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Hegemony in *El Señor Presidente*: A Psychoanalytic Perspective

El Señor Presidente is primarily a novel about domination, its implications in the transmission of values, codes of behavior and conditions for survival. According to Weinstein and Platt, the stability of the individual depends on the stability of the state: the extent to which the individual can integrate id, ego and superego processes depends on the character of the society.[1] In Asturias' fictional system, the hegemonic state polarizes the society, pitting those with the president against those opposed to him. The condition which the dictatorship fosters is so pervasive, any form of opposition is virtually eliminated. The society becomes a nightmarish configuration involving terror, lies, death and disgust, a gestalt which reaches into the human psyche itself. Hegemony cannot be understood as partial influence in a society, it must be acknowledged as total; thus it intends a whole body of practices and expectations; it dictates the ordinary man's understanding of the nature of man and the world.[2] In the novel, Asturias unfolds a culture of domination, a complex pattern of structures of human interaction and language. He establishes a tension between the modes of repression and the need to break from them, a tension which becomes the controlling form of the narrative.

The pitiful character, El Pelele, who emerges from the Dantean pit of *pordioseros* in the first chapter, grotesquely prefigures each of the major characters in the novel. His condition is symptomatic of them all; his frenzied flight parallels theirs.[3] Close analysis reveals the effects of the culture of domination on this character and, therefore, the individual in this society. Weinstein and Platt argue that "the fundamental problem is not drive expression from within (Freud's primary concern) but assault on the personality from without; and the struggle at this level is not against onerous reality but against the loss of reality, or against the loss of a sense of integration with the world."[4] El Pelele represents this struggle for survival; his effort to escape the deadly structures which act upon him provides the model of enclosure and escape which underlies this novel.

Asturias establishes his relentless perspective of humanity in the first chapter. He assaults the reader's sensibilities by depicting the oppressive existence of the *pordioseros* who claw each other like caged rats:

> La noche los reunía al mismo tiempo que las estrellas. Se juntaban a dormir en El Portal del Señor sin más lazo común que la miseria, maldiciendo uno de otros, insultándose a regañadientes con tirria de enemigos que se buscan pleito, riñendo muchas veces a codazos y algunos con tierra y todo, revolcones en los que, trás escupirse, rabiosos, se mordían.[5]

These beggars spit, insult, elbow, bite and fight one another in the effort to horde whatever disgusting scraps they consider theirs. They insulate and alienate themselves rather than identify with each other. Out of this fear, neurosis and terror emerges El Pelele, a figure driven to the verge of physical and mental collapse by the taunts of his fellow beggars. They scream "madre" and El Pelele flies into uncontrollable frenzy.[6] He finds no peace from their constant assault.

Significantly, one more verbal assault occasions El Pelele's murder of El Coronel José Parrales Sonriente and accounts for his flight through the city. Not only does he flee out of fear of reprisal but also from some internal emotion triggered by the word "madre." The passage below, which closes the first chapter, illustrates El Pelele's instinctual behavior, a paroxism of violence that results in death for the Coronel and which ultimately will mean his own life:

> El bulto se detuvo—la risa le entorchaba la cara—acercándose al idiota de puntapié y, en son de broma le gritó:
> —¡Madre!
> No dijo más. Arrancado del suelo por el grito, El Pelele se le fue encima y, sin darle tiempo a que hiciera uso de sus armas, le enterró los dedos en los ojos, le hizo pedazos la nariz a dentelladas y le golpeó las partes con las rodillas hasta dejarlo inerte.
> . . . El Pelele escapó por las calles en tinieblas enloquecido bajo la acción de espantoso paroxismo. (p. 18)

El Pelele does not act; he reacts. He attacks not a person, but a voice which tortures him. The simple sentence, "no dijo más", is significant here for El Coronel will speak no more. The fact that he has died is secondary to his silence. The idiot's escape has nothing to do with remorse, but with irrational fear which manipulates yet remains "espantoso" or elusivė as a ghost.

El Pelele may not understand what he runs away from, but he does run in search of something, his mother. The image of flight is regressive, an attempt to return to the security of the womb: "El Pelele huyó por las calles intestinales, estrechas y retorcidas de los suburbios de la ciudad." (p. 18)

He continues his quest half in reality, half in dream. He raises his hands to fight objects which in reality are inanimate, but in his perception they present a clear danger: "De repente se paraba, con las manos sobre la cara, defendiéndose de los postes del telégrafo pero al cerciorarse de que los palos eran inofensivos se carcajeaba y seguía adelante." (p. 19) He is compared to a prisoner who tries to escape from a prison of no walls "como el que escapa de una prisión cuyos muros de niebla a más correr, más se alejan." (p. 19) The futility of his flight is caught in this image; his prison is psychological, his search for peace a mental return to "Mother".

This regressive behavior points to a personality which has lost the ability to integrate completely with the world. According to Freud, man's ties to the external world lie in his helplessness which involves the control of anxiety and the mastery of stimuli through the mediating power and the mastery of stimuli through the mediating power of adult figures. According to his theory, anxiety is always linked to birth, the original traumatic event. Through maturation the individual learns to adapt, to make the anxious condition remote from reality. Yet, "the gradual ability to distinguish present (actual) danger from potential danger and situations of danger from traumatic situations is a measure of the maturity of reality testing; failure to make such distinctions is a sign of regression."[7] El Pelele is unable to make these distinctions, hence his compulsion to return to "Mother". Freud's theory helps us understand the ramifications of El Pelele's flight: his is not an escape from authority and punishment but an instinctual movement toward security.

Men struggle to retain a sense of control over their lives and in particularly intolerable situations the ego finds a precarious stability in submission. However, "persistent threats from the external world, particularly when it becomes clear that the ego by its own efforts cannot master these threats, will force the regression of drives to pregenital states and the regression of ego and superego functions as well."[8] When disintegration and regression occur, the complex and delicate interplay of id, ego and superego processes break down; the organization of the psyche reverts to lower levels. At this point behavior and thought become more characteristic of primary process thinking, where the pleasure principle, not the reality principle, holds sway.[9] This mode of behavior is characterized by a lack of logic, by emotionalism and the incorporation of contradictory material through the mechanisms of condensation, displacement and symbolization.

Anna Freud offers important distinctions between the different forms of regression: temporal, topographical and formal. The temporal regression occurs in aim-directed impulses, object representations and fantasy content. The topographical regression manifests itself in terms of hallucinatory wish fulfillments and the formal in terms of primitive methods of expression.[10] Her distinctions are useful when considering the case of El Pelele who clearly acts instinctively, whose behavior is not rational and who engages in hallucinatory wish fulfillments.

Midway between dream and reality, El Pelele conjures up a vision of his mother through contradictory images and condenses them into a symbol of "alivio y socorro." The person who triggers his vision, like Don Quijote's Dulcinea, is of low class. She is a cock-fighter's woman: "hembra de aquel cualquiera y mártir del crío que nació." (p. 23) Yet El Pelele is arrested by her movement and sound, "viento y hojas." He runs to her with tears in his eyes and she is transformed into the object of his quest:

> En el pecho maternal se alivió. Las entrañas de la que le había dado el ser absorbieron como papel secante el dolor de sus heridas. ¡Qué hondo refugio imperturable! ¡Qué nutrido afecto! ¡Azucenita! ¡Azucenota! ¡Cariñeteando! ¡Cariñeteando!" (p. 23)

In this fantasy he speaks without speaking. The primal guilt is voiced through his impassioned wish for forgiveness: "¡Perdón, Nañola, perdón!" The vision replies, mirroring his supplication, "¡Perdón, hijo, perdón!" Guilt unites them. Again he complains: "Nañola, me duele el alma";

she returns, "Hijo, me duele el alma!" (p. 23) Son and mother have become one. Their exchange culminates in an image which incorporates good and evil into one; innocence and guilt, anxiety and peace are inseparable:

> Soy la Manzana-Rosa del Ave del Paraíso, soy la vida, la mitad de mi cuerpo es mentira y la mitad es verdad; soy rosa y soy manzana, doy a todo un ojo de vidrio y un ojo de verdad: ¡los que ven con mi ojo de vidrio ven porque sueñan, los que ven con mi ojo de verdad ven porque miran! Soy la vida, la Manzana-Rosa del Ave del Paraíso; soy la mentira de todas las cosas reales, la realidad de todas las ficciones. (p. 24)

The image conveys a duality of perception thereby incorporating the ability to simultaneously see evil along with beauty. This ability alone constitutes a possible momentary escape from the surrounding horror.

El Pelele is able to find "madre" in this fashion. His regression is a mode of survival and Freudian theory illuminates the elements of his condition. Ultimately, El Pelele (as all the major characters in the novel) cannot escape his reality; he ironically returns to El Portal del Señor where he is assassinated. Other characters in the novel also seek escape through the process of projecting themselves out of their temporal situation and into a situation from the past. Their condition is a type of regression, though not one which can be satisfactorily articulated through classic regression theory.

The experience of Fedina Rodas parallels that of El Pelele as she attempts to project herself outside of the encompassing cell into the security of her home: "Reanimada, hizo esfuerzos para pensarse libre y lo consiguió. Vióse en su casa, entre sus cosas y sus conocidos." (p. 111) Similarly, in his dungeon, Cara de Angel transports himself back with Camila; he feels her body next to his. The tactile sensation is vivid but fleeting; like El Pelele he experiences only temporary escape. These are two examples of Asturias' use of the enclosure/escape model which he establishes in the beginning chapters about El Pelele. Through the repetition of this model Asturias conveys the disorientation of his characters.

In *El Señor Presidente*, repetition is structurally important in rendering the disintegrated personality. Asturias speaks of his particular technique in the following statement:

> Toda novela es por excelencia acción, movimiento, vida y, al mismo tiempo, es como la lente que recoge alrededor del hecho central todos aquellos elementos que se entrecruzan siempre que influyan en el lector para crearle la sugerencia de la verdadera vida.[11]

The "hecho central" of this novel is the dictatorship. The actions and movement he describes are both temporal and psychological. His repetitions constitute a linguistic montage which through juxtaposition and contrast create the illusion of eternal and internal movement, one not predicated on time or space, but on the inner organization of the psyche.[12] Camila's perception of motion pictures capsulizes his fictional method:

> Todo en movimiento. Nada estable. Retratos y retratos confundiéndose, revolviéndose, saltando en pedazos para formar una nueva visión, fugaz a cada instante, en un estado que no era sólido, ni líquido ni gaseoso, sino el estado en que la vida está en el mar. El estado luminoso. En las vistas y en el mar. (p. 80)

Whereas in film the result is progression, in Asturias' fictional system the result is negative movement which speaks of psychological disintegration brought about by instability.

Through this method Asturias brings together two opposites in order to present a total view of domination. His montage incorporates the temporal diachronic with the simultaneous unity of the synchronic.[13] He is able to define a world view through a dialectical emphasis on horizontal and vertical realities. This technique gives the condition of the dictatorship its totality.

The Asturias montage evident in the larger structural elements in the novel, such as the images of flight, is also present in the smaller unit, the sentence. In Asturias' style, sentence and words clearly correspond to the term coined by Frederic Jameson, the *art-sentence*.[14] Diachronic and synchronic elements are fused together to destroy any illusion of temporal security, or rather unity of time, place and action.

When Sra. Carvajal, for example, hears her husband is to be killed, her reaction is immediate dissociation:

No pudo hablar. Dos tenazas de hielo imposibles de romper le apretaban el cuello, y el cuerpo se le fue resbalando de los dos hombros para abajo. Había quedado el vestido vacío, con su cabeza, sus manos y sus pies.[15]

The passage is purely descriptive. The woman does not physically move, in fact she cannot even speak. The cold feeling assumes the form of claws which strangle her until her torso becomes non-existent and what remains is an empty dress and only fragmented extremities. From this external description of her shock, Asturias moves to an internal one, which he manages through what can be considered a linguistic shorthand:

En sus oidos iba un carruaje que encontró en la calle. Lo detuvo. (p. 215)

Sra. Carvajal visually and auditorily perceives the approach of the carriage, yet she is in a stupor and unconscious of what she perceives. The sound of the carriage moves through her ears: the use of the imperfect "iba" here connotes the action not completed in any specified time. In this manner, Asturias again describes her dissociation. Sra. Carvajal does not hear a carriage—all action of perception on her part is nullified. Rather, he places the carriage in her ear. The juxtaposition serves to illustrate a break with the moment that is psychological as well as perceptual. The change to the preterite "encontró" brings the perceiver closer within the realm of reality, and the final "detuvo" to the present. In one sentence Asturias synthesizes the diachronic relation with the synchronic. Her perception obviously reflects a reaction which knows no superimposed order but the order of the trauma itself.

The above sentences illustrate Saussurean syntagmatic and associative orders. The syntagmatic relation backward and forward in time is manipulated to indicate the illusion of temporal disorder. In a sentence such as the following in which Cara de Angel commences a mental litany which prefigures his death, the associative element is most evident:

Seguía . . . la sensación confusa de ir en el tren de no ir en el tren, de irse quedando atrás del tren, cada vez más atrás del tren . . . más atrás del tren, cada vez más atrás . . . más y más cada vez cada ver cada vez . . . cada ver cada ver cada ver cada ver cada ver . . . (p. 266)

For Cara de Angel the rhythm of the train begins an association which combines words and sound indicating his inner feelings of approaching doom. The final words "cada ver" when spoken together form "cadáver" or corpse. The passage is syntagmatic in that it *reaches* to what has gone before and what will occur in a temporal relation: it is associative since it links images and words whose structure and order are determined by the situation of the speaker and the ability of the reader to reconstruct the expression. The syntagmatic and associative orders underlie Asturias' skillful use of the literary montage. He manages to relate through diachrony and synchrony the totality of the hegemonic state.

Clearly, the effects of the dictatorship are total, reaching from physical to psychological imprisonment. Yet the questions arise, What social mechanisms account for this totality?; How is the individual affected and determined to such a degree by his social situation? Weinstein and Platt believe the theory of object relations can shed light on this complex interaction. This psychoanalytic view accounts for the relations between individuals and groups; it explains the development of the personality in relation to the cultural and social standards of particular times and places. They specify further:

To begin with, there are two fundamental aspects of the concept of object relationships around which the psychological investigation of obligated patterns of expression can conveniently be organized. One is comprised of internalization and identification processes, the basic means by which situations of stability are organized; the other involves the notion of object loss, the normatively perceived passing or failure of, disappointment in, abandonment by or betrayal by loved or otherwise valued persons, institutions, symbols and even aspects of self.[16]

The values of a society are transmitted to the individual through internalization; these internalized values then produce patterns of behavior.[17] The influence of care-taking and authority figures is central to the identification process necessary for the internalization of values, and therefore, social action. In Asturias' fictional system, the individual lives with insecurity and instability for at any moment the invisible hand of the president may disrupt his life. Chance dictates whether a person will be a victim or an oppressor; whether a person will be considered

"with the president" or against him. Ultimately, chance means the difference between life and death. The citizens have internalized this fact as shown in the symbol of the lottery which El Pelele introduces in one of his mental meanderings:

> . . . curvadecurvaencurvadecurvacurvadecurvaencurvala. Mujer de Lot (¿La que inventó la lotería?) (p. 20)

The image is picked up again and this time the connection to the social reality is explicit:

> De nada le sirvía ser inocente, de nada, ya estaba complicado, ya estaba complicado. ¡La lotería, amigo, la lotería! ¡La lotería, amigo, la lotería! . . .
> ¡Amigo, amigo, la única ley en egta tierra eg la lotería: pog lotería cae ugte en la cagcel, pog lotería lo fugilan, pog lotería lo hagen di putado, diplomático, pregidente de la gepública, general, minigtro! ¿De que vale el egtudio aquí, si to eg pog lotería? ¡Lotería, amigo, lotería, cómpreme; pueg un número de la lotería! (p. 102)

This feeling of entrapment by chance is internalized and becomes a symbol in the hegemonic common culture. The perversity of El Presidente who values executions, laughs before death and derives pleasure in manipulation if internalized by the children in this society. In the following passage the puppeteer realizes the children laugh when they should feel sad:

> Don Benjamín creyó que los niños llorarían con aquellas comedias picadas de un sentido de pena y su sorpresa no tuvo límites cuando los vió reir con más ganas, a mandíbula batiente, con más alegría que antes. Los niños reían de ver llorar . . . Los niños reían de ver pegar . . . (p. 55)

The split in effect is already evident in the children. The state is producing a citizenry of psychotics whose inability to react rationally to reality situations characterizes their behavior.

Thus Asturias depicts hegemony as a condition which externally and internally determines society. Raymond Williams offers the following description of the hegemonic state:

> . . . hegemony supposes the existence of something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or superstructural, like the weak sense of ideology, but which is lived at such a depth, which saturates a society to such an extent, and which, as Gramsci puts it, even constitutes the limit of common sense for most people under its sway, that it corresponds to the reality of social experience very much more clearly than any notions derived from the formula of base and superstructure.[18]

Williams suggests the complexity of the condition, but his is primarily a political perspective. Asturias, in his artistic conception, goes further than the political view. He explores the effects of hegemony on the psyche. His culture of domination, a collective mode of practices and behavior determined by repression, produces individuals who at various levels experience a lack of a sense of integration with the world. A political explanation is not sufficient. To understand the depth of Asturias' rendering of the hegemonic state we must acknowledge the psychological dimensions of his perception as well.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Fred Weinstein and Gerald M. Platt, *Psychoanalytic Sociology: An Essay on the Interpretation of Historical Data and the Phenomena of Collective Behavior.* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1973).

2. See Raymond Williams' "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *New Left Review*, 82 (1973), pp. 3-16. Also see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, trans., (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

3. The repetition of the flight image is outlined here: General Eusebio Canales flees the city after he is told he will be arrested; Miguel Cara de Angel tries to escape the president by train; and Camila enters the cinema escaping her own girlish reality. As brought forth in this novel, two elements of flight are significant: 1) each character tries to escape physical or psychological oppression, and 2) each flight is futile, no one escapes the president's circle of influence. General Canales dies after being shocked by fabricated news of his daughter; Miguel Cara de Angel is imprisoned in a cell, all hope destroyed upon hearing another fabrication about

Camila also brought about by the president. Camila's momentary escape from adolescence prefigures a rude jump into womanhood that due to the dictator brings pain, separation and finally complete alienation from all that she holds dear.

4. Fred Weinstein and Gerald M. Platt, *Psychoanalytic Sociology*, p. 4..

5. Miguel Angel Asturias, *El Señor Presidente* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, S.A., 1948), p. 7. All references to the text will refer to this edition and will be noted with the page number.

6. It is important to note that "madre" is an overdetermined symbol. It connotes the obvious security of "mother," yet in the colloquial sense "hechar la madre" is the lowest insult. Octavio Paz in his philosophical essay *El Laberinto de la Soledad* discusses "la madre" as the overriding symbol of violation and betrayal.

7. Weinstein and Platt, pp. 35-36.

8. Ibid., p. 108.

9. Charles Brenner, *An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1974) pp. 66 ff.; Pinchas Noy "A Revision of the Psychoanalytic Theory of Primary Process," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 50 (1969). Pinchas Noy posits primary and secondary process thinking in a relationship of constant exchange. His theory is much more flexible and accounts for the psychic use of both processes in normal functioning. His contribution may be important in the study of the effects of the hegemonic state on primary and secondary process thinking but lies outside the parameters of this study.

10. Weinstein and Platt, p. 108. These categories seem very rigid and as such they are open to debate. However, as a way of approaching this character they are useful. There is insufficient space to recount all the instances which speak of primary process thinking, such as El Pelele's perception of color rather than object. The examples are numerous and could sustain further analysis in a future study.

11. Quoted by Ricardo Trigueros de Leon, "Miguel Angel Asturias," *Cultura*, I (San Salvador, Jan-Feb., 1955), pp. 107-108, reprinted in Gerald Martin, "*El Señor Presidente* and How to Read It," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 47 (1970), pp. 223-43.

12. Humberto Robles, "Perspectiva, yuxtaposición y contraste en *El Señor Presidente*," *Revista Iberoamericana*, 38 (1972), pp. 215-36.

13. Ferdinand de Saussure explored the notions of synchrony and diachrony. Through this opposition Saussure perceived the possibility of an autonomous system of signs, recognizing the dialectic present in the internal negation of language itself. Through diachrony he incorporated the temporal, in synchrony the simultaneous unity. Saussure went further to posit a system of signs predicated on two general relationships: the syntagmatic and the associative. Again in these two we note the primary Saussurean distinction of synchronic and diachronic. The syntagma is "a horizontal grouping, a succession of meaning-units or words in time. The sentence is therefore one form which the syntagma can take, and in it the relationships governing the units are references backwards and forwards in time": the associative dimension calls to mind words related by internal structure or sound. (Jameson, Prison House, p. 37) In these terms Saussure spanned the temporal and the simultaneous which approximate the totality of human perception. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique generalé* (Paris, 1965, third edition) as well as Frederic Jameson, *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1972).

14. Whereas orthodox critics would isolate the components of language, style and syntax, the dialectical critic is interested in that "gesture by which an element—call it technique or structure, component, or if you will, *category*—is isolated from the work in question in order to set this work in a sequential relationship with others." (*Marxism and Form*, p. 315) Jameson projects a Marxist stylistics "in which the art-sentence itself, as it has been so variously cultivated and practiced in modern times from Flaubert to Hemmingway, may be seen alternatively as a type of work or mode of production, and as a commodity as well . . . In modern literature, indeed, the production of the sentence becomes itself a new kind of event *within* the work and generates a whole new form." Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 397.

15. Asturias, p. 215. See Gerald Martin, "*El Señor Presidente* and How to Read It," in which a detailed analysis of the language of this passage is given.

16. Weinstein and Platt, p. 92. The concept of object loss is of obvious importance in understanding El Pelele and the influence of the president as authority, father figure. A discussion of the president using research done on charismatic figures (i.e., Erikson, Loewenberg) would prove productive and useful, however, such a line of inquiry lies outside the purview of this study.

17. Weinstein and Platt offer the notion of a common culture to explain the network of interactions needed in a society for collective behavior: "social stability may then be understood to derive from the importance of a common culture—in brief from the acceptance of a commonly shared system of symbols, the meanings of which are understood on both sides with an approximation to agreement." p. 93.

18. Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure," p. 8.