

Cervantes in the Trenches: Art and Propaganda in Rafael Dieste's *Nuevo retablo de las maravillas*

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Abstract: This article analyzes Rafael Dieste's adaptation of Cervantes's *entremés* from three perspectives. Dieste wrote his *Nuevo retablo de las maravillas* (1937) on commission for the Republican Ministry of Propaganda during the Spanish Civil War, so the first reading examines its propagandistic characteristics. The second reading views it as a work of meta-propaganda condemning Nationalist propaganda methods. The third reading focuses on Dieste's defense of creative liberty. I argue that these three competing objectives explain why the work was never performed.

Keywords: Rafael Dieste – Miguel de Cervantes – propaganda – Spanish Civil War – theatre

The Christmas of 1936 was approaching in war-torn Spain. The writers Rafael Dieste and Carmen Muñoz, who had been married for just over two years, were struggling to make ends meet, let alone have enough to celebrate the holidays. Muñoz had picked up odd jobs making copies and translating documents, while Dieste sought commissions from the Republican government (Rei Núñez 86). In a letter to his brother dated December 7 he wrote, “Tuve que hacer una comedia—encargo de Ehrenburg—a vuela pluma, de anteayer para ayer, y hoy tengo que ocuparme, dejando otras cosas, de una antología de romances para el ministerio de propaganda. De ahí saldrán recursos para ir a veros un día” (qtd. in Casas 430). The Ehrenburg to which he refers is the Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg, who at the time was serving as acting Commissary of Propaganda. The “comedia” that he mentions—apparently written in two days in order to scrape together enough money to visit his family for the holidays—was his play *Nuevo retablo de las maravillas*, which adaptively reuses Cervantes's *El retablo de las maravillas* in the context of the Spanish Civil War.

As this story shows, *Nuevo retablo* was quite literally the product of extreme circumstances, not only for Dieste, but also for the Spanish Republic, which was fighting for its continued existence against the Nationalist forces. Dieste was certainly committed to a Republican victory and supportive of the political left, but he was also devoted to independent thought and creativity. His adaptive reuse of Cervantes's *El retablo* reflects a

tension between the immediate necessity of creating political propaganda to promote the interests of the Republic on the one hand, and his personal and aesthetic inclination towards a more humanistic art on the other. He was not alone in experiencing this tension. It was a common theme for members of his generation, who explored it extensively in essays published in the journal *Hora de España*, in whose inaugural issue *Nuevo retablo* first appeared in print.

Background

When the Nationalist forces attempted to overthrow the government of the Republic on July 18, 1936, Dieste, like most of Spain's intellectuals, joined the Republican cause (Caudet 21, Rei Núñez 81). Previously, Dieste had been one of the many artists affiliated with the Republic's artistic and educational activities during the pre-war years. In 1934 he received a grant from the Junta de Ampliación de Estudios to tour Europe studying the latest trends in theatrical theory and practice (Irizarry 49, Rei Núñez 73-76). Upon his return he put his studies to use for the Misiones Pedagógicas as director of its itinerant puppet theater company, El Retablo del Fantoche, for which, in addition to directing, he also wrote plays and "participated in all aspects of craftsmanship—designing the little stage and fashioning the puppets, figures, and sets [. . .]" (Irizarry 48). He continued this type of service after the outbreak of the war, affiliating himself with the Alianza de Intelectuales Antifascistas, in particular its theater section called Nueva Escena (Martín Gijón 268). He worked briefly (from September to November 1936) as director of the Teatro Español in Madrid, where he and Nueva Escena presented works by Rafael Alberti, Ramón J. Sender, and himself (Dennis and Peral Vega 46-47).

In spite of his long-standing relationship with Republican and leftist causes, Dieste nevertheless found it difficult to make ends meet in this environment. The Alianza, which had named him as director of the Teatro Español, refused to pay him for his work there because the Stalinists who dominated that organization wrongly suspected him of being a Trotskyist (Trapiello 250). It is for this reason that Dieste and his wife found themselves in the desperate economic situation described at the beginning of this essay, which led to his writing *Nuevo retablo* on commission for the Ministry of Propaganda.

Dieste's play seems to have had the same fate as Cervantes's *El retablo*: as far as we know, it was never performed (Aznar Soler 21). Instead, it went straight to publication in the first issue of a new literary journal titled *Hora de España*. The journal was the brain child of Dieste himself, who co-founded it with the artist Ramón Gaya, the poet Juan Gil-Albert, and the writer Antonio Sánchez Barbudo, and was funded by the Ministry of Propaganda (Trapiello 217). The journal's founders, with the addition of the poet and playwright Manuel Altolaguirre, became its editorial board and set up an office in Valencia. The first issue appeared in January of 1937.

Propaganda and Republican Intellectuals

The historian Stanley G. Payne says about the Spanish Civil War that it “generated the most intense propaganda struggle of all the European civil wars, even more than the one in Russia” (160). Not only was Spanish propaganda known for its intensity on both sides of the conflict, but Republican poster art was particularly notable for its quality. Payne calls it “the outstanding political poster art of the twentieth century” and says that it “outshone all of its predecessors in direct appeal and artistic quality, vivid in tone and color, dramatic and modernist in design and conception, shading sometimes into variants of cubism” (166). The Republicans had this aesthetic advantage because so many artists joined their cause. The same was true of poets, playwrights, and other writers: “la inmensa mayoría de los intelectuales, escritores y artistas se ponen inmediatamente del lado de la República. Manifiestan un decidido interés colectivo por colaborar en la contraofensiva dirigida a los rebeldes militares, poniendo sus talentos creadores al servicio de la causa popular y apoyando así al pueblo en armas” (Dennis and Peral Vega 30).

Republican intellectuals and artists were both fervent and organized. Within weeks of the war’s outbreak, they formed the above-mentioned Alianza de Intelectuales Antifascistas, whose manifesto, of which Dieste was a signatory, reads in part:

Contra este monstruoso estallido del fascismo, que tan espantosa evidencia ha logrado ahora en España, nosotros, escritores, artistas, investigadores, científicos, hombres de actividad intelectual, en suma agrupados para defender la cultura en todos sus valores nacionales y universales de tradición y creación constante, declaramos nuestra unión total, nuestra identificación plena y activa con el pueblo, que ahora lucha gloriosamente al lado del Gobierno del Frente Popular [...] (“Manifiesto” n.p.)

The Alianza, along with numerous other pro-Republican organizations, sponsored and organized a flurry of artistic activity to promote the cause.

The poet and playwright Rafael Alberti emerged as a leader in the movement to put literature at the service of the Republic. In a brief essay titled “Teatro de urgencia,” he laments that the few theatrical works being produced at the time were “complicadas y malas” and, perhaps even worse, “reflejan en muy poco la lucha, la transformación, la nueva fase creadora de nuestro pueblo” (“Teatro” 262). For that reason, he calls for a “teatro de urgencia” that he defines as “obritas rápidas, intensas—dramáticas, satíricas, didácticas . . . —, que se adapten técnicamente a la composición específica de los grupos teatrales” (“Teatro” 262). Alberti was looking, in other words, for plays that worked as propaganda (Gamonal Torres 170).¹

¹ Ramón J. Sender was also a major proponent of propagandistic theater (Lentzen 189).

The editorial board of *Hora de España* generally echoed Alberti's call for politically committed artistic activity and made recommendations for improving it. For example, in the first issue, immediately preceding *Nuevo retablo*, there is a brief statement co-written by Altolaguirre, Bernardo Clariana, and Gaya titled "Labor de propaganda." In it, they recognize the need for propaganda: "Mucha propaganda se ha hecho ya, y más es preciso realizar todavía" (61). They also call for it to be better: "Pero no se trata sólo de cantidad, sino de calidad y tono, de nobleza y hondura en la intención" (61). In other words, they can see the necessity for propaganda because of the circumstances, but do not see the circumstances as a reason for artists to abandon their aesthetic and ethical integrity.

Defining Propaganda

Given the rise of both Communism and Fascism, for both of which propaganda was an important tool, the early twentieth century saw an increased interest in defining and identifying propaganda, and more recent scholars of rhetoric have added to this early work. Although scholars continue to debate the precise definition of propaganda, there has emerged a general consensus around the major characteristics, outlined below.

First, propaganda is institutional. Organizations, such as political parties, governments, and businesses, use it to promote their interests (Jowett and O'Donnell 3, Koppang 121, Walton 397). As Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell explain, "The purpose of propaganda is to promote a partisan or competitive cause in the best interest of the propagandist but not necessarily in the best interest of the recipient" (26).

Second, propaganda is meant to promote a particular belief and/or action on the part of its audience (Lee and Lee 14, Koppang 122-23, Walton 394). Jowett and O'Donnell define propaganda as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (6). Speaking specifically of wartime propaganda, Toby Clark says that it "attempts to make people adjust to abnormal conditions, and adapt their priorities and moral standards to accommodate the needs of war" (103).

Third, propaganda has a hidden agenda. This is the characteristic that differentiates propaganda from persuasion. Whereas persuasion makes its purposes and methods explicit, propaganda tends to disguise them. Douglas Walton explains the mechanism for disguising these methods:

Expectations are put in place for the audience that one particular type of dialogue is being engaged in, but the reality is that underneath this surface appearance, really a quite different sort of dialogue is being engaged in (unilaterally, by the one side, and generally without the other side knowing about the real purpose of the discourse). (407)

For example, according to Jowett and O'Donnell:

Propaganda may appear to be informative communication when ideas are shared, something is explained, or instruction takes place. Information communicated by the propagandist may appear to be indisputable and totally factual. The propagandist knows, however, that the purpose is not to promote mutual understanding but rather to promote his or her own objectives. (41)

Finally, propaganda is an effort "to circumvent individual reasoning and rational choice" (Koppang 121). While propaganda is not necessarily equivalent to irrationality or falsehood in every situation, it is also not "an attempt to rationally deliberate on the wisdom or prudence of a course of action by looking at all the alternatives and weighing them judiciously or fairly. Neither is it an attempt to critically discuss an issue by openly considering all the arguments on both sides" (Walton 398). Propaganda uses a number of strategies to shape beliefs and actions while hiding its agenda and circumventing rational thought. Many of these strategies can be categorized in the following broad categories.

The first strategy is the mixing of truth and falsehood. As Koppang argues, this mixing is necessary for its effectiveness: "From a meta-propagandistic perspective, no speech can reach an audience if it is pure propaganda. Every speech must employ a mixture of truth and falsehood to gain approval" (124). For Jowett and O'Donnell, there is a "gamut from truth to deception" in propaganda carried out by everything from "mild slanting of information to outright deception" (21).

The second strategy of propaganda is to appeal to and manipulate the emotions of its audience. Walton explains, "An essential part of all propaganda is the use of emotively charged words and phrases that make the advocated viewpoint take on a highly positive coloration, and any opposed viewpoint take on a highly negative coloration" (399). Koppang describes the "activation of emotions like fear, anger, grief, guilt, and revenge, together with prejudice and patriotism" as one of the "mechanisms that outsmart rational individual reasoning" (122).

The third strategy is the promotion of an "us vs. them" attitude. As Walton explains, propaganda "postulates a dichotomy for the audience: 'We are the good guys. If you are not for us, you must be against us. All those opposed to our view are the bad guys.' Often the words 'fight' or 'struggle' are used in propaganda. The implication is that any means required to fight against 'evil' or danger posed by the 'enemy' is justified" (399-400). Propaganda commonly caricatures or otherwise dehumanizes those in the opposing camp.

Nuevo retablo de las maravillas as Propaganda

Scholars who have studied *Nuevo retablo* have taken for granted that it is a propaganda piece.² Generally, however, they tend to make these claims without elaborating on them in any significant detail or providing their definition of propaganda. The foregoing discussion of propaganda's characteristics and strategies allows for a closer reading of *Nuevo retablo* as propaganda and reveals that it is generally, but not entirely, propagandistic.

Nuevo retablo fulfills the first two characteristics of propaganda because it calls its audience to action in order to serve the interests of an institution. As explained above, Dieste wrote it as a commission from the Republican Ministry of Propaganda. It also contains overt references to Communism in order to benefit the PCE, which supported the Republic, the Alianza, and *Hora de España*. For example, the hammer and sickle, both Communist symbols, receive special emphasis in the play. At the beginning, when the Peones are complaining about their compensation, one of them addresses their hammers, saying, "¡Si fuerais armas de combate, martillos que nos agobiáis!" (170). This reference to hammers serves as foreshadowing for when the Peones return at the end of the play as part of an uprising against the Nationalists, in which one of them does indeed brandish his hammer as a weapon, while another completes the set by wielding a sickle (202). These symbols serve as a rallying call for the audience to, like the Campesinos and Peones in the play, take up arms against the Nationalists.

The overt symbolism of the hammer and sickle, however, makes the work's agenda fairly obvious. As if these Communist symbols were not enough, Dieste also has the tricksters celebrate their victory with even more obvious ones: "Mónica saca un pañuelo colorado que llevaba oculto y lo agita en el aire. Fantasio hace un giro rápido y se detiene cuando Rabelín inicia la internacional. Todos levantan jovialmente el puño" (205). As Irizarry concedes, "He does perhaps go overboard on the symbolism at the end [...]" (90). As a result, it cannot be said that *Nuevo retablo* has a hidden agenda, as is normally characteristic of propaganda. Although it is by no means a balanced view of the conflict, it does not masquerade as anything but an effort to support the Republican camp in the war effort.

Even though it fails to hide its agenda, *Nuevo retablo* still demonstrates many of the typical propaganda strategies for circumventing rational thinking. The above cited symbolism contributes to the play's emotional appeal to the audience. So, too, does the depiction of the Peones, who in the opening scene are at work crushing rocks for unfair wages: "cuatro lentejas y pan duro" (170). They live in fear of physical punishment from their masters, as when one of them says, "Unos minutos menos de trabajo les darían

² Kessel Schwartz classifies it with other theatrical works published in *Hora de España* "of dubious distinction in their propagandistic fervor" (204). Estelle Irizarry says of it, "We are obviously dealing with a propaganda farce," although she goes on to examine its distinctions from traditional political theater (89). See also Lentzen 195 and Dotras 744.

pretexto para una tropelía” (169). This depiction is of course somewhat exaggerated, but it does reflect the difficult circumstances of rural Spain in the early twentieth century. It is therefore a mixture of truth and falsehood that serves to provoke an emotional reaction in the audience that will circumvent rational thinking and call them to action.

The most persistent propaganda strategy in *Nuevo retablo*, however, is the promotion of an “us vs. them” attitude. This is evident from the very beginning in the way the Peones, tricksters, and Campesinos refer to the Nationalists. In the first group, the Segundo Peón encourages his companions by having them imagine that the rocks are actually their oppressors: “¡En las quijadas de los escribanos y de las beatas! ¡En todos los huesos malditos que se os vengan a las mientes! ¡Ánimo!” (170). This sense of division between good and bad, oppressed and oppressors continues when the tricksters meet the Campesinos, and each group expresses concern about the political leanings of the other. For example, Fantasio says to his companions, “Nadie salude hasta ver cómo saludan ellos” (172). The Campesino shows similar reticence when he says to his wife, “Calla, no hables tú la primera, que no sabemos quién es esta gente” (173). Once the Campesinos are assured of the tricksters’ political affiliation, they warn them about the sinister and unnamed “otros”:

CAMPESINA. A mal sitio venís. Aquí mandan ellos todavía.
MÓNICA. (Recalcando) Ellos . . .
CAMPESINA. Sí, los otros. En viéndoos la cara sobran explicaciones.
(Confidencialmente.) Tened cuidado. Ni en las pesadillas pudo ver nadie tales horrores. Primero humillan, después matan, después afrontan a los muertos. (175)

If the Nationalists are the evil “ellos,” the *Campesina* later refers to the militia members as “los nuestros” (“ours”), further emphasizing the division between the two camps (202).

Dieste intensifies this division throughout the rest of the play by caricaturing the Nationalist characters. Most are dehumanized by identifying them with titles rather than names, and they all exhibit predictably abhorrent behavior. For example, the Alcalde’s first impulse is to imprison the tricksters (178). The Terrateniente haughtily declares his wealth entitles him to an armed escort, but when asked to pay for the puppet show, he has conveniently left his wallet at home (178, 193). The Marquesa, representative of the nobility, rejects science in favor of tradition, and is portrayed as lascivious (180, 185, 197-98). The Cura is sanctimonious and judgmental, yet does not even know Latin (184). The General is pompous and blustery, but in the heat of battle he rides a ridiculous cardboard horse, revealing that he is all show (199). The Señorito is supposedly a learned attorney, but is easily duped by Fantasio’s faux knowledge (179). He also behaves in a cowardly manner, hiding from danger behind the Marquesa (187). In the case of the few Nationalist characters who do have names instead of titles, Dieste follows the Cervantine example of naming his characters descriptively: one is called Remilgada, from “remilgos,” meaning

“affectation,” and the other is called Tarasca, meaning “glutton” or “old hag.” The third is the real name of the Terrateniente, “don Zoilo,” which, as I will explain later, implies a hostility towards artists. The effect of these caricatures is to dehumanize the enemy and justify violence against them.

As this analysis demonstrates, *Nuevo retablo* displays the majority of propaganda characteristics. It is at the service of an institution, the Republic; it is designed to motivate actions and attitudes in support of the Republic; it circumvents rational thinking by mixing truth and falsehood about the condition of the lower class, making an emotional appeal to reinforce this depiction, and creating a sharp division between “good” Republicans and “bad” Nationalists. One characteristic of propaganda that it does not display, however, is the tendency to hide its agenda. It therefore mostly, but not entirely, fits current scholarship’s definition of propaganda.

Nuevo retablo differs from this definition because propaganda was viewed differently in the early twentieth century than it is today. People currently tend to see propaganda as something negative, as Toby Clark explains, “The word ‘propaganda’ has a sinister ring, suggesting strategies of manipulative persuasion, intimidation and deception” (Clark 7). This negative connotation explains in part why propagandists try to avoid having their work seen as propaganda. This was not always the case, however. As Clark points out, “[T]he negative and emotive connotations of the word ‘propaganda’ are relatively new and closely bound to the ideological struggles of the twentieth century” (7). It is precisely because of conflicts such as the Spanish Civil War that society has come to take such a dim view of propaganda, but participants in that war would not necessarily have shared this view. Propagandists tended to be quite open about it. For example, while most, if not all, governments today engage in some form of propaganda, virtually none admit to it. In contrast, the Republic during the Civil War had a Ministry of Propaganda. Most artists today would bristle at being told that their works constitute propaganda, but writers and painters during the Spanish Civil War regularly discussed the need for putting their talents to the service of the Republican cause. In fact, according to Clark, “Picasso himself described *Guernica* as a work of deliberate propaganda [...]” (42).

Instead of seeing all propaganda as negative, people during the early part of the twentieth century tended to think in terms of “good propaganda” and “bad propaganda.” This is evident in the work of Alfred McClung Lee and Elizabeth Briant Lee, who were American contemporaries of Dieste. In their 1939 book *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, they discuss the importance of differentiating between the two types, saying “[people] must be able to discover whether it is propaganda in line with their own interests and the interests of our civilization or whether it is propaganda that may distort our views and threaten to undermine our civilization” (14). In their view, “the action sought by a propagandist may be beneficial or harmful to millions of people” (15). Propagandists during the Spanish Civil War clearly viewed their own propaganda as beneficial and saw no need to hide their intentions. It also goes without saying that they saw the opposing camp’s propaganda as harmful. As I will argue in the following section, *Nuevo retablo*, in addition to being a work

of propaganda, is also a meta-propagandistic play that critiques Nationalist propaganda and people's susceptibility to it.

***Nuevo retablo de las maravillas* as Meta-Propaganda**

Nuevo retablo largely fits current definitions of propaganda, but does not hide its intentions because Dieste and others in his generation would have seen it as good propaganda. Naturally, people tend to see the enemy's propaganda as bad propaganda, and Dieste is no exception. *Nuevo retablo* can also be read as a work of meta-propaganda that casts light on the methods of Nationalist propaganda and lampoons those who allow themselves to fall victim to it. In this reading, the tricksters' *retablo* functions as a parody of bad propaganda.

First, while Dieste's own agenda is relatively transparent, the tricksters' *retablo* has a parodic hidden agenda. As in Cervantes's *El retablo*, the audience is made aware in advance of the tricksters' deception when, as the Nationalist characters approach, Mónica says to Fantasio, "Busca algún enredo para pasar bien de este apuro . . ." (176). Through this dramatic irony, the play establishes that the *retablo*'s true agenda, to protect these Republican tricksters from imprisonment and earn them money, is to be disguised as another form of discourse. For example, when the Nationalists are in earshot, the tricksters pretend not to notice them and engage in a nonsensical dialogue as they lay out "aparatos incomprensibles" on overturned barrels to prepare the *retablo*:

FANTASIO. ¡Aprieta ese meridiano!
 RABELÍN. ¿Así?
 FANTASIO. ¡Más! ¡Más!
 MÓNICA. ¡Cuidado! ¡Creo que va a saltar!
 FANTASIO. ¡Un poco más! ¡Basta! Corrige el punto de mira . . . ¿Ves el Tauro?
 RABELÍN. Aries, Tauro . . . ¡Ah, se escapa!
 FANTASIO. ¡Fíjalo!
 RABELÍN. (*Da un salto y hace como si dominase a un toro asiéndolo por los cuernos. Luego vuelve a su sitio*) (*Observando*) ¡Ya está! (177-78)

Their dialogue appears to be a technical, astrological discussion amongst themselves, but it is actually a performance for the Nationalist characters to give legitimacy to the tricksters. Even though they were clearly aware of their approach, the tricksters act surprised when the Alcalde and Terrateniente interrupt their supposed work: "Rabelín y Fantasio dan un brinco [. . .]" (178). This act for the benefit of the Nationalist characters reflects the tendency of bad propaganda to hide its agenda and masquerade as other types of discourse.

In order to further build credibility with his victims and circumvent rational thinking, Fantasio employs a propaganda trick known as *transfer*. According to Lee and Lee, “Transfer carries the authority, sanction, and prestige of something respected and revered over to something else in order to make the latter acceptable [. . .]” (24). Fantasio gains trust by transfer when he presents his fictitious credentials: “[F]ui doctorado en Munich, revalidado en Bolonia, diplomado en Coimbra, bendecido en Roma e hisopado en Burgos” (179). Each of the cities he mentions relates to the Nationalist cause and its allies: Burgos was the Nationalist headquarters, Munich represents Nazi Germany, Bologna represents fascist Italy, Coimbra represents dictatorial Portugal, and Rome represents the Catholic Church. Having supposedly studied in these places gives him prestige in the eyes of his victims. He uses transfer again when he describes his *retablo* as “Mi última invención, que ha rendido inestimables servicios a la policía, y por la cual me ha felicitado muy calurosamente Salazar Oliveira, es ese retablo que terminaba de armar cuando ustedes llegaron a honrarme con su presencia” (181). By associating his *retablo* with a prestigious institution such as the police, and with Salazar Oliveira, the authoritarian leader of Portugal who supported Franco, Fantasio is able to gain respect for his *retablo* in the same way that propagandists use the transfer method to gain respect for their message.

In another example, Fantasio subverts the *transfer* trick in a way that reveals the gullibility of his victims. He announces that the *retablo* will begin “al modo tradicional” (185). The use of the adjective “tradicional” is an example of another propaganda trick, *glittering generality*, which is “associating something with a ‘virtue word’ [. . .] to make us accept and approve the thing without examining the evidence” (Lee and Lee 23). It apparently works because, upon hearing it, the Marquesa is “[m]uy conmovida” (185). Fantasio elaborates: “Sí, señora Marquesa. Esto tiene una tradición antiquísima: fue ciencia salomónica, luego entretenimiento de grandes duques que conocían el secreto; después alarde confuso de Cagliostro y compañía, y ahora un arte metódico, científico, enigmático, pero tradicionalista” (185).

Superficially, it appears that Fantasio is using the *transfer* trick by once again dropping names, as he had done previously by mentioning Salazar Oliveira. The names that he mentions, however, reveal that he is actually talking about Freemasonry, which traces its origins to the Biblical king Solomon’s temple and attracted many members of the nobility during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including the false count and charlatan Alessandro di Cagliostro (1748-1795) to whom Fantasio refers. Such a pedigree should not appeal to Nationalists, who considered Masonry to be part of a broader international conspiracy against which they claimed to be fighting.³ The fact that it does

³ “If anti-Masonry was a long-standing feature of Spanish Catholicism, then the elimination of the brotherhood would also be one of the objectives of the military rebellion in July 1936. Its organizer, General Mola, was convinced that the proclamation of the Republic in April 1931 was due to the Judeo-Masonic-Bolshevik conspiracy. In his very first instruction sent to fellow conspirators on 15 April 1936, he stressed that the rebellion would be directed against ‘foreign’ elements such as Freemasonry” (Ruiz 185).

appeal to them points to the ignorance and gullibility of the Nationalists, who fall for appeals to authority even without understanding the source of that authority.

Like Dieste's own propaganda, the tricksters' parodic propaganda represented by their *retablo* divides people into "us vs. them" groups, but does so in a manner that actually downplays these distinctions and once again makes the Nationalists look ridiculous for believing in them. Like Cervantes's Chanfalla, Fantasio lays out the conditions for seeing the figures in the *retablo*: "Sólo pueden ver sus peripecias y figuras los que no estén tocados de marxismo, sindicalismo, anarquismo y demás plagas. Hay más marxistas de los que parece, y algunos, quizá los más peligrosos, lo son sin saberlo" (182). The "other" in this version is not Cervantes's *confeso*, but rather anyone supportive of the leftist groups in the Republican camp. But the tricksters simultaneously undermine the difference between Nationalists and Republicans by describing leftism not as a political position that can be consciously taken, but as a sort of contagion to which anyone is susceptible, perhaps even without knowing it. Panicked at this possibility, the Nationalist characters are quick to assert their belonging to the "correct" group:

CURA.	(<i>Temblando</i>) Yo no soy sospechoso.
GENERAL.	¡Ni yo!
MARQUESA.	Ni yo. Todo lo que el señor Cura vea, yo lo veré perfectamente. (183)

As the Marquesa's assertion reveals, however, she is committed to seeing the figures because she desires to belong to the group, not because she is certain about her political beliefs. She has fallen for the *band wagon* trick with which "the propagandist attempts to convince us that all members of a group to which we belong are accepting his program and that we *must therefore* follow our crowd and 'jump on the band wagon'" (Lee and Lee 24, italics in original).

The purpose of propaganda is to shape peoples' attitudes, and *Nuevo retablo* depicts how the tricksters' parodic propaganda has succeeded in getting the Nationalist characters to accept atrocities. After the appearance of the bull and mice, Fantasio reaffirms the conditions for seeing the figures: "¿No ven ustedes todavía? Me alarma esto. ¿De dónde puede proceder ese efluvio marxista? (*Mira a todos inquisitivamente*)" (190). When Rabelín throws a rock at an offstage dog, the Alcalde seizes on this opportunity to re-assert his belonging to the group by comically turning against this supposedly Marxist animal: "¡Ah! ¿Era ése? Es mi perro, pero no importa. ¡Que lo fusilen!" (191). This episode parodies the Nationalist use of firing squads against political enemies and implies that the people's support for it is due to susceptibility to propaganda.

The play also shows how propaganda has circumvented rational thinking to get the Nationalists to accept contradictory situations. While it would be reasonable to

assume that the ultra-Catholic Francoists would have been suspicious of Protestants and Muslims, in fact Protestant Germany, now led by Hitler, gave military aid to Franco, and Moorish mercenaries reinforced the Nationalists' ranks. The irony of this situation comes through in the General's speech to the imaginary German and Moorish troops who appear in the *retablo*. First, to the Germans he says,

¡Yo os saludo, salvadores de España, antiguos bárbaros de encendida pelambre, que hoy hacéis microscopios, productos químicos y gases asfixiantes! ¡Ante vosotros, nietos de Carlos V, primos de la Imperial España que hoy renace, ante vosotros, digo, presento armas y beso rendidamente los atributos de vuestros mariscales! ¡Sí, los atributos!" (192)

The first irony in this passage is that while the General is attempting to contrast the former barbarism of the Germans with their current civilization, his mention of "gases asfixiantes" collapses this dichotomy by recalling their current barbarism. In the second sentence, he attempts to emphasize the shared heritage between Germany and Spain by evoking their union under Charles V (1519-1556), which also proves ironic because this was the period in which the Protestant revolution began in Germany, leading to centuries of warfare. The audience is reminded of this fact when the Cura says of the Germans, "Lástima que sean protestantes" (191). These ironies emphasize the irrationality of the General's offer to kiss their leaders' "atributos," which comes off as a humorous euphemism for sexual submission.

Even the General himself seems to become aware of the contradictions inherent in the Nationalist cooperation with the Moors when he addresses them:

Y vosotros, oscuros hijos de Mahoma, que hoy ponéis la media luna al servicio de la cruz, y la cruz al servicio de la causa, de la cual . . . yo . . . aquí . . . ante vosotros . . . (*Se atasca*.) En fin, esto es muy complicado, pero vosotros . . . , a quienes tengo el gusto . . . (192, ellipses in original)

As his abundant hesitations indicate, the General struggles with the logical reasoning behind such an alliance, but then decides to abandon reason in order to avoid this difficulty. This speech depicts the Nationalists as easily susceptible to a propaganda that manipulates them into embracing absurd contradictions. An emblem of the emptiness of this rhetoric is the postwar German currency with which the General pays the tricksters. As Rabelín comments, "No vale un céntimo" (194).

The defeat of the red militias and the Nationalist taking of Madrid that occurs in the final scene of the tricksters' *retablo* is made to look ridiculous by association with the previous absurdities that the Nationalist characters have embraced up to this point. Although, as a matter of historical fact, the Nationalists would indeed take Madrid and win the war a few years later, the depiction of its fall as part of a broader parody of

Nationalist propaganda marks it as purely fictional, a vain fantasy that goes up in smoke as soon as reality intervenes and sweeps it away. The Peones and Campesinos from the beginning return to interrupt this fantasy, now in armed revolt alongside the *real* militias, as opposed to the defeated fictional ones in the *retablo*. Mónica describes their arrival as “la verdad del retablo que se desencadena” (202). In other words, the propaganda represented by the *retablo* has been unmasked, and now truth can prevail. The play emphasizes this when the *Campesina*, referring to the artificial and propagandistic celebrations that the tricksters had created for the Nationalist characters, asks them to create a festivity for them, to which Mónica responds, “¿Quién puede inventar fiestas con tanta alegría? ¡La fiesta sale sola!” (203). That is to say, the artificiality of propaganda is no longer necessary. As the following sections will demonstrate, although he was engaged in creating propaganda, Dieste was in fact reticent about such activity and looked forward to the day when it would no longer be necessary.

The Tension between Art and Propaganda Among Republican Intellectuals

The artistic embrace of propaganda described in a previous section is somewhat surprising given that during the decade prior to the Civil War, writers and artists of the Generation of 27 had idealized a pure, dehumanized (to use an Orteguian term) aesthetic. Their wartime writings indicate that many of them did not fully embrace the sudden turn to agit-prop art occasioned by the war, and most looked forward to a Republican victory as a return to aesthetic purity. Nigel Dennis and Emilio Peral Vega refer to this reticence in the introduction to their anthology of Civil War theater, noting the “tensión entre la eficacia y la utilidad, por un lado, y el valor artístico y la calidad estética, por otro. En el fondo, el verdadero desafío que representa la guerra para el escritor comprometido es cómo superar las limitaciones de un arte puramente propagandístico” (39).

Some artists openly rejected the idea of propagandistic art, seeing it as a contradiction in terms. For example, Gaya, an artist and co-editor of *Hora de España*, wrote in an essay published there, “[M]e parece dañino, inadmisibile que el artista dejase contaminar de sentido político su obra” (“Cartas” 24-25). He acknowledges that the circumstances require that artists dedicate their skills to the war effort, but prefers that this activity exist in a separate category from art: “Pero no se llame a esta labor arte [. . .] porque sería olvidar que, aunque sean artistas geniales los dedicados a ella, lo que se emplea de los artistas no es su arte, no es su genio, sino su facilidad técnica” (“Cartas” 27).

Gil-Albert’s response to Gaya is representative of common attitudes in that generation. He sees the current difficulties for artists as being caused by an unjust economic system, and looks forward to “un orden que [. . .] sea capaz de devolvernos a la larga un anhelo común, una plenitud armónica que el arte expresaría con renovado frescor” (“Cartas” 30). He identifies this new art-friendly economic order as Socialism and frames the benefits of its implementation in Biblical terms: “el poeta [. . .] podrá

descansar al fin en su séptimo día paradisíaco” (“Cartas” 32). Similar statements abound in the pages of the first issue of *Hora de España*, regarding not only artistic production, but a variety of other intellectual endeavors as well, including history, religion, foreign policy, and poetry.⁴

While Republican intellectuals in general understood the need to employ their skills in pro-Republican propaganda, they nevertheless saw this marriage of art and politics as a temporary measure, almost a necessary evil. They dwelt a great deal on the idealized future that they saw after a Republican victory, in which the arts and other intellectual activity could return to a purer form. Dieste’s writings and actions reveal that he shared this view.

The Tension between Art and Propaganda in Dieste’s Thinking

In a 1945 letter to his brother, Dieste wrote “Estoy convencido de la seriedad y de la fundamental honradez del movimiento comunista en su conjunto. Pero no soy comunista militante, ni tampoco simpatizante incondicional” (qtd. in Casas 391). He added in an interview in 1977, “[S]iempre he estado cercano de los postulados comunistas, aunque nunca perteneciera como militante al Partido Comunista. Antepuse siempre por encima de todo, el concepto de la libertad crítica, y la necesidad de unión absoluta de cara al triunfo de la causa Republicana” (qtd. in Casas 390). As these quotations indicate, while Dieste was a supporter of Communism, he recognized that even the leftist ideology he defended during the Civil War could be dogmatic and, therefore, a potential threat to creativity.

A natural extension of Dieste’s anti-dogmatism was his defense of artistic integrity. Sánchez Barbudo, a colleague from *Hora de España*, would later write of their editorial approach, “Nuestra obsesión (de Dieste, mía...) era no caer en propagandismo, en mala literatura, incorporar a los más, dejar libertad. A veces nos caía algo demasiado fuera de las tensiones y tragedias de la guerra, pero preferíamos esto al <<cartelismo>> fácil y demagógico” (in Lechner 468). Dieste himself also reflected on the uneasy relationship between politics and artistic integrity in relation to his theatrical production. In a talk he gave in 1981, he reflected upon his war-time activities, saying,

Se trataba de hacer, en aquel momento, teatro político. Por teatro político yo nunca entendí un teatro restringido, es decir, un teatro en el que una determinada consigna política o una determinada ideología se debe imponer o se debe configurar desde fuera como una suerte de molde de la pieza dramática. No, debe ser el mismo teatro con su vitalidad interior, libre de todo vínculo que no sea el de la poesía, que no sea la conciencia

⁴ See Chacel 20, Bergamín 30, Sánchez Barbudo 45, López-Rey y Arrojo 53, and Clariana 57.

íntima, que no sea ética, podríamos decir, universal, o la ética de un pueblo en un momento determinada. (qtd. in Dotras 744)⁵

As this passage demonstrates, Dieste's relationship to politically committed theatre was parallel to his commitment to leftist ideology: he was willing to support it, but not to be constrained by it. This is why several scholars have pointed out that his theatrical works from this period "trascienden su finalidad propagandística" (Dotras 744).⁶

Scholars have generally seen Dieste's defense of art in terms of attention to form and aesthetics. For example, Dotras says about his wartime theatre, "No superpone su carácter propagandístico a su ser—ética y estéticamente—teatral" (744).⁷ I argue, however, that Dieste goes beyond attention to form in *Nuevo retablo* to make an explicit defense of artistic integrity and expression of hope for a future period of artistic flourishing free from the need for propagandizing.

The Defense of Art in *Nuevo retablo de las maravillas*

As I have shown in this essay, *Nuevo retablo* is both propaganda and meta-propaganda. It is also both art and meta-art. While other scholars have demonstrated its status as art by noting a concern for aesthetics that transcends the exigencies of mere propaganda, I will focus on the play's meta-artistic elements, which manifest themselves in two ways. First, the play calls attention to itself as an adaptation, which emphasizes Dieste's creative freedom. Second, the play depicts the struggle between Republicans and Nationalists as a struggle between artistic freedom and the repression of creativity.

Dieste calls attention to the creative process in a self-referential scene in which Fantasio introduces the first figure to appear in his *retablo*, saying "Vamos a ser fieles al antiguo modelo que celebró Cervantes" (186). This line, of course, reminds Dieste's audience that they are viewing an adaptation of a Golden Age play and proclaims its fidelity to it. The following line, however, subtly undermines this assertion of fidelity: "Allí fue un toro el primer número" (186). In fact, Fantasio is mistaken: the first figure in Cervantes's version is not a bull, but rather Sampson. By proclaiming and then immediately undermining a claim of fidelity to a prior work, Dieste asserts his role as a creative artist who is free to adaptively reuse, rearrange, add, or eliminate elements from his source text.

This emphasis on creativity over fidelity in relation to classical theater was a major difference between Republican and Nationalist writers, as Duncan Wheeler has observed:

⁵ Originally published in Galician in *Encontros e vicios* 188. Translation by Dotras.

⁶ See also Casas 388, Villanueva xxiii, Aznar Soler 21, and Dennis and Peral Vega 67.

⁷ See also Dennis and Peral Vega 67.

[. . .] Golden Age drama performed an important creative building block for Republicans and Nationalists alike. The major conceptual and political difference is that the former sought to adapt works to fit the needs of the present, whilst the latter saw the needs of the present to be rooted in the past, and therefore the primary role of the modern-day practitioner was to facilitate access to past genius. Republican emphasis on creation rather than (re)creation, construction rather than mere (re)creation, automatically bestowed a more creative role on the modern-day practitioner [. . .] (73).

In addition to referencing the Republican emphasis on creativity, Dieste dramatizes this philosophical difference between Republicans and Nationalists by depicting the tricksters as artists and the Nationalist characters as enemies of the arts.

The third scene of *Nuevo retablo*, in which the tricksters meet the Campesinos, establishes the tricksters as artists and affirms the value of their work. When the Campesinos ask the tricksters who they are, Rabelín declares, “Somos artistas” (173). His statement is true: with their accordion and trunk full of props, Fantasio, Mónica, and Rabelín are like the itinerant puppet theater company that Dieste had once directed as part of the Misiones Pedagógicas, bringing art and culture to rural areas, which he alludes to in the opening stage directions describing the scenery: “Carretera llegando al pueblo. Al costado que hace fondo de la escena se supone una explanada de las que sirven de ferial y, a veces, de campamento a los gitanos y a los *titiriteros*” (169, italics mine). Fantasio goes on to elaborate on the value of such activities: “Todo pierde peso y hace volatines con nuestros juegos y con mis palabras” (173). In other words, art has a liberating effect. Rabelín adds to this discussion by emphasizing the power of art—in his case, music—to imitate nature. Referring to his accordion, he says, “Y con el son de mi arca de Noé. Aquí llevo jilgueros, gallos, cerdos y de todo” (174). The Campesino responds by confirming the value of art and lamenting its absence in their current circumstances: “Si vuestro oficio es de fantasía para ganar el pan, ojalá me sobrase del mío para daros y que me hicieseis ver visiones con gracia bien alimentada” (174).

In addition to establishing the Republican characters, the tricksters and Campesinos, as artists and supporters of the arts, this scene also establishes the Nationalists as hostile to the arts. For example, the *Campesina* warns the tricksters, saying “A mal sitio venís. Aquí mandan ellos todavía” (175). By “ellos” she is, of course, referring to the Nationalists, implying that artists are unable to ply their trade in Nationalist-controlled areas. Although she goes on to describe their atrocities, saying “Ni en las pesadillas pudo ver nadie tales horrores,” it is significant that her first commentary about

the Nationalists is their animosity toward artists (175). The murder of Federico García Lorca only four months before the publication of this play comes to mind.⁸

Nationalism's anti-creative attitude is also reflected in the name of the Terrateniente, whom other characters call "don Zoilo." Zoilus, as he is known in English, was a fourth-century Greek Cynic philosopher famous for his criticism of Homer, enough to earn him the epithet "Homer's scourge" (Hazel 261). In the Prologue to *Don Quijote I*, Cervantes refers to Zoilus as "maldiciente" (12). The Terrateniente lives up to the anti-artistic connotations of his name, immediately agreeing with the Alcalde's suggestion to arrest the tricksters upon first seeing them and later excusing himself from paying them for their performance by claiming that he left his wallet at home (178, 193).

The tricksters' encounter with this anti-artistic attitude reflects the situation of artists during the war. Because of the stricture on creative activity imposed by the Nationalists, Fantasio does not introduce his *retablo* as a work of theater nor himself as a theater practitioner, as his predecessor Chanfalla does. Instead, he hides his status as an artist, and claims that the *retablo* is his "invention" based on his pseudo-scientific training: "Experiencia del mundo, ciencia fisionómica, telepatía, magnetismo animal y otras artes [. . .]" (179). This tactic appears to work: realizing that Fantasio is not an artist after all, the Terrateniente excitedly exclaims, "¡Magnífico, magnífico! Ha llegado a visitarnos un fisionómico magnético que viene de Alemania" (179). Fantasio's pretense represents the situation of artists during the Civil War, who had to put their creative activities on hold and lend their talents to the war effort. As I have argued above, Fantasio's claimed invention, the *retablo*, parodies Nationalist propaganda, implying that the tricksters are artists forced by the circumstances to create propaganda.

Like the Republican artists and writers during the Civil War, Fantasio looks forward to the day when the exigencies of war no longer restrict his creative activities. Returning to the dialogue in the third scene between the tricksters and the Campesinos, Fantasio responds to the latter's encouragement by saying, "Entiendo tu saludo . . . Es una gran promesa. Casi me hace llorar" (174). The promise he refers to is the return of peace that will allow him to resume his artistic activity, which the Campesino confirms by saying, "Ya vendrá ese tiempo" (175). This imagined future arrives at the end of the play when the popular uprising and defeat of the Nationalists allows Fantasio to drop his pseudoscientific pretenses and rejoice at his return to creative freedom: "La tierra está purificada. El arte empieza de nuevo. Renuncio a mis invenciones" (203).

As mentioned previously, *Nuevo retablo* appears never to have been performed. I am not aware of any documented reason for this, but based on my analysis, it seems reasonable to speculate that it simply did not fit the brief given to Dieste by the Ministry of Propaganda. If Ehrenburg asked him for a propaganda piece, *Nuevo retablo* is that, but

⁸ The editors of and contributors to *Hora de España* linked García Lorca's death to the Nationalists' perceived anti-artistic attitude. For example, in Luis Cernuda's elegy to the dead poet, he compares him to a flower blooming on an infertile rock, saying, "Por esto te mataron, porque eras / Verdor en nuestra tierra árida / Y azul en nuestro oscuro aire" (33).

also much more. It is a work of meta-propaganda that causes its audience to reflect upon the mechanisms of propaganda. As such, although meant to dismantle “bad” Nationalist propaganda, it also has the potential to undermine Republican propaganda, which uses similar mechanisms. It also transcends the exigencies of propaganda by advocating for the importance of art and looking forward to the day when art can free itself from the taint of politics. *Hora de España*, with its numerous essays expressing a similar yearning, is therefore a far more appropriate venue for this work than any designs the Republican government may have had for it.

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