherent exposure of humanity to arbitrary suffering, must remain. The combination of Ollantay's unhesitating acceptance of his destiny, with the rather pat announcement in the concluding lines of the impending birth of a new *Ayar* who will complete the work of liberation, leaves us not so much reconciled as satisfied. The problem of the human condition in this case seems not so much explored as resolved, and very neatly too. This is the price paid by Rojas for setting out to express dramatically the predetermined, hopeful postulates of *Eurindia*.

Ollantay, then, is not so much *a man*, as *man*, accepting and even proclaiming (in Act III, scene 7) his tragic destiny. This destiny therefore be-

comes at once willed, on his part, and inevitable, since it symbolizes the ever-renewed heroic assertion of human liberty against oppression, however supernaturally justified. In consequence, much of the authentic human pathos of the play devolves on Coyllur. She stands between Ollantay, heroically resolved to bear his part to the end, and her father, the Inca Yupanqui, who is totally identified with the system which he represents and hence equally inflexible. She is drawn both ways: to Ollantay by love; to her people, her family, her religion and her way of life by training, respect and filial affection. Hers is a genuinely tragic choice. But it is one which Rojas chooses to handle poetically, rather than dramatically. Like her father and her lover she is presented, not as a free agent (even in the most limited sense), but as a being in the grip of cosmic forces, the object of a fate of which she is conscious, but against which she is powerless. Here once more Rojas, in spite of his reiterated aim of writing a modern tragedy, seems curiously reluctant to diverge from his Aeschylean model. Contrasting Coyllur with Euripides' Iphigenia, he emphasizes the "laconismo austero," the "sobriedad" with which he treats his own heroine, who neither repines nor pleads. We may be forgiven for thinking this *sobriedad* excessive. Coyllur does not bear the weight of symbolism carried by either Ollantay or her father. Without detracting from the grandeur of the play, she might have been allowed, in contrast to them, to accumulate more psychological tension. As it is, in the last two scenes of Act II, which are the emotional climax of the play, Coyllur's inner conflict remains under-developed. Though she describes herself as "desgarrada en el combate" and as a "holocausto hecho al destino" her character is basically passive. Even before her submission at the end of the act, her decision is announced in the tree-image of scene 7, with its implication of total attachment to earth, that is, to Ollantay the *hijo de la tierra*:

Mis pies se crispan cual raíces duras
 Que en un páramo se hundén, y retuerzo
 Mi desolado brazo en las culturas
 Como rama azotado por el cierzo.

It again seems difficult to agree with Rojas that her character gains in complexity during Act III. Her rôle reaches its climax in this respect before and during the *rapto*.

The Inca himself is the most hieratic figure in the play. His symbolism is not, like Ollantay's, attributed to him by the dramatist, but inherent in his position as a king with semi-divine attributes. Much more, therefore, what he officially represents limits his development as an individual figure. He personifies the "inflexible orden solar," the static force of the play in contrast to Ollantay's dynamism. On the main issue he cannot vacillate. His main decision, which significantly comes in Act I, not at the end of the play, and

which determines the rest of the action, is not in any real sense a tragic decision:

Ollantay: a tu amor la ley se opone
Debo cumplir la ley.

Once more the conflict is external: principle confronts principle. Two features of the Inca underline this. One is that neither the Inca nor Ollantay understand one another. The Inca stands for an inhuman, supernatural system in which Ollantay sees only tyranny; Ollantay stands for emancipation of the human spirit, in which the Inca sees only rebellion. The conflict is a truly tragic conflict of equally justified inevitable forces. This is what constitutes the enduring worth of the play in a context nearly devoid of real tragedies. The pity is that though we, the audience, realize this, neither the Inca nor Ollantay appear to have more than an inkling of it. They do not recognize in each other human beings rent by a conflict of cosmic forces greater than themselves. They have no pity for each other, and hence we have less pity for them. The second feature relates to the last act. Here catastrophe in a rising crescendo of intense dramatic force overtakes not only Ollantay and Coyllur, but also the Queen, Coyllur's mother, who sees her only child condemned to ignominious exile, and finally the Inca himself, not only, and not so much as a father, but also as the representative of a religious system which embraces the whole of the society over which he presides. For the first time he is faced with the inadequacy of the rigid system which he above all others personifies. He is unable to resolve the problem posed by Anahuarqui:

. . . si dispuso
El Sol, que su progenie el mundo rija,
De parricida yo ante el Sol te acuso
Si osas verter su sangre en la de mi hija . . .

Equally he fails to answer Ollantay's taunt that the Sun itself is a slave and not a God, the very negation of the Inca's whole religious position. What is more intrinsically tragic than Yupanqui's situation in this act? He is betrayed in a sense by the very force on which his whole life, his semi-divinity, his convictions, his survival, rest; yet his final words in the play seem a mere statement of fact, the significance of which is not apparent to himself:

Hoy veo, aquí, transido
Que aquel fatal presagio se ha cumplido.

To conclude: In *Ollantay*, Rojas attempted to give concrete artistic expression to the aspiration enunciated in *Eurindia* and reiterated during the *Homenaje* of 15 November 1923. "Quise poner sobre el individualismo sin patria, sobre el mercantilismo sin bandera, sobre el cosmopolitanismo sin

cultura, sobre el arte sin razón," he declared "un ideal que subordinara nuestro efímero cuerpo de carne a las armonías de una América nueva, con el decoro de su propia estirpe y con los atributos de una cultura integral." The result is a play which stands as a lonely landmark in the Latin American theatre. Lonely, because the direction indicated by Rojas was not the one eventually followed by other writers in the attempt to renovate traditional drama. Indeed the experimentation and the theatre of humor, fantasy and the absurd which have opened new pathways since 1939 have been very far removed from Rojas' anticipation. Lonely also for an intrinsic reason. Rojas' anxiety to translate his ideas into dramatic symbolism played him in some measure false. *Ollantay* survives as a tragedy in a way that Florencio Sánchez' *Barranca abajo*, for example, does not, for all the latter's quality as a play. But it is a tragedy of situation rather than of inner psychological evolution. This aspect of the "realismo de los modelos contemporáneos," the essential "interiority" of modern tragedy is what the contemporary reader misses. Nevertheless, Carlos Solórzano, playwright and historian of the Latin American theatre, recently said:

"El espíritu místico de España y el sentido mítico de nuestros ancestros indios anima la mejor creación artística de estos países y se hace patente en el teatro, en la permanencia del arte popular siempre vigente; no del folklore que es una simple máscara, sino en el verdadero rostro heredado de nuestros aristocráticos abuelos indígenas, que supieron comprender que la verdadera grandeza del espíritu humano está en la meditación y no solamente en la acción. Así, en los más ambiciosos autores dramáticos de estos países se advierte un concentrado tono filosófico, un aliento ceremonial, una preocupación por trascender los hechos mismos del drama y por encontrar un significado a ese devenir. Y todo esto rodeado por un paisaje intransferible, enunciado en un lenguaje que sólo puede ser dictado por los pueblos que logran reconciliar sus orígenes."⁸

If this is true, it cannot be denied that *Ollantay*, which so completely fits this description, occupies a position of some strategic importance in the development of modern drama in Latin America.

Notes

1. E.g., "El teatro de Rojas" in I. Moya, *Ricardo Rojas* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1961) 54-79, and A. de la Guardia, *Ricardo Rojas* (Buenos Aires: Schapiro, 1967), 231-358.

2. A. de la Guardia, "El teatro de Ricardo Rojas," *RUBA*, V^a Época, año II, No. 3 (1959), 377-388. But see on individual plays: R. H. Castagnino, "Antecedentes y elaboración de *Elelín* de Ricardo Rojas," *RULP*, IV (1958), 22-33; J. U. Pickenhayn, "*La Salamanca* de Ricardo Rojas," *Nosotros*, XXII, No. 90 (1943), 307-310; and in particular F. Lizarralde, *El Ollantay argentino* (Buenos Aires: Término, 1953).

3. *Nosotros*, III, No. 4 (1938), 5.

4. I exclude from this category *Oratorio laico*, "poema simbólico con música (Moya, p. 54) staged in 1910.

5. *Elelín* (Buenos Aires: Editorial La Facultad, 1929), prólogo, p. 8.

6. Buenos Aires: Losada, 1st ed., 1939. All subsequent references are to this edition.
7. Ricardo Rojas, *Eurindia* (Buenos Aires: Editorial La Facultad, 1924), p. 19. Cf. his statement in the *exégesis* (p. 13): "Según mi propia doctrina estética de *Eurindia*, yo debía fundir la más autentica sustancia indígena en la más elevada especie teatral creada por los griegos."
8. Carlos Solórzano, reported in *LATR*, 2/1 (Fall 1968), p. 59.