

Spanish Civil War as an Inaugural Moment in Antonio Buero Vallejo's *El tragaluz*

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The Civil War (1936-39) is one of those tragic moments in Spanish history that will never be forgotten. It marked the 20th century and it is still being part of the life and memory of many Spaniards working to uncover common gravesites, realistically and metaphorically. Because of this event, Spain not only lost its innocence and hopes for a future rooted in freedom and democracy, but its citizens were also unable to find assurance and trust in any type of government, and for forty years they threw away expectations for living a better life filled with liberty and prosperity. As Frank P. La Casa puts it, "The long struggle, its viciousness, the climatic nature of the century-old contest between traditionalists and progressives- traumatized the national psyche" (285). The absence of trust is shown above all through certain works of literature and in particular those of Buero Vallejo (1916-2000).

As many of his biographers confirm, among them Carmen Gonzalez- Conde, Martha Halsey and Ricardo Doménech, the fact that Antonio Buero Vallejo was the son of an army captain and brought up in an intellectual and liberal family impressed upon him the need to fight for the defense of the Spanish Republic against Franco's forces. Indeed, he spent most of his life analyzing the struggle of human beings to liberate themselves from oppression and the parameters imposed by the social forces around them. An incisive study of the role of Buero during the war and his decision to start writing is given by Luis Iglesias Feijoo in an article published last year, where the critic describes how Buero participated in several projects defending the artistic and historical patrimony of Spain during the war, promoted the sanitary wellbeing of the Republican troops and engaged in discussion regarding the use of art and literature during the war. His consideration for the infinite value of life and of individuals will be one of the mottos that, according to Iglesias Feijoo (234) and Caro Dugo (19), will mark Buero's theater, particularly in *El tragaluz*.

As a result of the war, Buero was arrested in Valencia and sentenced to death (later commuted to thirty years in prison) for having assisted the legitimate Republican government of Spain in his fight against fascism. After his time in prison, Buero began writing plays primarily, for which he is most well known. Although, he does not address the issue of the war directly in his works, according to Ricardo Doménech, Marion Holt and Ricard Salvat, he is the first writer to demonstrate the consequences and scars that the event produced on the minds and lives of Spaniards. *El tragaluz* (1967), translated by Martha Halsey as "The Basement Window," is a good example of this openness. In this piece, as many critics have seen (among them, De Quinto, Gwynne Edwards and Patricia O'Connor), Buero brings a breeze of fresh air to the Spanish scenery of the moment. He rejects all types of theater for pure entertainment such as that practiced by the Álvarez Quintero Brothers, Jacinto Benavente or Eduardo Marquina; he recovers the tradition of Valle- Inclán, Unamuno and García Lorca, and he composes a realistic and social theater which shows the inquietudes and worries about the human experience, as analyzed by Nietzsche, Camus, Sartre and, seven years after the release of the work itself, by Michel Foucault. As José Ramón Cortina states, "Buero es un escritor serio que trata de encontrar soluciones a problemas filosóficos del hombre" (125).

This essay explores the consequences of war and at the same time analyzes those consequences in the light of Foucault's idea of "panoptic," discussed in 1975 in his work *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. According to Foucault, the Panopticon is a circular prison, similar to the one in Mettray (France), in which subjects are constantly surveilled and punished for the most insignificant acts of disobedience. In Foucault's words, "The entire parapenal institution...culminates in the cell, on the walls of which are written in black letters: 'God sees you'" (294). In *El tragaluz*, there are different gods: society, work, money, position, and ideological correctness and among them, also, the character of the father, who, at the end of the play, will impart justice. However, these gods not only shape the lives of the subjects but also bring about the different types of consequences derived from the war's trauma.

First, there are economic consequences, seen in the positions of Vicente, his mother and his brother, fighting to earn money, to keep the house and to guard their own honesty and peace of mind. Also, there are cultural results, exemplified in the existence of censorship seen in Vicente's relationship with Beltrán. Finally, there are the psychological and mental effects. Psychologically and socially, the character's reaction to the war may be summarized in three main attitudes: insanity, intellectual/ philosophical disagreement and practical survival. In each example, the spectator sees the justification for the existence of a superior being, a guardian, a social institution or authority that subordinates and trains individuals. In some cases that being may be found in society and its requirements, but in Buero's piece this being is primarily the father, who, in a particular moment, is characterized by one of his sons, Vicente, as "god." *El tragaluz* is, above all, an experiment. Two scientists from the future, perhaps the 25th or 30th century, show the spectators a series of holograms in which they may observe the life of a Spanish family living approximately in the 1960s in Spain. Although the war has long been over, the family (formed by the mother the father and their two sons Mario and Vicente) still lives under its influence and especially under the ghost of Elvirita, the youngest child who died of starvation when her brother Vicente took the train to Madrid, leaving the family without food or any means to attain it. The family's continued guilt and blaming of Vicente for Elvirita's death shows the varied responses and attitudes of the characters towards the war and its consequences.

One of those consequences is the difference among the distinct social strata. Although the internal time of the work is the 1960's and the immediate postwar period ended some time ago, Spanish society and government policies still impose a sharp division between the rich and the poor. In the piece, Vicente is the wealthy son who supports his family. He does not depend on anyone although his entire family needs him and his ability to earn money. An example of this occurs the first time he goes to see the family and encourages his mother to pay for the washing machine and also to buy the refrigerator:

VICENTE. (Se levanta y saca un sobre azul) Toma, antes de que se me olvide.

LA MADRE. Gracias, hijo. Viene a tiempo, ¿sabes? Mañana hay que pagar el plazo de la lavadora.

VICENTE. Pues ve encargando la nevera. (86)

Vicente belongs to what in that moment might be called the Spanish upper middle class. He has a secure job with a publishing company, he is his own boss, he has a car (a luxury in Spain at that

moment), he is capable of providing odd jobs for his brother, and he even has a mistress. In short, he is very lucky and has a relatively good future in front of him.

On the other hand, very similar to the situation in the rest of Spain, those around him do not enjoy that type of position. Encarna, for instance, is a poor woman who works for Vicente. She is an orphan, and her most inner and horrible fear is to end up working as a prostitute wondering the streets. She, in some ways has that destiny already, since she has to go to bed with Vicente sporadically and depends on him to continue working in the publishing house, because of her lack of qualifications, for instance, when Vicente's associate, Juan, tells him that the publishing house wants to make some changes in the office, Encarna reveals her concerns about her future in the office. To this, Vicente responds that he is not going to let anything bad happen to her; even if he is told to fire Encarna, he will find another job for her. Worried by these expectations, Encarna asks: "¿Otra oficina? ... ¿Para que me acueste con otro jefe?" (74). Besides Encarna, Vicente's father is also dependent upon him. He lost one of his children in the war because Vicente ran away with the last of the family's provisions. After that, the father went insane and could not work anymore, leaving Vicente to provide for his family.

In addition to Vicente, however, the spectator may view this economic instability in the person of Mario, Vicente's younger brother. Mario, like Encarna and his father, does not work or works only sporadically for Vicente, translating. The lack of gainful employment serves as a reflection of the unemployment suffered in Spain during this period, and, more exactly, it illustrates a kind of depression, a lack of trust in the system that keeps Mario from looking for a job. Mario, in comparison with his brother, does not want to have a job because he does not want to be a part of the corrupt society in which Vicente is succeeding. As Molina, Thompson and Rodríguez Richart have observed, the opposition between the brothers occurs at several levels (Cain and Abel, dishonesty and responsibility, the bad or good treatment of women- victims like Encarna) but above all, the relationship between the brothers resembles the opposition between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*: "Mario (a thinker and a social minded altruist) condemns the active life of Vicente, while justifying his own position as observer, thinker and judge" (Molina 44). Mario and Vicente are, in words of Minako Nonoyama, the representation of Cain and Abel, although in this case, Abel, the provider, is not the good and generous son but the selfish one, while his brother is generous, sensitive and consumed by social inquietudes.

Mario rejects the traps, the lies and the deals to which he may be driven, and he prefers to observe the world from his chair in the basement. For example, in one of his confrontations with his brother, Vicente offers him a position in the new company, but Mario rejects it and gives as an excuse the treatment that Vicente gives to everybody, including Encarna and Eugenio Beltrán, a successful writer who is being overshadowed by the new interests of Vicente and the company. Talking about Beltrán, Mario confronts Vicente and tells him that Beltrán is more honest and successful than Vicente is. Mario sees in Beltrán a true source of inspiration for the future and sees no hope in Vicente's way of life:

Le interesan cosas muy distintas de las que te obsesionan a ti. No es un pobre diablo más corriendo tras su televisión o su nevera; no es otro monicaco detrás de su volante, orgulloso de obstruir un poco más la circulación de esa ciudad insensata... él ha elegido... la indiferencia... ¡Él es otra esperanza! Porque os ha enseñado que así se puede triunfar..., aunque sea en precario. (138-9)

Beltrán is not worried about material things like buying a TV or a refrigerator. He wants to succeed even if he is poor. Although Mario is presented as the defender of the weak, he may have the same opportunities as his brother but he rejects them. According to Kronic, Johnston and Lyon, although there is an opposition between the brothers, both may be considered as victims and executioners. Vicente may be selfish and egocentric, but Mario, “Offered the opportunity to battle from their midst against the forces that oppress him, he rejects it: for personal reasons and out of pride and misguided humility [...]” (Kronic 381).

Furthermore, the decadent economy is shown through the character of the mother. The mother is presented as the center of the home and in some ways as the main provider. She not only keeps the family together and takes care of everybody, but she tries to encourage her family and keep everybody happy. Arturo Jiménez Vera analyzes her as weak, saying that she cannot face the past and has created another version of the death of her daughter. For her, Vicente was not responsible for not getting off the train. Everybody was grabbing him: “La Madre se ha creado una versión dulcificada de los hechos responsables por la muerte de su hija. Para la madre no fue Vicente que no quisiera bajarse, sino que no lo dejaban bajar –que los soldados que llenaban el tren lo sujetaban” (37).

Her character is the one who most represents the poverty and misery of those years. Always attentive to the needs of those around her, she tries to attract the attention of her son Vicente, who lives independently, through the buying of pastries and milk every time he visits the family. For instance, the first time in the play when Vicente goes to their basement home, we see the mother arguing with her husband because he wants to eat the pastries before Vicente arrives: “¡Déjalas hasta que venga Vicente!” (83). This warning has several meanings. It reveals the poverty in buying the pastries only for special occasions, it reveals also the sacrifice that the family has to make to please only the one member who could buy them for himself, and finally it reveals a certain degree of protection on the part of the mother who does not want her sons to worry or to suffer from hunger. This type of blindness that some characters promote or want to establish in themselves is part of the existence of the panoptic society, a society that watches over its members to assure that social stratification and economical difference is not broken. The three cases of Mario, Vicente and the mother show the existence of a social god that punishes individuals who do not avail themselves to the fight in search of social and economic position and recognition. This imposition is also cultural.

One of the most noticeable cultural consequences of the war was censorship at all levels of culture and society. The fascist government not only tried to force the citizens to acclimate to their views but also tried to make them forget the hurt and anguish of the war. Buero himself, whose piece *El tragaluz* was released in the midst of strong opposition and conflict, suffered this type of censorship. According to Catherine O’Leary, although the censors left untouched many of the parts that one would expect to be cut, they eliminated others that seem harsh or undermine the mythological construction of the new social order that Franco’s supporters wanted to build: “In any event, the text that was cut contained references to criticism of the new Spanish society that was the product of a new ideology. Considering that the play criticizes and denies the attractive myths propagated by this ideology. It is quite surprising that so much of it escaped

ensorship, especially as in places the criticism was quite strident.” (*The Theater of Antonio Buero Vallejo. Ideology, Politics and Censorship* 87)

Many scholars not only think that Buero’s work is one of the most challenging and critical of the dictatorship and the war but also the first that openly shows the consequences of the confrontation on the population. In this regard, another critic, José María de Quinto, affirms that Buero does not write a political theater but rather a highly ethical one:

La obra de Buero, como la de Sartre, como la de Camus, no es una obra militante, política [...] sino por el contrario eminentemente ética [...]. [Los personajes] viven, claro es, en un mundo de injusticias [...] pero no luchan ni se revelan contra ese mundo, no saben cuál es el sistema que puede acabar con él, no entran en la praxis revolucionaria para cambiarlo, sino que tratan pasivamente de evadirse de él” (15)

Buero, for de Quinto, is not trying to make a political statement, but rather an ethical declaration, a reflection about the life of an individual in a world full of injustice and from which he cannot escape. Censorship may be also seen in *El tragaluz* in two essential moments: first, when Vicente decides to stop Beltrán’s publications and second, when the father tries to hide his pain over the death of his daughter through his mental disease. In the case of Beltrán, this censorship is clear. He is a very successful writer. Everybody likes his books: Encarna, Mario and even Vicente, who thinks that his presence in the firm is valuable and who affirms this in his conversation with Encarna: “De la nueva colección, el de más venta es el de Eugenio Beltrán, y ya hemos contratado para él tres traducciones... naturalmente la otra novela de Beltrán pasa a la imprenta enseguida” (72).

Although it seems that Vicente has already signed a contract with Beltrán, when he receives a phone call from Juan, he changes his mind quickly in order to please the new publishing company and his new bosses, and he accepts his new role: “Está bien: Ya pensaré lo que le digo a Beltrán. Pero, ¿qué hacemos si hay nuevas peticiones de traducción? ... Pues también torearé ese toro, sí señor... Comprendido Juan. ¡Ha muerto Beltrán, viva la Editora!” (73). Vicente has been observed by the new publishing house, and he has to behave in a manner that is going to be acceptable to them. Vicente does not want to be punished by the eternal observation of the guard. His incongruence and lack of honesty also contributes to his father’s insanity. For instance, Mario asks his mother if she remembers the night they had to spend in the train station, when his father went crazy, beating the walls and insulting his son:

MARIO: ¿Te acuerdas, madre? Y luego, por la noche... Esto no lo sabes aún pero ella también lo recordará, porque entonces sí se despertó... Aquella noche se levantó de pronto y la emprendió a bastonazos con las paredes..., hasta que rompió el bastón: aquella cañita antigua que él usaba. Nuestra madre espantada, la nena llorando, y yo escuchándole una sola palabra mientras golpeaba y golpeaba las paredes de la sala de espera de la estación, donde nos habíamos metido a pasar la noche... Una sola palabra que repetía y repetía: ¡Bribón!... ¡Bribón! (158)

His father used his own kind of censorship –in the form of insanity- to forget the cruelty of the past and go on with his life. In the play, the characters have mainly three ways to face the outcome of the war: insanity, intellectual or philosophical reprocessing or practical survival.

All these positions again demonstrate the type of god or guardian hidden in the panoptical circle. For the father, God or the guardian equals the justice he needs for revenge; for Mario, his God is his ideological and ethical premise. For Vicente (besides his father at the end of the play), God is his work, the pressures of society that force him to succeed. Vicente's father is insane because of Vicente's role in the death of his sister. The day Elvirita died, the family was trying to take the train to Madrid. The war had just ended and everybody was trying to return home to start his or her life again. The train station and the train were packed with people. Nevertheless, Vicente managed to get onto one, and he left with all the family's provisions. His sister died that night of starvation. The entire family tries to understand the father's insanity, but only Mario is capable of seeing its true cause. His father has gone crazy, not as a consequence of his arteriosclerosis, as Vicente assumes, but because of the death of Elvirita and Vicente's subsequent behavior. As Catherine E. Dowd affirms, Vicente does not accept the possibility of his guilt in the insanity of his father: "Vicente cree que su padre sufre de arteriosclerosis y que no es loco precisamente, sino viejo" (122).

Insanity is for the father the only place to escape in the face of a reality that is too cruel to endure. In relation to the Spanish society after the Civil War, many critics like O'Leary and Feijoo talk about "pacto del olvido," as a resource used by many of Buero's characters to obliterate the past, to put it out of their minds and live apathetically, free from all responsibility: "Hence, in *El tragaluz* (1966) Buero suggests that the family's stagnation in the basement flat and its lack of progress is linked to its failure to deal with its past" ("History and Remembering in the Post- Franco Theatre of Antonio Buero Vallejo", 382). Regarding their father's disease, Vicente and Mario talk about that night, and Vicente denies that this insult of "bribón" was referring to him: "Pudieron ser los primeros síntomas de su desequilibrio" (159). To which Mario responds: "Desde luego. Porque él no era un hombre al uso. Él era de la madera de los que nunca se reponen de la deslealtad ajena" (159). The father never recovers from insanity, but at the end of the play in a moment of lucidity he recognizes Vicente as his son, and kills him with the pair of scissors he used to cut pictures from magazines. While his father chose insanity, Mario, the youngest son of the family, chooses a life of meditation and acceptance.

Facing the horrors of the war and the selfishness and idolatry of his brother, Mario does not want to have any part of it. He rejects the world, society and all their actions and manifestations. This attitude may be observed, for example, when Encarna asks him about the reasons why he did not study when he was younger, and Mario responds that the war started when he was only ten. His brother left for the army, and Mario had to take care of the family:

ENCARNA: Y tú, ¿por qué no has estudiado? Los dos hermanos sois muy cultos, pero tú podrías haber hecho tantas cosas...

MARIO: ¿Cultos? Mi hermano aún pudo aprobar parte del bachillerato, yo, ni empezarlo. La Guerra Civil empezó cuando yo tenía diez años... hubo que sacar adelante la casa.

ENCARNA: ¿Y tu hermano?

MARIO: Estuvo con nosotros hasta que lo llamaron a filas. Luego decidió vivir por su cuenta. (97)

Mario does not have a secure job. He prepares little translations sporadically, but besides that, he lives with his parents and takes care of them. He does not approve of his brother's job, either, because he sees that Vicente does not perform his duties with honesty. For Mario, Vicente, as everybody else in this society, has sold his soul for money, career and position. Mario sees this not only in the fact that he abandoned the family in the train station, but also, according to Mario, Vicente is still doing it with everybody else. Vicente is using Encarna as a prostitute, selling her the job in exchange for her sexual favors; Vicente also sells his friends, like in the case of Beltrán. Even though Beltrán was a social success for the publishing company, Vicente lets the writer go to please his bosses and to save himself from any kind of trouble. Vicente wants his brother to go to work with him, but Mario refuses, considering him no more than a little dictator, keeping all his slaves under his authority: "¡Ah, pequeño dictadorzuelo, con tu pequeño imperio de empleados a quienes exiges que te pongan buena cara mientras tú ahorras de sus pobres sueldos para tu hucha! ¡Ridículo aprendiz de tirano, con las palabras altruistas de todos los tiranos en la boca...!" (142). Nevertheless, it does not seem that Mario, besides his ideas, has many ways to change the world or the society that he himself is criticizing. For Vicente, Mario is not doing anything to change the world around him. Mario is simply dreaming while living in the basement with his parents:

Mario, toda acción es impura. Pero no todas son tan egoístas como crees. ¡No harás nada útil si no actúas y no conocerás a los hombres sin tratarlos, ni a ti mismo, si no te mezclas con ellos... Está consumiendo tu vida aquí, mientras observas a un alienado o atisbas por el tragaluz piernas de gente insignificante!... ¡Estás soñando! ¡Despierta! (115)

Throughout the play, Vicente adopts the attitude of practical and selfish survival. He, one may say, is a self-made man on the backs of the others. He knows the rules of society and he embodies in himself what may be called the postwar motto: kill or be killed, as Mario puts it: "devora antes de que te devoren" (113). Vicente takes this perspective towards life also from the war when he admits that he is guilty of his sister's death:

Es cierto, padre. Me empujaban. Y yo no quise bajar... Les abandoné y la niña murió por mi culpa. Yo también era un niño y la vida humana no valía nada entonces... En la Guerra habían muerto cientos de miles de personas... Y muchos niños y niñas también..., de hambre o por bombas... Cuando me enteré de su muerte pensé, un niño más. Una niña que ni siquiera había empezado a vivir... (161)

The reason why Vicente did not get off the train was not because somebody was grabbing him, but because he wanted to live, to survive, a goal that he perceived as impossible if he had to remain with the family. This aim towards survival drives his existence and the treatment that he dispenses to others. This is not only in the case of Elvira, Encarna or Beltrán, but Vicente also despises his family and the fact that they never got out of the basement: "Debería ir más a menudo a visitarlos, pero estoy tan ocupado... Ellos en cambio, tienen poco que hacer, no han sabido salir de aquel pozo..." (78).

It is sometimes difficult to analyze certain events and to see the reasons why they took place or what response should have been the most convenient. This is the case for the Spanish Civil War. The intention of this essay was to acknowledge some of the reactions and consequences that the Civil War had in Spain, and we may come to the conclusion that, as Foucault announced in his book, Spanish society like many others, lives under the continual surveillance of a superior authority. This authority which may be society, a particular government or a particular family, is the main screen through which we may be aware of the consequences that a particular event has on the public. The Spanish Civil War had innumerable consequences and different outcomes for different peoples. This essay has tried to analyze some of them, but is not and does not pretend to be in any regard the final word about that disaster.

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