

## Egon Wolff's *Los invasores*: A Play Within a Dream

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As its title suggests, Egon Wolff's *Los invasores* (1962) deals with an invasion—the invasion and conquest of a city by the poor people or *harapientos* who live on its outskirts. The conquerors, obviously bent on exacting vengeance for the oppression they have so long endured, quickly destroy all vestiges of the capitalist way of life and impose a rule which, although it has anarchic overtones, is essentially socialist in nature. The destruction of capitalism and imposition of socialist doctrine is exemplified by the confiscation and melting down of silverware, jewelry, and other precious items to make tools, the equal division of clothing among all the people, and the fact that every woman, regardless of background, is sent to do manual labor in the hills.

The names given the two principal characters also point to the overthrow of capitalism by a socialist-oriented ideology. The wealthy industrialist on whose house the action focuses has the good Anglo-German name Meyer, while the chief spokesman for the *harapientos* is named China. There is, in addition, a reference to an event occurring on July 26, 1948, and since July 26 is the day on which the Cuban Revolution began and 1948 the year of the Chinese People's Revolution, the date clearly suggests that the uprising depicted in the play is inspired, at least in part, by these two revolutions.

Late in the play, China remarks: "La riqueza se mete en uno con raíces muy profundas. . . Llega a ser una segunda naturaleza, que deforma toda la realidad. . ."<sup>1</sup> These lines are highly significant in that they are suggestive both of the play's message and of the context or ambiance in which this message is couched. The ambiance, as we shall presently see, is that of a deformed or dream-reality. The message, meanwhile, is a warning to the wealthy that the poor have the capacity to rise up and overthrow existing governments, and that such an upheaval is inevitable if the wealthy continue to reject or distort this reality by ignoring the plight of the oppressed.

If in *Los invasores* "the message were the thing," the work would by now justly have been relegated to that already imposing list of social novels and plays

which have haunted Spanish American literature for much of this century. Happily, however, "the play's the thing," and thesis, although it is important, is subordinate to rather than dominant over the other aspects of the work.<sup>2</sup> Primary in importance is the manner in which the dramatist structures the play around a surrealist dream-reality, and the skill with which he blends the principal themes—guilt and fear—into it.<sup>3</sup> The thesis or message is carefully encased within structure and theme, and deftly projected through them.

As the play begins, Lucas Meyer and his wife arrive home from a party and begin to talk animatedly of their happiness and of the role wealth has played in bringing it about. Pietá, Meyer's wife, soon interjects a note of anxiety, however, by mentioning her fear that their happiness might not be as secure as it would seem. Her immediate concern, she continues, stems in part from several recent, disquieting events involving the *harapientos* of the city. That very evening, for example, she had seen some of them moving about in the shadows, while a few days earlier the janitor of the school their son attends had built a bonfire with the coats of the students and no one had dared reprimand him for it. Meyer attempts to dismiss his wife's anxiety by assuring her that the poor are completely harmless and that "el mundo está perfectamente bien en sus casillas" (p. 131). The two then exit via the stairway and the stage lights dim.

Moments later a window pane is broken. A hand reaches in, unlocks the window, and through it enters a man dressed in rags but wearing an immaculate stiff white collar and a carnation. Meyer, hearing the commotion, comes down and threatens to shoot the intruder if he does not leave immediately. The latter, who we soon learn is China, makes no effort to go, but rather softly chides Meyer for making threats he cannot carry out.

When Meyer discovers that he, in fact, cannot bring himself to pull the trigger, he asks for the man's identity. China responds: "Me llaman 'China,' y usted es Lucas Meyer el industrial. . . . Y ahora que hemos cumplido con esta primera formalidad, puede irse a la cama, si quiere. . . . Comprendo que es suficiente para usted para ser el primer encuentro. Que Dios acompañe a usted y a su bella esposa, en su sueño. . . . Buenas noches" (p. 135). Meyer, full of outrage, again resorts to futile threats, and he at last becomes so exasperated and unnerved by China's mystifying confident manner that he relents and says that he may sleep there that night but must leave early the next morning. Meyer then exits again.

Shortly thereafter Toletole, China's girlfriend, enters through the window and, as before, the entrance is heralded by the appearance of a hand in the window. China admonishes Toletole for not waiting until the next day, as they had agreed, but she exclaims that it is too cold to sleep in the doghouse and that the person with whom she was to share it kept pushing her out. Meyer, hearing new noises, comes back down, and it is at this point that fear clearly begins to take hold of him—fear of either a general invasion by the *harapientos* or of an attack on him and his family by some of these people. The concern about a personal attack springs from a deep-rooted sense of guilt over having secretly murdered a partner years before in order to gain complete control of the business they had shared. Even though the death has been ruled a suicide, Meyer still fears that the partner's family, which has been left destitute, may seek revenge.

The entire city, we discover, has been invaded even though within the play Meyer's house serves as the focal point for the invasion. Paralleling Meyer's mounting fear of this invasion and his feeling of impotence in the face of it, there is in the play a progressive deformation or disorganization of reality. Conversations are tinged with the unusual or irrational, and various scenes and actions are distorted by elements of the grotesque and the bizarre. In the first scene, for example, the frequent repetition by Pietá of certain words—particularly "miedo," "absurdo," and "rico"—seems strange; and in the conversations between China and Meyer the latter appears much too naive for the astute businessman he is.

When Toletole enters Meyer's living room early in the play, she hangs up a girlie calendar she has brought for China. Such a conspicuous object would normally serve as a set-up for a subsequent scene or comment, but in this case it is never alluded to again. Later that evening China has Toletole dance for Meyer to repay his "hospitality," and dance music from an unexplained source accompanies her: "*(Resuena una música danzarina, de ritmo rápido, tocada en un solo instrumento de viento, a cuyo compás Toletole comienza a ejecutar una danza desabrida y triste. . .)*" (p. 141).

At another point later in the play, three strange figures appear to glide in through the walls of the living room and begin to dance in a circle around Marcela, the daughter of Meyer and Pietá. The dance is described as "*un ritual distorsionado y grotesco*" (p. 168). The three, describing themselves as "Espectros del hambre," have their faces smudged and are adorned with dry branches. They profess to be there to present gifts to Marcela, but their offerings and comments are grotesque:

EL COJO.—*(Sacando un esqueleto seco de perro del saco que carga sobre sus espaldas, se lo presenta serio.)* ¿Has visto alguna vez un perro muerto en un charco de barro a la luz de la luna? *(Lo sacude ante ella.)*

TOLETOLE.—*(Saca un estropajo amarillo, que es un viejo vestido ajado de mujer pobre. Y se lo pone sobre la falda.)* ¿O una mariposa amarilla aleteando en una botella de cerveza?

ALI BABA.—*(Saca una pata de palo quebrada.)* ¿O un puño de esclavo revolviendo una torta de crema?

EL COJO.—¡Mi pata! . . . ¡Mi linda patita! ¡Devuélveme mi pata! (p. 169)

This deformation or distortion culminates in a frenzied scene replete with two nuns who appear out of the darkness to ask for money; projections (called for in the stage directions) of eyes, faces, hands and shoes of beggars which are flashed on one wall; the voices of a chorus, and of two children who chant a strange, disjointed story involving trees, ants and fear; and the appearance of several beggars who claim to be people Meyer had dismissed without justification. Meyer, whose resistance has already been weakened by his feelings of fear and guilt and by isolated appearances of each of the figures mentioned above, falls completely apart when all of them come before him at once accompanied by grotesque projections and a haunting chorus. Convinced now that China and

his friends are wreaking vengeance for the death of the partner, and unable to bear any further torment, Meyer shouts, in utter desperation: "¡Basta . . . Basta! ¡Yo lo maté! ¡Yo lo maté!" (p. 188)

At this point Pietá calls out to him to ask what is wrong, and we discover that all has been a nightmare. Meyer, when he realizes he has been dreaming, feels great relief, but is still somewhat troubled by how real everything seemed. He tells his family that it was just a foolish dream, so foolish, in fact, that he had even dreamed that their son's coat had been burned in a bonfire by the school janitor. This comment by Meyer, however, astounds his son Bobby, who exclaims that it actually had been burned the day before. As the play ends, Meyer and his family are staring at each other in stunned silence as we see a hand appear at the window, knock out a pane, and begin to manipulate the lock.<sup>4</sup>

The viewer or reader of *Los invasores* may well be perplexed by the disjointed conversations, actions and scenes which are found throughout the play. When he learns, however, that the reality presented has been a dream-reality, he realizes that these elements were not bound by conscious logic, and that, in fact, the ultimate dramatic effect provided by the dream is greatly heightened by this kind of presentation.

The principal themes in *Los invasores* are, as mentioned previously, guilt and fear. Meyer's feeling of guilt over the murder of his partner and his fear of revenge for this murder appear, in fact, to be the underlying causes for the nightmare he is experiencing. The statement that wealth deforms reality also takes on added significance in the light of these themes because it is wealth—the ill-begotten wealth resulting from murder—which brings on the feelings of guilt and fear, and these, in turn, are the springboards for the nightmare and the disjointed reality it holds.

In an allegorical sense, the confrontation in the play could be depicted as occurring between Meyer and his conscience, the latter being personified in China and the other characters. Conscience struggles with Meyer to show him that he has been living in a deformed reality and to convince him of the need to mend his ways, as can be exemplified by one of China's statements: "El pueblo no se ha alzado contra usted; esa obsesión le viene de creer que su vida tiene alguna importancia. . . ¿Es tan difícil pensar que eso, ahí afuera, es sólo una cruzada de buena fe? ¿Un juego ingenuo de la justicia? ¡Venga! Lo invito a mirar la realidad. Es un espectáculo que recrea el espíritu. (*Meyer está clavado al suelo.*) Venga, únase a nosotros. Venga. Sígame." (187) Also noteworthy in this passage are the use of the words "obsesión," "ahí afuera," "juego," and "espectáculo," all of which can be related to the context of a dream-reality.

Imagery, which is used with great effectiveness in *Los invasores*, is closely allied with theme, and, like it, is intertwined with structure. Throughout the play there are references to *sombras* and to people emerging out of the darkness, and these shadows and areas of darkness are representative of the shadowy world (i. e. dream world) in which the action occurs.

Animal imagery is also prominent in the work. Pietá, in the opening scene, refers to the fear afflicting her as "un miedo animal," and Marcela says that the family is reacting to the invasion like "conejos asustados." More important, how-

ever, is the use of this imagery with relation to the *harapientos*, who are alluded to variously as "gato," "termitas," "animales," "perro," and "hormigas." Of particular interest is the image of the *harapientos* as "hormigas," because it is included in the chant of the two children. Some time before this chant is heard, Meyer refers to himself as being "firme como un roble" (p. 177), and there are two references to the *harapientos* as "hormigas rabiosas." In the children's chant, the symbolism of "árboles" and "hormigas" thus is rendered obvious:

NIÑITA.—Juanito, ¿te cuento el cuento de todos los árboles?

NIÑITO.—Cuenta. . .

NIÑITA.—Todos los árboles tenían tanto miedo de las hormigas, que cuando las vieron venir, se quedaron parados. . . Tiesecitos, esperando que les caminaron encima. . . (p. 182)

This chant is one of the components of the nightmare and, hence, of the dream-reality, and by incorporating into it imagery ("árboles," "hormigas") and theme ("miedo") the author skillfully weaves these two elements into the play's structure.

The characters in *Los invasores* are carefully drawn, and, as Margaret Peden states "the tension, the *drama* of the play, is expressed *through* the characters, not merely *by* them."<sup>5</sup> Gabriela Mora, in her "Notas sobre el teatro chileno actual," suggests that the characters, while they are convincing, are really symbolic of various social classes.<sup>6</sup> Peden questions this interpretation, particularly with regard to China and Toletole: "The two remaining principal characters especially are just the opposite of stereotypes. Toletole, the sad little clown, and the ambiguous China are magically real characters; China is never really defined, and the development of the play lifts both characters into the world of the unreal. It is the mystery of China and Toletole that makes *Los invasores* such a powerful play."<sup>7</sup> China and Toletole are indeed magically real characters who are lifted into the world of the unreal, as Peden suggests, but I believe that even the other principal characters—Meyer, Pietá, Bobby and Marcela—are really convincing only within the context of a magical or dream-reality.<sup>8</sup> Otherwise it is difficult to reconcile the extreme naiveté of Meyer in his conversations with China with the astuteness and guile which has made him wealthy, and equally difficult to accept the exceedingly simplistic views of Bobby, Marcela and Pietá. Considered, however, within the framework of a distorted dream-reality—as they must be—both the simplistic and the contradictory become quite natural and convincing. The play, as mentioned earlier, may also be taken as allegory, and at this level each of the characters is a representative figure if not a stereotype.

A superficial consideration of the structure of *Los invasores* would seem to indicate that the dream or nightmare begins after Lucas Meyer and his wife go upstairs to bed at the end of the first scene. It is at this juncture that China, himself a somewhat enigmatic character, enters the house. The striking contrast between the carnation and stiff white collar he is wearing and the rags which make up the rest of his attire is the first concrete manifestation of the disjointedness which gradually comes to pervade the entire work, and this contrast, thus, seems to be launching the dream-reality. When one looks at the play more care-

fully, however, it becomes apparent that the opening scene is contained within the dream or, perhaps, constitutes a second level of dream, and there is the suggestion that indeed the entire play may fall within a dream-reality.

In the conversation between Meyer and his wife at the beginning, she informs him that their son's coat had been destroyed a few days earlier by the school janitor. At the end, nonetheless, Meyer says that he dreamed that this had happened. When the son then states that it actually had occurred, and on the previous day, all the members of the family, including the wife, stare at each other in astonishment. One might argue that Meyer, still upset over his nightmare, merely thinks (dreams?) that he has dreamed the episode with the coat when actually he had learned of it from his wife the night before. The opening scene in such a circumstance would reflect reality rather than dream. This interpretation, which rests chiefly on the element of confusion (or on an error by the playwright), seems less dramatically plausible than the dream interpretation, however, and does not explain the contradiction in the time given in the two accounts—a few days ago vs. yesterday.

Also pointing to the likelihood that the initial scene falls within the dream is the nature of the dialogue found in it. This dialogue, while not really abnormal, does seem unusual—an effect achieved primarily through the frequent repetition by Pietá of the words “ricos,” “absurdo,” and “miedo,” all of which have, of course, special meaning in the play. The line “¡La vida es un sueño . . . un sueño!” (p. 127), which appears in the very first speech, could also be suggestive of the presence of a dream-reality, as could Pietá's question: “Pero, ¿es sólido todo eso?” (p. 127).<sup>9</sup>

Yet another bit of circumstantial evidence lending support to the theory is the fact that Pietá, in the opening scene, feels very much threatened by the *harapientos*, and, in fact, begs to sleep in the room with Lucas that night. At play's end, however, she apparently is not in his room, and seems not to be at all concerned by, nor even aware of, the terrifying invasion of which Lucas speaks.

More important than any of the evidence presented above, nonetheless, is the way in which the dramatist makes use of the appearance of a hand at several points in the play. On two occasions in which he avails himself of this device, the symbolism at first seems obvious. China's entrance into the house is heralded by the appearance of his hand at the window, and the assumption might well be that it marks the beginning of the nightmare. Again at the very end of the play, a hand appears in the window, and its meaning would seem to be that the real invasion—the one prefigured by the dream—is now beginning. On two other less overt occasions, nevertheless, the playwright also employs the device of the appearing hand. The first, and most significant, comes at the very beginning. As the curtain rises, the stage is dimmed. After a few moments a hand reaches in and turns on the light, and then Meyer and wife enter. And later in the play, Toletole's entrance is signaled by the appearance of her hand at the window.

The hand at the beginning clearly suggests the presence of a dream-reality, and the fact that the author uses this device of the appearance of a hand both to begin and to end the play, as well as at two other moments in it, lends considerable strength, I believe, to the interpretation that the dream world neither begins

nor ends within the play, but rather that there is a beautifully executed presentation of a dream within a dream within a dream or, as Borges might put it, of circular dreams. The first two levels, as discussed above, are 1) the period beginning when Meyer and wife go up to bed and ending when Meyer appears to awaken from his nightmare; and 2) the period from the beginning of the play (or possibly from a time prior to the beginning) and ending when Meyer appears to awaken. The third and all-encompassing dream would extend, then, from beginning to end, or from some point prior to the beginning to some point after the end.

Further support for the interpretation that the entire play is encased in a dream-reality was provided by Egon Wolff himself when, in a recent letter, he stated: "En verdad, el mundo que pretende describir la obra, gira dentro de una realidad que es ilusoria, y las amenazas pertenecen al mundo de "lo posible"; son sueño, entonces. Sueño antes, durante y después de la acción."<sup>10</sup>

The notion of a circular configuration of dreams is employed by Borges in his "Ruinas circulares." This latter piece, which contains many references to circles, shows how the dreamer-protagonist is himself a dreamed being, and suggests, thus, an infinite series of concentric circles of dream-reality emanating from a single point of reality. Hence the entire story is within the framework of dream-reality. The same structural configuration might be applied to *Los invasores*<sup>11</sup> for, although the symbolism is less obvious, there is a recurring pattern of images and speeches in the play and one significant comment by Meyer near the end employing the word "círculos."<sup>12</sup>

The dramatic technique of using a dream to prefigure reality has, of course, a long literary tradition. It is seen in Calderón's *La vida es sueño* and J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*, among other works. Egon Wolff's originality in *Los invasores* does not, consequently, derive from the fact that he employs this technique but rather that he adds to it a new dimension. The dream-reality perceived in the play appears not as conscious reality but rather as the disjointed or distorted reality we often experience in a dream. Complementing this innovative presentation of dream-reality, and making the work even stronger, is the suggestion, through adroit use of theatrical devices, of the existence of multiple levels or circles of dreams within the play.

Within the moral framework, the hand can also be viewed as having symbolic value. Light has traditionally been equated with truth, and when the hand reaches in and switches on the light at the beginning of the play it serves to put us in the presence of truth. The hand at the end of the play, meanwhile, may represent a final attempt by the playwright to underscore that the rich have been warned repeatedly to show compassion for the poor and that each time they have disregarded the warning as though it were a dream. Its appearance at this juncture forces us to ask ourselves: "Is the invasion for real this time?"

In his *El gran teatro del mundo*, Calderón has the character Discreción repeatedly exhort man to "obrar bien, que Dios es Dios." Egon Wolff makes the same exhortation to the wealthy in *Los invasores*. In the latter work, however, the statement is not put directly, but rather finds its expression through the careful mixture of theme, imagery and thesis with a highly complex structure.

The result is one of the most compelling Spanish American plays of the past decade.

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## Notes

1. Egon Wolff, *Los invasores*, in *Teatro hispanoamericano contemporáneo*, ed. Carlos Solórzano (México, 1964), I, 175. All further quotations from the play will be from this edition, and will be identified by page numbers in parenthesis immediately following the quotation.

2. Frank N. Dauster, in his *Historia del teatro hispanoamericano. Siglos XIX y XX* (México, 1966, p. 91), speaks to the same point when he states that in *Los invasores* "el aparente realismo sirve para subrayar el elemento irreal."

3. Margaret S. Peden, in her "Egon Wolff" (an essay soon to be published, p. 14) has observed, in fact, that "Fear, possibly, is the key word in a study of Wolff's theatre."

4. Peden, in her study entitled "Three Plays of Egon Wolff" [*Latin American Theatre Review*, 3, No. 1 (Fall, 1970), 33], has aptly characterized the dramatic effect of the play's ending: "The discovery that the reality perceived has been a dream-reality underlines and emphasizes the terror of what is to come. The end of the nightmare is not an end; it is only the beginning."

5. Peden, "Three Plays . . .," p. 32.

6. Gabriela Mora, "Notas sobre el teatro chileno actual," *Revista Interamericana de Bibliografía*, XVIII, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec., 1968), 419.

7. Peden, "Three Plays . . .," p. 33.

8. Peden ["Egon Wolff," p. 11] describes the family members as "partial stereotypes": "The Meyers represent well-known bourgeois values. The son is a caricature of the self-serving liberal who knows nothing about real revolution, although it is true that he adapts more readily than other members of his family to their situation. The daughter Marcela is the most extreme of the family group, arrogant and totally intransigent."

9. Alonso Alegría, the Peruvian playwright and director, has commented that when he and a troupe staged *Los invasores*, they concluded that the only satisfactory way to present the opening scene was to do it in a clearly surrealistic manner [from a conversation with him in April, 1970]. Such a conclusion lends, I believe, added credence to the interpretation that the scene does fall within the dream. However, since we do not know until later that this first scene is within the dream, it may be that to play it as a surrealistic sequence would destroy the *illusion of reality* which, at this point, is important to deluding the audience.

10. In a personal letter from Egon Wolff, dated June 14, 1972.

11. Peden ["Three Plays . . .," . 34] alludes to "The circular construction basic to the concept of *Los invasores*," but does not elaborate.

12. The comment, "¡Estás hablando en círculos!", is made by Meyer in response to China's repeated but vague assertion that the poor are simply waiting for the moment to arrive: "CHINA.—Espero . . . / MEYER.—¿Esperas qué? / CHINA.—Que llegue el momento . . ." (176); and later: "CHINA.—Esperamos . . . / MEYER.—¿Esperan qué, por amor de Dios? / CHINA.—Que llegue el momento. / MEYER.—(See *levanta espantado*.) ¡Estás hablando en círculos! . . ." (178-79)