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NAMING AND NAMELESSNESS IN JOSE RUIBAL'S *LA MAQUINA DE PEDIR*

Wayne H. Finke

During the nearly forty-year regime of Generalísimo Francisco Franco, Spain's literary production entered a period of semi-dormancy occasioned by severe limitations of censorship and repression of creative energies, particularly in the area of the theater.¹ While theaters, especially in Madrid, were economically solvent and successful, the dramatic offerings presented onstage in the main afforded audiences inoffensive fare of bourgeois superficiality with scant, or virtually no probing of the complex realities of post-Civil War Spain.² Writers who remained in Spain following the devastation were constrained to a depiction of the anodyne situations of urban life, while those who accepted forced, or self-imposed exile, found limited access in foreign lands—even in Latin America—for the staging of their productions. While repertory theaters were to be found in major capitals like Buenos Aires, Santiago and Havana, impresarios were more interested in mounting productions of the classics or translations of tested European dramatists than in offering their audiences the novel creations of a new generation of Spanish playwrights.

One writer whose career has suffered the vicissitudes of mid-twentieth century Spanish history is José Ruibal. A native of Pontevedra (Galicia), Ruibal left Spain after the holocaust and took up residence in Latin America, where he pursued a career in journalism.³ While his job lay in writing articles of daily relevance, his interest in literature and his facility with language inevitably led him to write works of fiction. His first play, *La ciencia del birlibirloque*, was written in 1956 in Argentina, based on an old Gallician folk tale. In 1962 his play *El asno* was completed; it represents an advance in the dramatist's development in its probing the question of national power and under-developed nations.⁴ The ass in this work is an electronic donkey capable of carrying out numerous domestic chores, from cooking to performing cosmetic surgery and printing false documents.

Ruibal's most dazzling creation is titled *La máquina de pedir*, written in 1969.⁵ This "absurdist" play depicts a world far more cosmopolitan and international than the merely local, or Spanish reality, yet at the same time portrays the materialistic macrocosm of which Spanish reality is but a partial reflection. Humans, humanoids and animals commingle on stage and interact with each other in a setting replete with the trappings of ultra-modern technologized existence, a veritable cornucopia of leisure items strewn across the stage.

The setting itself merits our attention because of its highly original elements: we find ourselves at a seaside resort oasis, reminiscent of Agadir, Acapulco or Eilat. At center stage stands an enormous fish tank in which one of the protagonists floats. To the right and left are large television screens on which world events are projected, and from which characters emerge to participate directly in the action of the play.

Occupying this scene are the two protagonists, the Dama (or Lady) and the Pulpo (or Octopus), her husband. The reader of this play perceives immediately that there are only generic names for all characters, with no indication of any Christian names or surnames. As Ruibal in his preface stresses regarding characters (and, for that matter, naming):

We do not use pure characters, nor those from the telephone directory nor characters that one can find on the street. On the street one can find a quixotic character, but never a Don Quixote.⁶

Hence, specific given names are eschewed, and designative terms are derived from some aspect of the physical nature of the characters. The Dama is a large, stunning woman with curved toenails so long that

they can be, and indeed are, periodically “played” or bowed by her two servants, a pair of almost mechanical dwarfs of Oriental features. Her husband, the Pulpo, represents an industrial magnate whose empire constitutes an enormous and ever-growing fleet of oil tankers. In him one can infer the recollection of an Onassis or Niarkos, of maritime shipping fame, yet here in the world of the topsy-turvy it is the husband who literally gives birth to offspring, the baby “tankettes” which slide down the conveyor belt from his fish tank to the sea, growing as they advance and receiving the proverbial champagne baptism as they enter the waters of the sea.

This extraordinary marriage has arisen from the Dama’s desire to eliminate poverty from her unspecified land. To achieve this goal, she employed the services of a matrimonial agency, which was able to furnish her with a candidate of such limitless wealth that the thirty million poor of her homeland could be erased. However, the result has not been welcomed by these paupers whom her marriage has transformed into the rich. This now-moneyed class is bored, sated and furious with its benefactor, as its members attempt to cast off their \$50 and \$100 bills but only succeed in ripping them like flesh from their bodies. The wealthy likewise find themselves in a state of consternation, as they desperately seek out the few remaining paupers to give them alms, only to discover to their horror that the pages of their dictionaries containing the words “pauper,” “poor” and “poverty” have all been ripped out. In their despair the rich invade Hell and attempt to capitalize on its investment possibilities by erecting signs: “Vacation in Hell: a guaranteed climate,” “Whites Only,” and “Private Property,” but are repulsed by the resident devils.

In this mythical country wracked by sudden economic reversal, the leader of the government, named El Consejero Delegado (the Delegate Counselor), appeals for a solution to this calamity. Advisors, in the form of ambulatory computers with stools attached to their rears, sit down to deliberate. Following debate between dimboxes and war hawks they can only come up with the traditional solution of armament and warfare. Only through the intervention of an intruder and his trained parrot is the ideal solution discovered: a begging machine created by technology, of feminine form, that will provoke instant charity. The assembly lines gear up, producing models of the begging machine, and as under-developed nations of the world become flooded with them, the poor are displaced by these technological substitutes. Seeking reprisal, great hordes of the poor stream from the TV screens and, dressed as guerrillas, seek the Dama in order to kill her for the heinous crime of upsetting world economic order.

On the other TV screen the Consejero Delegado announces the phenomenal success of the invention, but immediately suffers a heart attack upon learning that the Japanese have marketed an improved, miniaturized model. As a result of this death, the rich of the world arrive to congratulate the Pulpo for the elimination of poverty and offer him the vacant post of leader of his nation.

A celebratory party is held, but as the festivities proceed, the Dama discovers that the world markets are saturated with begging machines and faints. A horde of criminals invades the scene and wrathfully kill, draw and quarter the Dama. The computer humanoids work feverishly to devise a solution, and from the remains of the Dama they invent a new model of the begging machine, a replica of the Dama constructed of stainless steel, with a war helmet and machine guns for breasts. They announce that this creation will eliminate the real criminals of the world who simply cannot compete with technology: indeed, these thieves, unable to cope, commit mass suicide.

As copies of the improved model emerge from the assembly line, the prototype orders the revelers to celebrate this advent. The two Oriental dwarfs place on the Octopus yet another invention, the brassiere of desires; the Pulpo, acceding to his innermost desires, begins to give forth a continuous stream of new “tankettes.” The party grows in frenetic activity, as the models of the robbing machine swamp the world to complete the task of eliminating the traditional criminal element of society.

José Ruibal's dramatic tour-de-force depicts a modern world based on technology carried to an extreme, wherein the human factor ceases to hold any importance. His main objectives of attack on this technoworld are the hypocrisy of charity and the mechanization of modern life, as Wellwarth has demonstrated.⁷ For the dramatist, wealth and poverty are merely artificial differentiations easily eliminatable. Criticism of the mechanization of life is perceived in both the myriad numbers of apparatus and devices mentioned and the human examples, slaves to this technology: newscasters, guided (or mis-guided) presidential advisors, members of the CIA, Pentagon officers, among others.

In this machine-oriented world where technological advancement is the most important product, human beings cease to hold center stage. Mankind through its ingenuity and resourcefulness has literally "thought" itself out of the picture, as machines, apparatus and gadgets take over the daily activity of life. As the spectator (or reader) observes at the conclusion of *La máquina de pedir*, man is left to entertain himself in a post-Edenic paradise of pleasure, and of course, irrevocable boredom: he merely sits at home, dedicated to the pursuit of "killing time," as his latest model machine departs each day to perform the habitual activity of work.

As life becomes mechanized, automated, human existence proceeds to lose its element of individuality: man becomes de-personalized, un-individualized, as models of machines slide down the conveyor belt, all equal, standardized. Thus names — those articulations serving to differentiate one human being from another — also lose their habitual function and importance, as characters are simply called, or addressed, by some quality of their generic aspect, physical form or functional activity:

Lady
Octopus
Dwarf
Reporter
Delegate Counselor
Guerrilla
Poor
Rich
Thieves.

Nomination exists thus on a most basic level: human identity simply becomes "thingness," like any other aspect of a mechanical world. Rather than stressing characters' individuality, Ruibal depicts the infinite amorphous hordes of beings like the poor, the rich and the criminals, on one hand, and simple generic entities (protagonists) on the other. As we progress towards ever-increasing mechanality in the course of the play, non-nameness becomes the norm of the day. Perhaps the only "thing" Ruibal omits is the characters' serial number, but we must remember that Ruibal, a writer by trade and by choice, forges his characters on the anvil of human language, not mathematical language. Nameless characters, thus, in the play in question, serve to connote the de-personalization pattern of appellation of an existence based on technology, conveyed through a repertory of things that constitute names.

NOTES

- ¹ George Wellwarth, *The Theater of Protest and Paradox*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York UP, 1971) 360. See also his *The New Wave Spanish Drama* (New York: New York UP, 1970) xi–xii. Ruibal himself discusses the Franco period on drama: "...la era de Franco bien podría tomarse como la cuarentena dorada del teatro español. Gracias a su persistencia consiguió que un puñado de autores se mantuvieran en un estado nonato, madurando sus obras por tiempo cuaternario." José Ruibal, *El hombre y la mosca* (Madrid: Ed. Fundamentos, 1977) 13–14.
- ² George Wellwarth, *Spanish Underground Theater* (University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 1972) 21–37.
- ³ Wellwarth, *Spanish Underground Theater* 24. See also Angel Berenguer, "El hombre y la mosca de José Ruibal: Un análisis apasionado del poder," in Ruibal, *El hombre y las mosca* 158–159.
- ⁴ Wellwarth, *Spanish Underground Theater* 28; Berenguer 162.
- ⁵ José Ruibal, *La máquina de pedir* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1970). Particularly illuminating are Ruibal's own views on theater in general and on his own works in particular, contained in José Ruibal, *Teatro sobre teatro* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1977) 14–47. Anje C. Van Der Naald, *Nuevas tendencias en el teatro español* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1981) offers not only a brief biography of Ruibal, but undertakes an examination and evaluation of his dramatic production. See especially pp. 131–134. See also the recent article by Sabas Martín, "José Ruibal: El teatro como experiencia radical," *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, num. 449 (Nov. 1987): 144–148.
- ⁶ Ruibal, *La máquina de pedir* 6.
- ⁷ Wellwarth, *Spanish Underground Theater* 30.