

The Theatre of Julio Ortega Since His “Peruvian Hell”

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Since his debut as a dramatist twenty years ago in the theatre of Universidad Católica in Lima, Julio Ortega has created an extraordinary position for himself in the brotherhood of contemporary Peruvian playwrights. Indeed, throughout the politically tumultuous years following the premiere of *La campana* and *La ley* in 1965, Ortega has been the only one of his peers to write continually for the stage. While it is true that a few *limeños*, such as Alonso Alegría and even Mario Vargas Llosa, have also produced plays during the same time period, no one has cultivated the theatre so assiduously as Ortega. Alegría for example, has finished only one work in Spanish since *El cruce sobre el Niágara* (1969), and Vargas Llosa did not publish his first serious play, *La señorita de Tacna*, until 1981.

Ortega's characteristically brief pieces for the stage, of which there are now 19,¹ form a corpus that is unique for reasons other than the historical, however. Their distinction is ostensibly founded in the various innovations they have helped introduce to Peru's contemporary theatre: the recourse to the brief one-act expression; the incorporation of universal, more sophisticated intellectual themes meant to transcend the *costumbrista*, somewhat simplistic, ones of past works; and the transgression of the usual generic boundaries of the traditional theatre. While this latter contribution does not come solely from Ortega, during the course of the past twenty years he has done more than any other Peruvian to refine and popularize such generic permutations of the short dramatic piece as the *teatro-ensayo* and the *cuento para el teatro*.

Until the beginning of the present decade, Ortega's theatre was generally concerned with the stereotypical introspective being awed by the intellectual incongruencies of daily existence and passive in even his own defense. As we noted more than fifteen years ago, the principal theme in Ortega's early works was man's passive nature before the problems he faced in improving his existence.² That early character was doomed to a tragic existence because he could bear neither passive nor passionate resistance to the problems he faced.

La ley is a good example of this human inanimateness, this lack of *voluntad*, as well as a clear manifestation of Ortega's secondary thematic interest in many of those early pieces: the absurdity of official institutions and the ridiculous idea, for him, that the ideal state could exist. Finally, as already intimated, his works through the 1970's were patently universal, whether penned in Peru or not. They have only occasional touches of Ortega's personal and profound "peruanidad," which in his case may be defined as pride of cultural identity tempered by a concomitant preoccupation with social reality in Peru.

In addition to these structural features and the semantic universality with which we characterize Ortega's theatre, the past five to eight years have witnessed a meaningful shift in the semantic basis of his theatre production. This shift is first apparent in *Infierno peruano* (1980), which was published a few years after Ortega's self exile from Peru and the beginning of his professorship at the University of Texas at Austin. This is the first of Ortega's plays in which the concern with the individual is overshadowed by a patent concern for the body politic of Peru.

Born of the upheavals produced by the "revolución peruana" of the 1970's, *Infierno peruano* emphasizes the events of 1977, when Peru's socialist hopefuls saw General Leónidas Rivera deposed from the military junta. The loss was a significant, albeit it an ironic one for the likes of Ortega because the general had been their most forceful spokesman against military excesses in the government. With Rivera gone, we know, the egocentrics that remained easily exercised dictatorial control of the country.

To repeat the cliché, *Infierno peruano* was not written overnight; it was composed after Ortega had written a number of newspaper articles on the "revolución" and then after a number of these were appended as "Crónica de condiciones y contradicciones," to his *La Cultura Peruana*, published by Fondo de Cultura Económica in 1978. The principal portion of this book is a compilation of critical essays on the titular theme that Ortega had published in Lima's *Correo* from September 1974 to March 1976, when he was a journalist for that newspaper. Most deal with the contributions of Inca Garcilaso, Cieza, and Caviedes as primordial critics of Peru's fundamental cultural heritage. It is hardly surprising that the basic concerns of these Colonial reformers are philosophically akin to those of Ortega, or any other writer/reformer aware of the social, political, and cultural barriers and divisions that have characterized Peru since the Conquest. In a broad sense, the most significant of these for Ortega is the schism between the nation's cultural legacy and sociopolitical ambitions alien to that legacy.

In his essay ("Crónica de condiciones y contradicciones") and later in his essay for the stage (*Infierno peruano*) Ortega clearly suggests the philosophical bond between him and his Colonial predecessors as he chronicles the events leading to and following the exile of General Leónidas Rivera. Ortega's careful record of the names of the more important participants, daily events significant to the intellectual community and to the public at large (such as acts of terrorism), and of the profound impression that the revolutionary fervor produced in Lima and in the rest of the nation constitute a valuable testimony of the sociological, political, and cultural impact of the revolution. Most importantly, in both works he brings to light the ever-widening gap

between those who constitute the country and those who control the constituents.

As Heidrun Adler aptly observed in 1981: "Julio Ortega's . . . *Infierno peruano* is an essay, a philosophical treatise that describes precisely the Peruvian situation from 1968 to 1980."³ In its fourteen scenes (there is no plot), she goes on:

. . . the elements of the Peruvian crisis are satirically characterized and include: General Morales Bermúdez, taken to court for having betrayed his people; the peasants, trying to organize themselves; the messianic appearance of Saturnino Huillca, traditional voice of the indigenous need to organize; the parties in the electoral circus haggling over power like so many merchants in the name of parliamentary democracy; the rich man and the pauper; the intellectuals; the nightmare of counterrevolution; hopes and fears; pictures of a grotesque carnival. (54)

We would add only that while each scene may be viewed as an anecdotal caricature of the incident at hand, by the end of the work all scenes are masterfully orchestrated into a thematic whole. The final message of *Infierno peruano*, as expressed by Huillca, is that the Peruvian revolution must be a cultural struggle for popular autonomy and authority and that resistance to the imposition of any alien will is indispensable.

Clearly, it is important for Ortega that this message come from an Indian leader who is at once the spokesman of the masses today and the voice of the mythical consciousness of Indigenous Peru. Huillca's is the only voice of authority for the Indian masses in the play and looms in stark contrast to the voices of the non-Indians, which merely spew hollow demands for petty concerns. As such, Huillca's message is assurance to his sympathizers that any new change proposed for the common good will be unacceptable if the populace is denied any thing short of full participation, including *voz* and *voto*, in determining the destiny of the nation. Thus while Huillca is an allegorical link between the past and present, he is also a forceful reminder that the sociopolitical crisis in Peru, as elsewhere in Latin America, stems from the imitation and the integration of the foreign cultures with the indigenous, but without real concern for the latter.

Balada de la dirección correcta,⁴ published two years after *Infierno peruano*, continues the first play's thematic plea for popular resistance to the imposition of incompatible cultural values. *Balada* . . . is not a mere recasting of its immediate predecessor, however. Its distinctive features include a more realistic play action and an easy-to-follow plot, a unified structure, and an emphatic insistence that the plea for cultural autonomy and authority is best served by peaceful, spiritual resistance than by any physically violent reaction.

This is an urban play based on the experience of those *provincianos* who have come to the urban center with the hope of finding social stability and identity. The city is a hostile environment for them, as Ortega shows, and their expectations quickly fade as they are caught up in the daily mundane struggle with the government officials. The essential conflict is a symbolic one

dramatized by the searches for certain streets and carried out by several pairs of these so-called "recién bajados." The streets, where their friends and family members live and await the newly arrived, are not to be found and all of the pairs eventually return to the busy plaza (the stage). They have searched in vain because the government officials are continually changing the street signs in order to maintain the *provincianos*, symbolically the national indigenous population, as a displaced, amorphous mass. Despite such deceptive practices, as well as the veiled threats and false promises the government resorts to in an effort to control them, the people persist in their search and resist, peacefully, the impositions of the officials' will. At first only a symbolic action, the *provincianos'* resistance finally becomes a joyous victory when, with the sheer weight of their ever-increasing number, they easily invade, take over, and give their own name to a street. At the insistence of one of their own, the *provincianos* even name themselves business *socios* and begin planning their own, much brighter future.

For some *Balada . . .* may seem only a logical extension of the revolutionary message of its predecessor. There is no denial that the thematic intent of both plays is to defend the indigenous masses as the intended overseers of their own destiny and, secondly, to champion resistance to governmental disregard for the popular will. Beyond these shared interests, however, the works are substantially different. The most significant of these differences is that *Balada . . .* is totally devoted to the plight of the Indian, whereas only a limited portion of *Infierno peruano* specifically deals with his problem. In the repertory of contemporary Peruvian theatre, *Balada . . .* is also unique because it restricts its concern to the phenomenon of the "recién bajado," the Andean who has abandoned the sierra and come to the larger coastal city, usually Lima. Finally, that Ortega has chosen to impugn the government and its treatment of the *serrano* come to the city and that he defends the *serrano* in his struggle against the coastal urban environment, be it social or political, are the two features that particularly distinguish *Balada . . .*

Ortega's sympathetic proposals clearly oppose the traditional proposals for resolving the conflict between the Andean indigenous elements and those who are neither Andean nor in tune with the cultural indigenous heritage of the country. While most observers of this phenomenon, for example, maintain that there is hope for integrating the Indian into the national mainstream, Ortega views the problem quite differently, in a truly revolutionary fashion. He agrees that there is hope of unifying the nation, but he insists that the present dichotomy between the two can be resolved only when the Indian regains his cultural authority and autonomy and then chooses to integrate non-Indian elements into his world. When considered from Ortega's representative point of view, then, *Balada . . .* posits the intriguing suggestion that, when the indigenous masses are able to exercise their cultural authority, the non-Indian will no longer be able to isolate himself from the rest of the nation.

The most popular of Ortega's recent stage pieces may well turn out to be "El lugar del hombre en la cola."⁵ Since the play omits specific reference to Peru, there is also good reason to foretell its success throughout Hispanic America. Unlike the preceding plays, "El lugar . . ." is bereft of any mention of the indigenous concerns and its language, characters, and the setting are

universal. The briefest of the plays Ortega has written since 1980, "El lugar . . ." also seems particularly promising due to the immediacy of its essential dramatic conflict, the spontaneous wit of the dialogue, and its well paced play action. In addition, it offers yet another perspective of Ortega's recent thematic concern with the body politic. In this case the underlying inspiration is still Ortega's preoccupation with alienation of the social mass by a capricious and self-serving government, but his surface intent, his apparent inspiration, is to dramatize his deep-seated faith in the individual. Specifically, this work dramatizes Ortega's insistence that individuals are capable of instigating resistance to governmental imposition and that one's resistance, although meager at first, can eventually lead to the re-establishment of popular autonomy.

The dramatic situation of "El lugar del hombre en la cola" is one we all may have experienced to some extent. Life in the city is regimented by the lines its citizens must wait in to engage in practically every activity, be it to catch a bus or pay a fine. In what amounts to a dramatic prologue to the main action, X begins the day wondering about his dream in which he was to decide whether to aid people as individuals or as members of a small group. And just as the danger the people faced in the dream is not yet identified, we are not yet sure of X's role because he admits assuming different identities when he is in crowds. The play action begins when X enters the busy street to take his usual bus. When he gently insists that Y's line for bus 36 is in the place of X's line for bus 35, Y accuses X of subverting the social order and sowing doubt in Y's mind, to name a few of the charges. Their dispute leads to the inclusion of even more intrusive and egocentric folk, the disclosure of even more bizarre types of lines one must stand in, arrest, and yet another line at the commissary to await judgment for being ignorant of the "Código de Colas" and causing confusion. As they discuss their future, Y decides to flee to improve his lot despite X's warning that there is no real physical escape. According to X, their crisis is representative of the universal crisis, which he defines as the dominance of the individual by a government in chaos. Furthermore, X believes, the crisis can be survived only if the individual does not surrender to governmental whim and returns to the basic and traditional human values. After Y's aborted flight and subsequent admission that there is no real escape, he agrees with X that man's only hope is individual resistance to government impositions. Even if they must sacrifice their social position and live in a primitive state, X and Y determine to protect their individuality and to help end the crisis. Now joined by a woman in middle-class jogging clothes, they leave the commissary and hasten to their task. One's last thought is of the prologue and the realization that X now knows that his role in society is to lead, to aid people individually and in groups as they face the previously unnamed danger, which he and we now know to be the crisis.

This brief overview of the principal action of "El lugar . . ." is an unfair one, perhaps, because it gives no real clue to the play's sense of urgency nor its use of humor. The latter, in fact, is Ortega's indispensable linguistic tool for characterizing the state of society wrought by government and, in the main, is based on the semantic values he assigns the word "colas." While a character is forced to endure a variety of "colas," to catch a bus for example, he is also

aware that some "colas" are superior because there is a kind of pecking order of "colas" based on their length and social standing. The word, therefore, can have one or more values: it can be the bus line or the social activity, school, neighborhood and house one lives in, or the country club or church one belongs to. As one may expect, Ortega's constant play on the word produces a large number of witticisms. In addition to their value for providing numerous moments of comic relief, his verbal humorisms also support the play's thematic concern with the loss of individuality, including one's language values, to government whim. As a collective example, one may be accused of being an "hijo de mala cola," since there is a "carácter genérico de la cola, la congénita colidad humana, como si dijéramos." According to one "cronista de sus variedades," there is even an official "Museo de la Cola" where "colas sospechosas" are publicly exhibited for interested "coleros." In addition to these linguistic gems, Ortega resorts to other subtle and not so subtle features to weave the thematic concern, and its urgency, into the action and dialogue. Granted, the jogging shoes at the end are not-so-subtle, but they are still an effective and humorous reminder of the need for immediate resistance. More subtle reminders include big-city noise and hustle-bustle, like that in the Policy Commissary, to heighten the tension and frustration of X and Y in their struggle with ubiquitous city pressures and tension; Y's inability to escape; X and Y's resolve to return to a primitive form of survival in the desert in an effort to preserve their individuality; and, as final example, the woman's fearful plea to join them in their efforts. With the final curtain the humorous effects of "El lugar del hombre en la cola" may be somewhat subdued, but the play's urgent plea for regaining popular autonomy is steadfastly evident. Moreover, this is an optimistic plea, one to which we can all respond.

To conclude, Ortega's drama since the late 1970's has been, primarily, a socialistic rejection of imported sociopolitical systems that impose class/caste barriers in Peru. As an intellectual and the only Peruvian dramatist committed to the principle of restoring popular autonomy, however, Ortega does not propose a profoundly radical or subversive philosophy. He does encourage, on the other hand, an optimistic faith in man's ability to unite and to resist, in a non-violent fashion, those forces that oppress and abrogate his individuality. To this end, *Infierno peruano* and *Balada . . .* are specifically inspired by Ortega's purview of the Peruvian experience of the past twenty years and by his belief that any resolution of the nation's present dilemma lies in its most significant cultural legacy—autonomous authority. This belief, along with Ortega's abiding understanding and faith in the Peruvian people, is the basis of the thematic optimism in these three plays. From a literary perspective, Ortega's philosophical populism is again a significant consideration because it also justifies and explains such devices as the use of a large number of people on stage. The crowds are indispensable to the dramatic atmosphere and to the successful presentation of the plays' social thesis. Without crowds, for example, Ortega would not have been able to dramatize effectively the hope for popular resistance of governmental authority, the severity of class/caste subjugation by the oligarchy, or, within a more specific confine, the *limeño's* need to incorporate the *serranos* as a source of political power and as a living

reminder of the national cultural legacy. Ortega's faithful, joyful embrace of the popular mass is likewise essential to the structure of the three plays. It is no coincidence, for instance, that in each work the teeming plaza/street is the focal point of activity and dramatic complication, that the crowd is the key to the dramatic resolution, or even that the final, almost festive mood is dependent on the people's optimistic resolve to resist imposed governmental chaos.

Thus it is that after twenty years as a dramatist, Julio Ortega continues to reflect the soul of man as he contends with himself and with his society. Even after two decades, however, Ortega's theatre has not become a static expression condemned by philosophical or artistic stagnation. These three plays are proof of the dynamic imagination, power of reason, and the sense of personal involvement that have come to characterize Ortega's entire literary production, particularly his theatre. *Infierno peruano*, *Balada de la dirección correcta* and "El lugar del hombre en la cola" also merit special attention at this time because they show Ortega to be the only contemporary Peruvian dramatist whose works reveal a real concern with the cultural dilemma and the political future of that country.

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Notes

1. This figure is based on the works published and those still in manuscript form. At least one of the latter is still in the stage of final revision. Tentatively titled "Melodrama" (1984), this six-page work, Ortega's fourth since 1980, is not discussed herein because it is still undergoing a final revision. Departing from the theme of the plays discussed in this paper, it is set in Madrid and concerns the plight of a man caught up in a domestic dilemma.

2. RJM, "The Theatre of Julio Ortega," *LATR* 6/1 (Fall 1972): 50.

3. Heidrun Adler, "Julio Ortega's Peruvian Inferno," *LATR* 15/1 (Fall 1981): 54.

4. *Conjunto* 53 (1982): 50-71.

5. Ms., 1984.