

Pirandellism in the Theatre of Roberto Arlt

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When *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* was presented in Argentina in 1923, it inspired copious imitation, most of it unimpressive. In fact, most plays modeled on Pirandello were so poor that it prompted Enzo Eloisi in 1937 to write a satirical play entitled *Nada de Pirandello, por favor*.¹ It is apparent that Arlt did not want to be classified with the imitators of Pirandello and for this reason the evening before the opening of *El fabricante de fantasmas* he wrote that there were in his play other sources of inspiration besides Pirandello.² Critics, nevertheless, insist, and rightfully so, on Pirandello's technical and thematic influence on Arlt's theatre in general. Significantly, they are also in agreement on the superiority of Arlt's plays in contrast to other playwrights who were inspired by Pirandello. Mirta Arlt,³ Blanco Amores de Pagella,⁴ and Frank Dauster⁵ all consider Arlt as one of the most important playwrights influenced by Pirandello. This inspiration is most strongly felt in three plays: *Trescientos millones* (1932), *Saverio el cruel* (1936), and *El fabricante de fantasmas* (1936). It must be noted, however, that Arlt's work is not a mere imitation of Pirandello. There is a unique quality in his plays which emanates generally from a propensity toward social criticism and the utilization of grotesque elements. These distinguishing factors will be analyzed along with the similarities between Arlt and Pirandello.

Trescientos millones, Arlt's first play, concerns a poor servant girl who escapes from prosaic reality by imagining an inheritance of three hundred million pesos and creating a chimerical world inhabited by characters who often appear more real than the creator herself. The characters which emanate from the servant's prolific imagination have much in common with Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*: they must play fixed roles which are imagined by their creators and, in addition, they maintain independent identities outside the sphere of their creator's influence.

The same ambiguity Pirandello injects into the reality of his six characters is apparent in Arlt. The father, for example, in *Sei personaggi* . . . continually

insists that his suffering is as authentic as any flesh and blood person and not mere theatre. In the prologue of *Trescientos millones* Arlt intrigues the audience by listing characters as 'fantasmas.' These 'fantasmas' are supposed figments of the imagination, which at the same time are allowed to live independently of their creators, assuming very human characteristics. They discuss the meaning of life and existence, complain about their creators, and display pride and sorrow, as Arlt goes to all extremes to prove their humanity.

In the presentation of characters in the first act, Arlt distinguishes between their various levels of reality just as Pirandello does in *Ciascuno a suo modo*. Arlt lists 'la sirvienta' as a *personaje real*. *Personajes de humo* are: "La Muerte," Rocambole, "Galán," and "El Capitan."

In precisely the same way that Pirandello defines the different spheres of reality in *Ciascuno a suo modo* and *Sei personaggi . . .* and then sets out to make the difference between these two realms ambiguous, Arlt purposely confuses the distinction between the *personaje real* and the *personaje de humo*.

The technique of the rehearsal, so splendidly conceived by Pirandello in *Sei personaggi . . .*, is used also by Arlt in order to create the obscured boundaries between the realms of reality and fantasy in scenes with the "galán." The servant imagines a "galán" whom she wishes will court her. Although the servant is the supposed creator or author of the action, it is the "galán" who creates his own romantic scene; that is, while he is forced to play a specific role he still exercises considerable freedom in his interpretation of the part.⁶ The line of demarcation between creator and character is again extremely tenuous, for once more the creation acquires a status of virtual equality with its creator. This unorthodox relationship gives the spectator the impression of witnessing a work in progress: a love scene which is revised and reworked before their eyes. Everything that the "galán" attempts or suggests is rejected by the servant; she declines his offer to kneel or play the melancholy lover. The servant's dissatisfaction with the "galán" makes him finally protest: "¿Puede decirme qué papel hago yo aquí?" "¿Soy yo o es usted la que se tiene que declarar?"⁷ (Acto primero, p. 76) The elements which make the scene real, while it is supposedly in the servant's imagination, and the similarity the love scene shares with a rehearsal combine to heighten the air of ambiguity of the entire scene. It is not reality and yet it is simply not fiction.⁸

The duplicity becomes even more involved when the servant and the "galán" change roles: "Haga de cuenta que yo soy el hombre y usted la mujer," she says (Acto primero, p. 77). Now the "galán" has become the audience and the servant the character. This inversion specifically recalls *Sei personaggi . . .* and *Ciascuno a suo modo*. In the former play we see the characters amuse themselves as the actors attempt to act out their tragedy; in the latter the public attacks the actors whom they feel are falsifying the drama of their real lives. In *Trescientos millones*, when the "galán" becomes annoyed, the servant simply reminds him of her inheritance. One anticipates that she will give the more natural response: "I am the author, you the character." When instead she states "Yo tengo trescientos millones," she is converting fiction into reality by making the fiction a practical instrument. The "galán" must obey her because she has money, and for no other reason.

Arlt's social preoccupation, not at all apparent in Pirandello, is highly evident in *Trescientos millones*. The servant realizes that the fulfillment of her dreams would never be possible without a great deal of money. Therefore, the starting point of her chimerical escape is "trescientos millones," the importance of which is accentuated by the fact that this is the play's title. Jaime Giordano comments on the significance of wealth for the poor in Arlt's works: "La riqueza puede hacer olvidar la angustia metafísica, puede distraer el alma. En cambio, la pobreza dilata todas las desesperaciones."⁹

In the servant's imaginary journey, the captain explains to her that this money is the sole reason for the woman's newly gained importance: "Cuando se tienen trescientos millones hay que fijarse en todo. . . . Si no fuera así tanto derecho tendría a fijarse y a tener pretensiones el que no tiene un centavo como el que es multimillonario, como usted" (Acto primero, p. 74). Arlt very often describes the subservient behavior of the poor toward their wealthier counterparts. In *Trescientos millones*, the servant is presented almost as a slave to the "patrona" whose harsh voice or shrill service bell awakens the unfortunate woman to her menial tasks. Ironically, in the servant's fantasy world it is the three hundred million pesos which enslave the characters to her.

Probably the single most outstanding trait in Arlt's works which differentiates his work from Pirandello's is the Argentinian's utilization of the grotesque tradition in literature. Nothing is ever certain in the grotesque world, in which life might be compared to walking on the edge of a precipice from which one might fall at any moment. Man's inability to foresee imminent dangers or to understand clearly his immediate environs supports the conviction that surprise is a fundamental component of the grotesque tradition.¹⁰

The reader or spectator is often suddenly and unexpectedly flung into a confused and unpredictable world; a seemingly tranquil moment very often literally explodes into a violent nightmare. The world of the grotesque generally involves "the ludicrous demon," dreams, carnivals, and the mask and face motif. All of these elements are apparent in Arlt's plays. Each is presented in order to accentuate the unexpected nature of the grotesque world where fantasy and dreams are confused with reality and the dangerous and harmless are impossible to distinguish. Dreams and "the ludicrous demon" are most evident in *Trescientos millones*.

The mysterious world of dreams is particularly appropriate for the artist with a grotesque vision of life.¹¹ The artist first lures the character, and consequently the reader or spectator, into believing that he can distinguish dream from reality only to shock him into the awareness that his original perception was erroneous.

The dream world acquires more importance than the real world in *Trescientos millones*. The servant submerges herself in her fantasy world and is awakened only by the voice of the "patrona" or the ringing of the service bell. The dream-like quality of the play is in clear contrast to Pirandello who also presents dreamers as the main characters (Enrico IV) but shows mainly their interaction with other people. Probably *Trescientos millones* is closer to *Sei personaggi* . . . in this sense because there is an ambiguous distinction in both works between the literary 'personaggi' and real people. Nevertheless, Pirandello still does not create the illusion of the grotesque dream world as Arlt does.

This grotesque unpredictability is apparent also in what Lee Byron Jennings calls "the ludicrous demon."¹² No one or nothing can be trusted or predicted. A monster might be transformed into a clown or prince or vice versa. Dante's Geryon in *The Inferno* appears as an innocuous, or even charming, young man while in reality he is a monster who will devour everything in sight. The grotesque world and consequently Arlt's works are filled with unpredictable freaks and demons. Death in *Trescientos millones* is a clear example of this bizarre type of creature. The entrance of a personified death would strike terror in the heart of anyone. Nevertheless, Death in Arlt's play carries a sense of humor. It first reprimands the servant for not offering a chair, consequently complains about the general untidiness of the servant's quarters, explains that the panacea for all ills is deviled ham, and then lecherously touches the servant's body. Death changes from an extremely fastidious, complaining type to a lustful individual. In short, Arlt presents Death in a completely unexpected way, which accentuates the absolute unpredictability of the world.

El fabricante de fantasmas is the play most strongly influenced by Pirandello, again particularly compared to *Ciascuno a suo modo* and *Sei personaggi*. . . . The play concerns a dramatist who murders his wife and is consequently pursued by his own characters and led to his death. Arlt's relationship with Pirandello can be noted in these elements: self-conscious theatre, the play-within-a-play technique, commentary and criticism of the inner play, a breakdown of aesthetic distance, the creation of different levels of reality, and a fixed but autonomous role for the characters.

Similar to Pirandello in his self-conscious theatre, Arlt concerns himself with the creative process in *El fabricante de fantasmas*. The protagonist compares himself to a character in a play and 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.

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 eyes. 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 are autonomous; the author's contribution is merely a passive notation of these independent unfolding existences. Pedro at times expresses unhappiness with the way the scene progresses, in much the same way as the servant does in *Trescientos millones* and the manager in *Sei personaggi*. . . . The audience in this way receives the impression that it is viewing a rehearsal or a play-within-a-play. This produces a tension similar to that between the actors and the characters in *Sei personaggi*. . . . 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: "Dirijase al galán" (Acto primero, p. 127). 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" (Acto primero, p. 128). This is a comparison which 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" (Acto primero, p. 128).

The second act begins with commentaries and criticism of the work by Pedro and his friends, reflecting Arlt's concern not only for the creative process itself but for the critical perspective; this is a dual focus which he shares with Pirandello. In *Ciascuno a suo modo*, for example, Pirandello presents spectators and critics who comment on the work as it is taking place. Arlt, using Pirandello's technique, purposely heightens the illusion that one is viewing a work in progress, the creating of a play, rather than a completed play.

This effect is augmented by Pirandello's and Arlt's 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. In Pirandello's play, aesthetic distance is broken down as Delia Moro literally invades the stage from the audience; *El fabricante de fantasmas* has no melodramatic confrontation. The judge makes it quite clear that he realizes the parallels between what occurs in the inner play and the murder of Pedro's wife, but quietly and firmly insists that Pedro will eventually confess of his own accord.

In *El fabricante de fantasmas*, Arlt's bizarre dream sequences, not at all evident in Pirandello, acquire an even more nightmarish quality than in *Trescientos millones*, and the ambiguity between dream and reality is effectively presented. Two tense scenes illustrate this characteristic. In the first, Pedro relaxes at home when his servant informs him that some visitors wish to see him. It appears to be a completely normal occurrence and the presence of a very real servant accentuates this. Nevertheless, the visitors are a grotesque group of characters from Pedro's works including: a hangman, a prostitute, a hunchback, and a cripple. The antagonism between the butler and the characters heightens the tension in this scene which borders on reality and chimera. The servant eventually departs upon hearing the bizarre group insist that they are Pedro's children. Arlt purposely emphasizes the vividly realistic details in the nightmarish scene stressing the inability to distinguish reality from fantasy.

The uncertainty between these two realms is even more apparent in a grotesque horror scene which occurs later in the play: Pedro attempts to escape from his "fantasmas" in Europe. He feels confident that he is finally freed from these bizarre creatures which emanate from his conscience, when he meets a charming masked lady at a carnival and tries to convince her to unmask. She finally acquiesces and the horrified Pedro looks upon a face which is identical to that of his murdered wife. Later, when he un masks the woman's husband he first finds the face of the judge who pursues him, and after that, he finds the face of the hunchback character who terrorizes him at home. The absolute initial tranquility of the scene is brusquely transformed into a horrifying inferno. The mask

theme and carnival setting accentuate the unpredictability of the grotesque world. The carnival is perhaps the most marvellous location for grotesqueries, for here we find bizarre freaks and terrifying masks in abundance.¹³ At a masquerade or carnival the dangerous and harmless are indistinguishable because everything is cloaked in strange disguises. Here Arlt presents what Kayser calls "the fantastic grotesque with its oneiric worlds,"¹⁴ where demons and monsters lurk behind masks in dream or carnival sequences. In short, Arlt's unique contribution to Pirandello's depiction of the relativity of reality in theatre is the Argentinian's use of the grotesque world of terror, nightmares, and unpredictability.

Arlt's *Saverio el cruel* is a play most similar to Pirandello's *Enrico IV*. In Pirandello's drama, the protagonist falls from a horse while masquerading as King Henry of Germany, and comes to believe that his fictional role has become reality. Pirandello effectively illustrates the relativity of madness by alternating Henry's apparent lunacy with glimpses of obvious rationality. Moreover, the servants are hired to cooperate with Henry's fantasy, as some begin to accept it as reality. In the final moments of the work, Henry is regrettably forced to re-enter his world of madness for protection, because he has murdered the lover of his mistress and the perpetrator of his original accident. Ironically, lunacy has become the infelicitous shelter for Henry from punishment for his crime.

The similarities in theme and plot between *Enrico IV* and *Saverio el cruel* are striking. Nevertheless, it is also quite apparent that there is no mere mechanical imitation of Pirandello, but an original and inspired portrayal of the illusive nature of reality. In *Saverio el cruel* a group of wealthy young people are instigated by their friend Susana into creating a fantasy for the dairyman Saverio. It is apparently nothing more than a joke in rather poor taste. Saverio is told that Susana is victimized by the insane illusion that she is a princess who has been robbed of her kingdom and is pursued by a cruel colonel. Susana's friends inform the dairyman that the only way she can regain her sanity is by someone acting out the role of the colonel; then they proceed to reveal that he should play the role to aid the unfortunate lady. Initially, the dairyman is skeptical, but he soon accepts.

All Susana's friends play roles in order to lure Saverio into Susana's farce, in the same way that Henry's employees act out his fantasy in *Enrico IV*. The principal difference is that Arlt initially maintains the illusion of Susana's sanity while Pirandello insists at first that Henry is deranged. Arlt's play, however, becomes increasingly complicated as Saverio apparently begins to accept his role of colonel as reality. He not only acts out the role alone, but with the servant, Simona, and Susana's friends. The dairyman, as colonel, even purchases a guillotine in order to maintain his power by eliminating his enemies. Thus, an apparently rational person has become insane in *Saverio el cruel* while an obviously deranged person changes to normal in *Enrico IV*.

Both works end with startling surprises. Saverio is informed by Susana's sister, Julia, that the entire plot concocted by Susana was a farce. Saverio sadly explains his return to normality. Susana, however, insists that the fiction was real, finally shooting Saverio and exclaiming: "Ha sido inútil, Coronel, que te disfrazaras de vendedor de manteca" (Acto tercero, p. 87, v. 2). The seemingly rational Susana was actually mad from the start. Arlt startles the spectators as he

demonstrates the total relativity of madness and reality. This tense murder scene accentuates the dramatist's desire to shock the public into accepting his premise. Similarly, Pirandello's seemingly rational Henry murders a man, and thereby becomes a prisoner of his mask of insanity. Henry must play the lunatic in order to be free of the law. In *Saverio el cruel*, the dying dairyman laments that Susana was indeed deranged, while the moribund victim in *Enrico IV* insists on Henry's sanity. Pirandello and Arlt create two fine dramas in which they vividly capture and communicate their views that life and man are not easily fixed and classified. Madness and sanity, like fantasy and reality, are two bridges which constantly connect at points which no one would ever imagine.

In direct contrast to Pirandello's drama, Arlt's *Saverio el cruel* reflects his social concerns. Here, Arlt underlines class distinctions in society. First, there is the marked difference between Susana and her wealthy friends and the dairyman Saverio. The former are consumed with so much leisure time that they have nothing better to do than reproduce an elaborate farce to deceive the dairyman. On the other hand, Saverio works so hard that he has never had time or desire to even dream. He tells them later: "Cuando ustedes me invitaron a participar de la farsa, como mi naturaleza estaba virgen de sueños espléndidos . . ." (Acto tercero, p. 83).

Saverio's violent reaction to his role also illustrates Arlt's negative view of class distinctions. All his life the dairyman was forced to be subservient to his wealthier customers, such as Susana and her friends. When Saverio changes uniform from dairyman to colonel he is transformed from a timid, harmless figure into a violent and possibly dangerous man. It is as if the change from one figurative mask into another actually has created a different person. Saverio's extreme reaction to what was believed a farcical role is explained in part by the fact that he had never before had the opportunity to exercise authority. He had always lived the part of the "siervo." Saverio rebels here against the frustration and repression that had been contained inside him after many years of being treated as an inferior by the frivolous rich. Giordano comments on the kind of radical response demonstrated by Saverio as follows: "El siervo nada posee, y su espiritualidad lo lleva a la ilusión, a la nada, al rencor, a la violencia. Debe elegir entre la obediencia o la blasfemia."¹⁵

Arlt's inspired use of the oneiric element is completely absent in Pirandello. This time, however, the dream sequences indicate the playwright's animosity toward war. In the first dream, Saverio conjures up the image of a salesman who wears a mask which gives his face the appearance of a skeleton. The visitor is the representative of an armaments factory, which has sold heavily to numerous governments. Arlt's anti-military message in the dream constitutes a prelude to the vicious attack on the armament industry in *La fiesta del hierro*. It is interesting to note that the salesman in Saverio's dream represents a corporation named Armstrong, precisely the name of the company in the later play.

In the second dream, Saverio imagines a loudspeaker which announces and comments on his belligerent actions. Saverio complacently remarks: "Buena publicidad. El populacho admira a los hombres crueles" (II, ix). As in his well-known short story "La luna roja" and *La fiesta del hierro*, the playwright

effectively captures the nightmarish tension of war as the loudspeaker accentuates each frightening detail of a world on the brink of destruction.

As I have illustrated, there are obvious direct influences of Pirandello in Arlt's plays. For example, the treatrical presentation of the autonomy of characters and the interplay of fantasy and reality in *Trescientos millones* and *El fabricante de fantasmas* are clearly related to *Ciascuno a suo modo* and *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*. In addition, Arlt's treatment of the relativity of madness and sanity and of reality is reminiscent of *Enrico IV*. Nevertheless, an analysis of the works accentuates the originality of Arlt's theatre. The Argentinian does not merely reproduce mechanical imitations of Pirandello. Rather, Pirandellian themes and techniques are transformed and thus integrated into Arlt's own bizarre literary style and *Weltanschauung*. The dream worlds, grotesque elements, and concern for social injustice clearly distinguish Arlt from Pirandello. Unlike the many Pirandello imitators initially inspired by the appearance of *Sei personaggi . . .* in Buenos Aires in 1923, he has created moving works which are the reason interest in his plays lives on.

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Notes

1. Angela Blanco Amores de Pagella, *Nuevos temas en el teatro argentino. La influencia europea* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Huemel, S. A., 1965), p. 51.
2. Raúl Castagnino, *El teatro de Roberto Arlt* (La Plata: Universidad de La Plata, 1964), p. 45.
3. Mirta Arlt, *Roberto Arlt: Teatro completo* (2 vols., Buenos Aires: Editorial 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."
4. Blanco Amores de Pagella, p. 52.
5. Frank N. Dauster, *Historia del teatro hispanoamericano* (Mexico: Ediciones de Andrea, 1966), p. 51.
6. Thomas Bishop, *Pirandello and the French Theater* (New York: New York University Press, 1960), p. 39: Bishop discusses the fixed role of the characters in *Sei personaggi . . .* which parallels the 'galán's' situation in *Trescientos millones*.
7. Mirta Arlt, *Roberto Arlt: Teatro completo*, V. I. All quotations are from this two volume edition of his theatre.
8. One must recall *Sei personaggi . . .* again where the entire tragedy of the characters seems to hover in a vague, ill-defined sphere between life and fantasy. The contradictory remarks of the other actors and the father adds to this effect, as the other actors say of the murder: "No it's only make believe, it's only pretence!" while the father insists: "Pretence? Reality, sir, reality." Pirandello, *Naked Masks* (New York: E. P. Dutton Co., Inc., 1962).
9. Jaime Giordano. "Roberto Arlt o la metafísica del siervo," *Atenea*, XLV, CLXVI, No. 419 (1968), 74.
10. Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. 184-185.
11. Paul Ilie, *The Surrealistic Mode in Spanish Literature* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1968), pp. 24-25: Ilie describes the use of dreams in Machado's grotesque works.
12. Lee Byron Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grottesque in German Post-Romantic Prose* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), p. 11: "Death or the Devil very often puts on a fool's garb, or the clown becomes a devil."
13. Jennings, p. 20: "The carnival or circus often serves as the background for a grotesque situation, partly because of its affinity for freaks and monstrous masked figures and partly because of its radical departure from the conventions of every day life, its creation of a fantastic world in which standard of identity and seriousness no longer apply."
14. Kayser, p. 186.
15. Giordano, p. 95.