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LITERARY TRADITIONS IN *EL FABRICANTE DE FANTASMAS*  
BY ROBERTO ARLT

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Roberto Arlt (1900-1942) was an Argentinian newspaper reporter, novelist, and short story writer before he became a dramatist. It is interesting to note that although he wrote his first play as late as 1932, the theater became almost his sole interest in his last ten years. According to Mirta Arlt, his daughter: *El teatro le interesaba con exclusividad: lo veía como una síntesis de movimiento, color e intención dramática que lo apasionaba.*<sup>1</sup> Raúl Castagnino points out that although there is a large bibliography on Arlt's life and his narrative works, detailed studies of his theater, until recently, have been few. Castagnino's own *Teatro de Roberto Arlt* (1964), Mirta Arlt's edition of his *Teatro completo* (1968), and several articles on Arlt's theater are examples of a revival of interest in Arlt's theater.<sup>2</sup> The following plays, listed chronologically, comprise Arlt's dramatic production:

*Trescientos millones* (1932), *Prueba de amor* (1932), *Saverio el cruel* (1936), *El fabricante de fantasmas* (1936), *La isla desierta* (1937), *Africa* (1938), *La fiesta del hierro* (1940), and *El desierto entra en la ciudad* (1942).

A careful study of Arlt's theater leads to the conclusion that his particular view of reality, especially of the confusion between the worlds

of reality and fiction, has been markedly influenced by several literary traditions. This paper will consider primarily three of these influences on Arlt: Pirandellism, the grotesque tradition, and *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoyevsky. Other influences, including Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Unamuno will be treated in less detail.

*El fabricante de fantasmas* is a three act play concerning a playwright named Pedro, who murders his wife and is pursued by his own creations. In the first act the playwright's resentment against his spouse combined with his attraction to another woman lead him to murder. Not long after the killing, Pedro's conscience visits the author and attempts to convince him to admit his guilt. The playwright angrily refuses and threatens to turn his conscience into a hunchback. Pedro is tried and acquitted in court. Act two has Pedro presenting a play entitled *Los jueces ciegos*. This play-within-a-play describes the wife's murder and fiercely satirizes the judge who had freed Pedro. The judge in Pedro's trial sees the play and visits the author. He now believes that Pedro is guilty, but implies, rather than states, his conviction, leaving the increasingly guilt-ridden Pedro to be pursued by a grotesque group of characters from his own works. Pedro and his characters argue bitterly. Pedro's wife's *fantasma* enters menacingly at the end of the act, warning him of a future filled with horrors. In the last act, the writer, now totally frenzied, has fled to Europe in an effort to escape from his own creation. At a ball in Paris he meets a lovely masked woman to whom he is strongly attracted, but upon unmasking her he is shocked to find that she is identical in appearance to Eloísa, his murdered wife. Moreover, she is married and her husband is the double of the writer himself. The horrified Pedro returns home ill where his characters besiege him once again. Finally, the devastated Pedro is literally lifted by his characters, who carry him to the window, provoking him to jump out.

### Pirandellism

Arlt did not wish to be considered a mere imitator of Pirandello, and therefore denied the importance of Pirandello in his works. He emphasizes the importance of other influences in his works.<sup>3</sup> Critics, nevertheless, are convinced of Pirandello's influence on Arlt's theater, both technically and thematically. Mirta Arlt,<sup>4</sup> Amores de Pagella,<sup>5</sup> and Frank Dauster<sup>6</sup> all list Arlt as one of the most important of the playwrights influenced by Pirandello. Raúl Castagnino refers specifically to *El fabricante de fantasmas a la manera pirandelliana, aunque lo negara*.<sup>7</sup> The relationship between Arlt's work and Pirandello's *Ciascuno a suo modo* and *Sei personaggi...* can be noted in the following elements: self-conscious theater, the play-within-a-play, commentary and criticism of the inner

play, breakdown of aesthetic distance, the creation of different levels of reality, a fixed role for the characters and an emphasis on their autonomy.<sup>8</sup>

There is in addition a new element in *El fabricante de fantasmas*: a concern on the part of the author for the creative process in the theater. Not only does the protagonist compare himself to a character and comment that theater is the means by which he communicates his personal problems to the public — *Aunque no lo crea, soy un personaje verídicamente teatral. Pero yo no tengo nada que hacer en el teatro. Para mí el teatro es un medio de plantearle problemas* (I, I, iii),<sup>9</sup> but, he actually presents his real life in the play-within-a-play, *Los jueces ciegos*. This leads one to draw an immediate parallel with *Ciascuno a suo modo* in which Pirandello similarly creates a situation in which art imitates a real life occurrence: Pedro, supposedly a real person, calls himself a character. Arlt is purposely confusing the line of distinction between the fictional and the real worlds. Later Pedro emphasizes this aspect when he reflects upon the escapist appeal of the theater:

la gente que acude a los teatros va en busca de lo que no existe en sus vidas. Podría decirse que las mentiras son para ellos las puertas de oro que se abren a un país encantado. Nosotros, autores, no nos podemos formar ni la más remota idea acerca de la arbitraria estructura de aquellos países de ensueño, en los que se mueve la imaginación del público (I, I, vi).

The protagonist's consideration of the role of the author in the production of a drama and also the public's reaction to the work constitute another example of self-conscious theater of the type of Pirandello's *Sei personaggi...* and *Ciascuno a suo modo*. The stage manager's concern for the public's reaction to the drama of the six characters in the former play and the actual criticism of the work in progress by critics and spectators in the latter offer striking parallels to the Arltian technique. The similarities between *El fabricante de fantasmas* and Pirandello's works become even more explicit as the creative process literally unfolds before the spectator's eye.

Pedro begins to work on his drama with the aid of two *fantasmas*, one of whom is *el fantasma de Martina*, the counterpart of his lover, Martina, and the other a *galán*. What follows is reminiscent of Pirandello's *Sei personaggi...* in that the characters act out their unfinished drama and the director writes it down. The characters in both plays have independent existences; the author's contribution is merely a passive notation of the autonomous unfolding existences. Pedro at times expresses unhappiness with the way the scene progresses in much the same way as the servant to the *galán* in *Trescientos millones* and the manager in *Sei personaggi...* The audience in this way receives the impression that it is viewing a rehearsal

of a play-within-a-play. This is productive of a tension similar to that between the actors and characters in *Sei personaggi...* and the author and protagonist in Unamuno's *Niebla*. When Martina, for example, directs a question about behavior with women to the author himself rather than to the *galán*, Pedro brusquely orders her to stay within her sphere: *Diríjase al galán* (I, I, vi). And when the female *fantasma* goes so far as to provoke Pedro with taunts regarding his relationship with his wife, he reprimands her with the comment that *El fantasma es tan rebelde como el ser humano que representa*, a comparison which then leads him to castigate humanity itself: *el hombre de carne y hueso es sobre la tierra un fantasma tan vano como la sombra que se mueve en la pared* (I, I, vi). This constant comparison between men and ghost or phantom, as well as fiction and reality, is apparent throughout Arlt's work.

The audience's impression that it is viewing a work unfolding before its very eyes is further heightened when, after murdering his first wife, Pedro encounters his own conscience and debates with it his general concept of the function of theater: *Yo llevaré las oscuras pasiones del hombre al teatro* (I, II, i). Indeed the possibilities of the role of the conscience on stage fills him with enthusiasm and prompts him to inject into it an element of the grotesque: *Qué magnífico monstruo representaría en el tablado, persiguiendo a un asesino, irritando sus nervios. Para completar tu estampa maligna, lo único que falta es un par de jorobas* (I, II, i). Then follows a struggle of wills as the conscience begs Pedro not to follow him:

Te ruego que no me conviertas en un personaje ridículo. Humildemente y con lágrimas en los ojos. Todo lo que haces es odioso y tocado de locura. Dígnate recapacitar. Una vez que me hayas lanzado a las tablas revelándome al mundo tal cual me has formado, mi desgracia no tendrá remedio. Seré jorobada de día y de noche, en el teatro y fuera de él (I, II, i).

The conscience realizes that as a *fantasma* it will be forced to assume whatever role Pedro imagines for it. As with the characters in *Sei personaggi...* or the *galán* in *Trescientos millones*, its role will be fixed and he will be trapped eternally within it. Pedro's enthusiasm blinds him to these protests, however, as his imagination begins to perceive the potentialities of the work which he is about to create: *Veo la obra, que alcanza la extrema grandiosidad en los extremos contrastes. Una ciega... quizás una ciega de alma angélica, y un jorobado ingenioso, maligno y entremetido como un fracasado de inteligencia...* (I, II, i).

The second act begins with commentaries and criticism of Pedro's play by the author as well as his friends. Once again, this reflects Arlt's concern not only for the creative process itself but for the critical perspective, a dual focus which he shares with Pirandello. Arlt thus

purposely heightens the illusion that one is viewing a work in progress, the creating of the play, rather than a completed play. This effect is augmented by the technique of the play-within-a-play. The inner play, *Los jueces ciegos*, is based on a supposedly real episode: Pedro's satire of the judge who had tried and acquitted him of the murder of his wife. In the same way that the lovers came forth from the audience to protest what they felt was unfair treatment in *Ciascuno a suo modo*, the judge is provoked into visiting Pedro after viewing *Los jueces ciegos*. While there is in this way the same basic confusion between fiction and reality in both plays, Arlt's approach is less dramatic, although psychologically more subtle. Pirandello's play breaks completely with aesthetic distance as Delia Moro literally invades the stage from the audience; in *El fabricante de fantasmas* there is no melodramatic confrontation. The judge makes it quite clear that he realizes the parallels between what occurs in *Los jueces ciegos* and the murder of Pedro's wife, but quietly and firmly insists that Pedro will eventually confess of his own accord.

The judge's visit and the following scene, in which appears a group of bizarre characters who remind their creator of the works they come from, again involves a confusion of fiction and reality on several planes. A similar situation had prevailed in the servant's relationship to the *fantasma* in Arlt's *Trescientos millones*, a notable example of fiction-within-fiction, in which the servant herself created other characters, while still others, like Rocambole, were transposed from other literary works. In *El fabricante de fantasmas* the blind girl came from *El sol apagado* and the lame girl from *Cuando los tontos leen la biblia* (II, II, iii). This mixing of literary worlds parallels that of the *Quijote*, where characters in interpolated stories as well as from Avellaneda's novel enter into conversation with Don Quixote and Sancho who, in Part II, are already conscious of themselves as literary figures.

The projection of fiction-within-fiction also leads to the confrontation between the author and his creations. As Pedro refers scornfully to his creations as *estos perros* (II, II, iii), the *fantasmas* resentfully blame their creator for what they are. The prostitute, for example, in a mixture of shame and cold anger berates Pedro for thus degrading her:

Pues yo darla todas las negras noches de mi puerca vida para que te quebraran el espinazo con un cuchillo mellado.... Yo era una muchacha decente, cuando en el segundo cuadro de la obra de *El alma de la calle* me hiciste entrar a puntapiés en la mala vida.... Escribías el segundo cuadro de la obra y las palabras se atascaban en tu mente. Es que yo resistía a convertirme en una mala mujer. Pero tú decías (imita la voz de Pedro): ¿Cómo termino la obra si Clementina en el segundo cuadro no se lanza a la calle...? (II, II, iii).

This insistence on their right to an autonomous existence clashes with the author's will in a way which is particularly reminiscent of the relationship between Unamuno and his protagonist Augusto Pérez in *Niebla* (1914), a work which antedates *Sei personaggi...* by four years. One is reminded also of the anguish of the father and son in *Sei personaggi...* They fiercely rebel against being forced to recreate their tormented fixed roles. The two long for independence and are enslaved to a role as repugnant to them as the part is to the prostitute in Pedro's play.

Another literary precedent which may well have influenced Arlt in this work is the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet*, when the *fantasmas* return to visit Pedro in the final act in an effort to force their creator to reenact his crime, and thereby condemn himself. The scene recalls a like situation in *Hamlet* where the protagonist stages a play as a means to force a confession and avenge his father's death. What is interesting in Arlt's play is that the creator appears unaware that his characters are about to reverse roles with him as they become the audience and he the character and this produces a new element of mockery of the character-creator by other characters, who have become creators. The lame girl, for example, winks and asks if the curtain has fallen and the hangman responds that the wind caused it, while it was he who actually let it down. The *fantasmas* then insist that Pedro act out rather than merely retell, his story. They literally lift him bodily and bring him to the window and then provoke him into jumping. Arlt thus had Pedro recreate the homicide of his wife as a special performance for the *fantasmas*.

### The Grotesque Tradition

Arlt recreates a grotesque world in his theater, and the fundamental aspect of the grotesque is insecurity. Nothing is ever certain in the grotesque world, in which life can be compared to walking on the edge of a precipice. Man's inability to foresee dangers or to understand clearly his immediate environs supports the conviction that surprise is a fundamental component of the grotesque tradition.<sup>10</sup> The reader or spectator is often suddenly and unexpectedly flung into a confused and unpredictable world; a seemingly tranquil moment often literally explodes into a violent nightmare. The world of the grotesque generally involves dreams, carnivals, masquerades, the mask and face motif, and madness.<sup>11</sup>

These grotesque elements are prevalent in *El fabricante de fantasmas*. One is immediately struck, for example, by the transformation from the real world to Pedro's bizarre, chimerical world, a world peopled by outrageously deformed characters. The masquerade in Europe, to which

Pedro has fled in an attempt to escape from his antagonists, is one of the most startling examples of the aspect of the grotesque in the work. Pedro's own uncertainty that he is free from the *fantasmas* is originally shared by the spectators. This particular scene produces a truly grotesque vision of the world where a seemingly tranquil, pleasant surrounding becomes a terrifying inferno. First the charming masked woman and then her apparently jovial husband are suddenly changed into nightmarish *fantasmas*. Strangely, the woman does not seem to understand what has terrified Pedro, and this makes the half-dream and the half-real episode even more confusing. Arlt appears to go out of his way to disarm the public so that it will feel the same shock as the character.

Arlt once again gives an indication of his predilection for the handicapped or deformed in his works: the hunchback, the lame girl, the blind girl. Significantly, these characters are referred to not by real names but merely by their particular malformation (a basic element in the grotesque tradition). This intensifies the dehumanization of the individuals.<sup>12</sup> Arlt's obsession for these unfortunate characters is apparent also in his novels (*Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*) and in his short stories ("El jorobadito"). Since Arlt feels alienated and frustrated in the world, it is only natural that he is preoccupied with characters who are deformed, and thus the very embodiment of loneliness and suffering. These often unfortunate figures are an intensified version of the discomfort and suffering of Arlt as he views the world around him.

### Dostoyevsky

Although Dostoyevsky is not generally mentioned as one of the major influences in Arlt's theater, the obvious points of similarity between *El fabricante de fantasmas* and *Crime and Punishment* indicates one more literary precedent utilized by Arlt.<sup>13</sup> Mirta Arlt, indeed, calls *El fabricante de fantasmas* "la más dostoiévskiana" of Arlt's works.<sup>14</sup> The focal point of comparison is provided by the protagonist. Pedro, like Raskolnikov, feels that his superior intelligence constitutes a supermorality which justifies his acts, including murder. He seems absolutely indifferent to the fact that he has killed his wife, exclaiming casually to his conscience: *¡He matado a mi mujer! ¡Y bien! ¿Qué hay?* (I, II, i). Pedro then reveals his own "superman" theory as he rationalizes the murder of his wife by insisting that he will create innumerable *fantasmas*, whose creation she would have obstructed: *He matado, sí, pero daré vida a innumerables fantasmas... Ella era la enemiga de mi futuro* (I, II, i). Moreover, Pedro, in the same way as Raskolnikov, subconsciously desires to be punished for his crime, as affirmed by Phillip Rahv: *in spite of all his [Raskolnikov's]*



protestations to the contrary, he is prostrate with guilt and the yearning for punishment.<sup>15</sup> Dostoyevsky's protagonist insists that he feels neither guilt nor remorse for his brutal act and yet his need to confess to Sonia and then Porfiry Petrovich demonstrates that he is far more disturbed for having committed his crime than he realized. Raskolnikov and Pedro are deeply torn by the same inner conflict between the logical belief that they should feel no remorse for the murder of *inferior beings* and their conscience which insists that they had, in fact, committed an evil deed. The intentionality of the parallel is further underscored when, as the judge continues to question Pedro about the crime, Pedro specifically observes a similarity in technique between his procedure and that of Raskolnikov's pursuer, Porfiry Petrovich: *usted viene a mi casa plagiando el procedimiento del juez de Crimen y castigo* (II, I, iv). The judge, as with Petrovich, believes that Pedro will ultimately punish himself for the murder: *Usted, sin necesidad de que un juez lo condenara, llegaría a condenarse* (III, I, iv). In Arlt's work, Pedro creates a play, *Los jueces ciegos*, in which he betrays himself. This is a clear indication of the character's subliminal longing to be punished for his crime, as in the case of Raskolnikov and indeed, in this connection, the judge pointedly alludes to the parallel with Dostoyevsky's work: *Usted pertenece a esa magnífica escuela que en el siglo pasado comenzó, con el sagacísimo Dostoiévsky, el análisis de la personalidad del degenerado...* (II, I, iv). Arlt himself admits, through these words of the judge, the direct influence of Dostoyevsky on *El fabricante de fantasmas*. Pedro unconsciously longs to be punished as evidence by his innumerable encounters with his bizarre *fantasmas*, symbols of his excruciating guilt. The executioner, for example, sees Pedro's torment as the origin and reason for the existence of himself and Pedro's other characters: *Nuestra naturaleza culpable tenía origen en este destino: torturar a un criminal* (III, II, ii). The hunchback's words, which spell out the mission of the *fantasmas* actually include the title of Dostoyevsky's work: *Tenemos que obligarte a confesar tu crimen. Por eso dije que íbamos a morir. Cuando hayas confesado tu delito tu delito comenzará el castigo* (III, II, ii). Raskolnikov wanders the streets longing to confess to every passerby. Pedro, in Arltian fashion, copes with the bizarre creations of imagination who strive to lead their culpable creator to perdition. While Raskolnikov has nightmares of recreating the murder of the pawnbroker, Pedro relives the murder scene with his grotesque embodiment of his anguish and remorse. In addition, considering Arlt's fascination with the theater and the fact that this is a play, Pedro's confession to the public is in the form of *Los jueces ciegos*.

In conclusion, although Roberto Arlt was inspired by other writers and traditions, it is obvious that his works are not mere exercises in imitation. The nightmarish quality of Arlt's work is perhaps his characteristic

personal contribution. The horrifying dream sequences, the gruesome characters, the insecurity and helplessness of the protagonists, often take on the characteristics of the *fantastic grotesque* as is evident in *El fabricante de fantasmas*. The obvious inference is that the author's mental torture and alienation from his environment or prosaic reality inspired him to portray this attitude in his literary creations. That is to say, he incorporates literary traditions into his works as a means of communicating his own dissatisfaction with the world which surrounds him. The result of his effort shows Roberto Arlt to be a sensitive, creative artist whose literary voice deals in psychological and sociological realities significant in today's world.

## NOTAS

1 Mirta Arlt, "Recuerdos de mi padre," in *Ficción* (Set. Oct, 1968), 23.

2 For example, see: Walter Rela, "Argumentos renovadores de Roberto Arlt en el teatro argentino," in *Latin American Theater Review* (Spring 1980); David William Foster, "Roberto Arlt's *La isla desierta*: A Structural Analysis," in *Latin American Theater Review* (Fall, 1977); James Troiano, "Social Criticism and the Fantastic in Roberto Arlt's *La fiesta del hierro*," in *Latin American Theater Review* (Fall, 1978), "Cervantinism in Two Plays by Roberto Arlt," in *The American Hispanist* (Nov. 1978), "The Grotesque Tradition and the Interplay of Fantasy and Reality in the Theater of Roberto Arlt," in *Latin American Literary Review* (Spring-Summer, 1976), and "Pirandellism in the Theater of Roberto Arlt," in *Latin American Theater Review* (Fall, 1974).

3 Raúl Castagnino, *El teatro de Roberto Arlt* (La Plata: U. Nac. de La Plata, 1964), p. 48.

4 Mirta Arlt, *Roberto Arlt: teatro completo*, 2 vols. (Buenos Aires: Ed. Schapire, 1968), I, 16: *Sus personajes, como los de Pirandello, son seres rechazados por el autor, que andan a los tropezones con la implacable libertad.*

5 Angela Blanco Amores de Pagella, *Nuevos temas en el teatro argentino: La influencia europea* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Huemul, 1965), p. 52.

6 Frank N. Dauster, *Historia del teatro hispanoamericano* (México: Ed. de Andrea, 1966), p. 51.

7 Castagnino, p. 51.

8 See my article on Pirandello and Arlt listed in note 2.

9 Mirta Arlt, *Roberto Arlt: Teatro completo*. All quotations are from Vol. I of this two-volume edition of his theater. Arlt uses "cuadros" as well as acts in the play and this will be indicated in source identification.

10 Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana U.P., 1963), pp. 184-85.

11 For a detailed study of Arlt and the grotesque see my article listed in note 2.

12 Lee Byron Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grottesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana U.P., 1963), p. 9.

13 Dostoyevsky's influence in Arlt's narrative, however, has been well established. See, for example, Stasys Gostautus, *Buenos Aires y Arlt [Dostoievski, Martínez Estrada y Escalabrini Ortiz]* (Madrid: Insula, 1977), p. 258.

14 Mirta Arlt, *Roberto Arlt...*, I, iii.

15 Philip Rahv, "Dostoyevsky: *Crime and Punishment*, in *Dostoyevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Rene Wellek (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 353.