

Reinaldo Arenas's *Persecución*: Extra- and Intertextual Links to Virgilio Piñera

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Veo Electras por todas partes. Electras que me asaltan como esos copos de nieve cruel que nunca he visto. Si veo una silla es Electra. Si un peine, Electra, un espejo, el sol que se pone, estas losas, aquellas columnas. Todo es Electra. He ahí lo terrible. Esa mujer me persigue.—Clitemnestra, from Virgilio Piñera's *Electra Garrigó* (1941)

Nuestras cucarachas—o cucarachitas—piñerianas no están emparentadas con esa superestrella de los insectos modernos llamado Gregorio Samsa. Nuestra cucaracha ha sufrido y sufre la persecución, ... la habita. Ha hecho de esa persecución un modo de vida o de sobrevida. —Reinaldo Arenas, "La isla en peso con todas sus cucarachas" (1983)

Reinaldo Arenas (1943-1990) is one of Latin America's most innovative and groundbreaking literary voices of the twentieth century.¹ A prolific writer who overcame persecution and censorship in Cuba before he came to the United States in 1980 as part of the Mariel exodus, Arenas wrote nine novels, two novellas, four collections of short stories, a poetic trilogy, a book of poems, a collection of essays, an autobiography, and a dramatic work titled *Persecución*. Published in 1986, six years after his arrival in the United States, but begun in Cuba as early as 1972, *Persecución* is an audacious, critical, and experimental text that is quite singular within a literary oeuvre that explores more the possibilities of expression of fiction and the nuances of poetic verse than drama.² Although it is one of Arenas's most political texts, *Persecución* does not fall into simplistic political pamphleteering, but rather represents an artistically provocative counter attack, a vengeance against the

human race that has allowed and continues to allow reprehensible abuses of power.

Arenas's openly homosexual autobiography, *Antes que anochezca* (posthumously published in 1992), one of the most sexually uninhibited and liberating texts ever to come from Latin America and the Caribbean, and its subsequent translation into various languages, has brought Arenas considerable international recognition over the past few years. Indeed, the autobiography, slated to be made into a movie by film director Julian Schnabel, has been both a critical and commercial success. To date, critical works on Arenas have limited themselves to the author's fiction, essays, and autobiography; a relatively minor number of critics have studied his poetry. However, no scholar has yet ventured to seriously undertake an analysis of the dramatic work, *Persecución*.³

Persecución is divided into five acts that theoretically can be performed independently. Loosely tied together by the theme of persecution, each act relies on traditional dramatic devices (monologues, choruses, soliloquies) as well as more contemporary innovations (metatheatrical and absurdist techniques, the presence of a screen on stage that serves as a form of visual memory used to project images of Cuba). Although this work reintroduces many of the same concerns present in Arenas's other texts (i.e., themes of persecution and censorship, the writer as a militant voice challenging all forms of oppression, and so forth), it does so through a new vehicle, that of drama. One cannot help but ask why a writer who, for the most part, exploited fiction and poetry as modes of expression, ventured into the arena of drama? What new avenues of expression did this genre offer Arenas that were not available to him through fiction and poetry? To attempt to answer these extratextual questions, we need to turn our attention to one of Cuba's greatest twentieth-century dramatists, Virgilio Piñera (1912-1979), who was a friend as well as mentor to Reinaldo Arenas.

Arenas affirms the importance of Piñera as mentor and friend in *Antes que anochezca*. In the opening pages of the autobiography, Arenas, sick and desperate, addresses a photograph of Piñera hanging on a wall in his apartment: "Oyeme lo que te voy a decir, necesito tres años más de vida para terminar mi obra, que es mi venganza contra todo el género humano" (16). In fact, Arenas lived almost three more years, which gave him the necessary time to complete his final projects. Hence, he ends the introduction by thanking Piñera ("Gracias, Virgilio") for the time he gave him. A separate chapter of the autobiography is also dedicated to Piñera (105-108) in which Arenas

acknowledges at length the respect, admiration, and literary indebtedness he felt toward this man:

Yo visitaba a Virgilio Piñera en su casa a las siete de la mañana. Era un hombre de una laboriosidad incesante; se levantaba a las seis de la mañana, colaba café y a esa hora me daba cita para trabajar en mi novela *El mundo alucinante*. Nos sentábamos uno frente al otro. Lo primero que me dijo cuando comenzamos fue: “No creas que hago esto por algún interés sexual; lo hago por pura honestidad intelectual. Tú has escrito una buena novela, pero hay algunas cosas que hay que arreglar.” Virgilio, sentado frente a mí, leía una copia de la novela y donde consideraba que había que añadir una coma o cambiar una palabra por otra, así me lo decía. Siempre le estaré agradecido a Virgilio por aquella lección; era una lección, más que literaria, de redacción. Fue muy importante para un escritor delirante, como lo he sido yo, pero que carecía de una buena formación universitaria. Fue mi profesor universitario, además de mi amigo. (105)

Regardless of the specific dynamics of their friendship and how both men reacted to the hate and intolerance that surrounded them, it is apparent that Arenas related to and also saw a reflection of himself in Piñera.

Despite their generational differences, Piñera and Arenas were both persecuted in Cuba for their homosexuality. Piñera reacted to the oppression by living in constant fear and panic, and symbolically represented homosexual desire in obscure embedded images in his writings, while Arenas chose a more bohemian and sexually active life in Havana and became progressively more audacious in representing homosexual desire in his writings.⁴ Piñera’s initial support of the Cuban revolution quickly evaporated when on 11 October 1961 he was incarcerated for being homosexual. From that point on, condemned “al silencio y la negrura,”⁵ Piñera, according to most accounts, internally ostracized himself, living in fear and seldom publishing. In his article “Fleshing out Virgilio Piñera from the Cuban Closet,” José Quiroga examines what he calls Piñera’s silence (read as fear and repression but also as the silence of the heroic) as “the theatrical embodiment of an impasse that many Cuban homosexuals felt and continue to feel within the repression of a masculinist order that condemns them to support either the capitalist or the socialist version of a nightmare.”⁶

Piñera, like Arenas, was a multifaceted writer who, in his own right, wrote superb essays, poetry, novels, short stories, and dramatic works. Still,

despite his successes with fiction and poetry, Piñera is best remembered for his plays. More importantly, Piñera fundamentally saw himself above all as a dramatist. “Soy altamente teatral,” he writes in the introduction (tellingly titled “Piñera teatral”) to his *Teatro completo*, published in Cuba in 1960 shortly before he fell out of favor with the revolutionary government. In this essay, Piñera confesses his predilection for and fascination with the theater: “Pero con todo, y a pesar de todo, soy teatral. Es por ello que no he podido resistir al título de efecto, Piñera teatral y, lo que es de mayor importancia, hablar de mi teatro ... un poco a lo clown” (8). With strong connections to the European Theater of the Absurd, which saw human existence as lacking in meaning or structure, Piñera ventured into the absurd with his celebrated one-act *Falsa alarma* (1948) years before Ionesco produced *La Cantatrice chauve* (1950). Moreover, his existentialist piece, *Electra Garrigó* (1941) anticipated by two years Sartre’s *Les Mouches* (1943) in which existentialism’s prevailing nihilism and absurdity of existence are set forth dramatically. Piñera modestly put his work into perspective when he wrote:

Pero, francamente hablando, no soy del todo existencialista ni del todo absurdo. Lo digo porque escribí *Electra* antes que *Las moscas* de Sartre apareciera en libro, y escribí *Falsa alarma* antes que Ionesco publicara y representara su *Soprano calva*. Mas bien pienso que todo eso estaba en el ambiente, y que aunque yo viviera en una isla desconectada del continente cultural, con todo, era un hijo de mi época al que los problemas de dicha época no podían pasar desapercibidos. Además, ... yo vivía en una Cuba existencialista por defecto y absurda por exceso. (“Piñera teatral,” 15)

Piñera’s critical position toward Cuba’s cultural inexperience, societal absurdities and repeated political failures is well-documented in his writings as well as in the actions he took in life. For example, *Electra Garrigó* (1948) rewrites the classical myth of Electra to explore the violence in Cuban life. A play like *Aire frío* (1958), considered by critics to be one of Piñera’s best, chronicles the hardships and moral stagnation of the members of the Romaguera family over two politically and socially turbulent decades in Cuba (1940 to 1959). In his own life, Piñera’s self-imposed exile to Buenos Aires in 1946, a city in which he lived and worked for the next 12 years, except for brief returns to Cuba, testifies to the writer’s desire to escape Cuba’s tumultuous politics as well as what he considered the island’s intellectual backwardness and lack of opportunities for writers dedicated to their craft. Yet, when Piñera returned to Cuba in 1958, little did he know of the dangers

that would soon come to pass. The naive optimism for the revolution that he expressed in the introduction to his *Teatro completo* would be short lived. Arenas's essay, "La isla en peso con todas sus cucarachas," is the best account of Piñera's growing fear and panic.⁷ It first appeared in the journal *Mariel* in 1983 and was later reprinted in *Necesidad de libertad* in 1986. Arenas sees cockroaches, ubiquitous creatures in Piñera's writings, as symbolic of the Cuban people struggling to survive: "Sobrevivir es para nosotros – cucarachas – esconderse, pasar inadvertidos, desaparecer del radio (o radar) implacable que ilumina el reflector al caer sobre la explanada o sobre el mar" (118).

In "La isla en peso con todas sus cucarachas," Arenas summarizes and pays tribute to the singularity and brilliance of Piñera's prose, first his drama then his fiction, before proceeding to examine what he considers the foundational text in Piñera's oeuvre, the poem "La isla en peso" (1943). Of this poem Arenas writes: "es el drama de la interperie y la persecución, la desesperación, el vacío y la asfixia de todo un pueblo" (my emphasis, 124). Arenas ends the essay by elaborating on what he initially calls Piñera's six deaths ("Las seis muertes de Virgilio Piñera," 126-131), only to immediately add: "Aunque tal vez sería más adecuado llamar a esas muertes *asesinatos*" (126). In Arenas's view, these "muertes/asesinatos" were 1) the censoring of Piñera's work by the revolutionary government in 1971, a crushing blow to Piñera, a man dedicated to literature, 2) Piñera's repeated interrogations from 1976 to 1978 by the Cuban State Police, who also were responsible for confiscating portions of his manuscripts deemed "counterrevolutionary," 3) the actual physical but "sudden" death of Piñera in which Arenas leaves open for speculation the possibility of foul play, 4) the attachment of Piñera's unpublished manuscripts by the police, 5) the dramatist's posthumous "rehabilitation" by the regime intent on presenting a sanitized and politically-correct revolutionary Piñera to the world, and 6) the black-marketing of Piñera's unpublished manuscripts by members of the Cuban exile community who managed to acquire these texts. What comes out loud and clear in Arenas's essay is his respect and admiration for Piñera, the man and writer. Moreover, Arenas leaves testimony to how Piñera was persecuted, hounded, and metaphorically kicked around, like the empty shoe box in Piñera's bleak and brutal work, *Una caja de zapatos vacía*, by the revolutionary government intent on silencing anyone not representing the idealized "hombre nuevo."

In Cuba, the prototype of this powerful "hombre nuevo" or new man was the guerrilla and revolutionary ideologue Ernesto (Che) Guevara, who sacrificed everything for the revolution and coined the term "hombre nuevo"

in his writings. It was Che Guevara, a man who wanted to develop the new man's revolutionary consciousness to its maximum, who went into a frenzied fit in 1964 at the Cuban Embassy at Algiers when he discovered a copy of Virgilio Piñera's *Teatro completo* in the embassy library. Guillermo Cabrera Infante, in his introduction to the English translation of Piñera's *Cold Tales*, tells us that the Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo was a witness to Che Guevara's fury. According to Goytisolo, Che Guevara threw the book against a wall shouting: "How dare you have in our embassy a book by this foul faggot!"⁸

Arenas was also, like his mentor and friend Piñera, persecuted, hounded, and "kicked around" by a system out to eliminate and silence those members of Cuban society who simply failed, for whatever reason, to fit the revolutionary model. Yet the one major difference between Arenas and Piñera was that Arenas refused to be quiet; his in-your-face fury and anger against any parties intent on destroying the individual's free expression of difference are manifested in one way or another in all of his texts.⁹ Moreover, although his writings were declared anti-revolutionary and censored, while in Cuba Arenas defiantly sent his manuscripts abroad where they were immediately published, infuriating the revolutionary cultural policymakers, which on various occasions confiscated and destroyed his work and ultimately branded him a non-person. Indeed, Arenas would not have been so vehemently persecuted and censored by the Cuban revolutionary government had he not dared to speak out, that is, put into writing the brutal injustices committed in Cuba not just against homosexuals but all citizens refusing to succumb to the monolithic ideology of the revolution. As Andrew Hurley, translator of Arenas's work, has pointed out: "Si no hubiera escrito, si no hubiera hecho un símbolo de su experiencia, no se habría encontrado en tales situaciones con el gobierno cubano."¹⁰

Persecución can be read as an attempt by Arenas to turn his own and Piñera's persecution into a literary text that artistically represents the subjugation and oppression that both men, and by extension the Cuban nation, suffered. The panic and tormented existence Arenas witnessed in the life of his mentor and friend Virgilio Piñera, as well as in the Cuban nation, did not silence him but rather drove him to challenge and fight back. *Persecución* is a text that rebelliously fights back. As I will illustrate below, Arenas's only sally into drama, a genre in which, he well knew, Piñera was without equal, represents an absurdist theatrical experiment (indeed, Arenas's play is subtitled "Cinco piezas de teatro experimental") that calls into question Cuba's oppressive social and political atmosphere. Piñera, silenced in a state of panic, could not

bring himself to voice these concerns directly. Even in a later play like *Dos viejos pánicos* (1968), he only tacitly condemned the political and social abuses around him. In a letter to a friend dated 5 July 1977, two years prior to his death, Piñera's emotional exhaustion is apparent: "No tengo deseos de escribir, ni sobre nada ni a nadie. Mi vida está por terminar y estoy cansado de luchar. Me dejo ir, eso es todo."¹¹ Indeed, Piñera sounds like one of his own characters paralyzed by inaction and unable to move out of the closing circles in which he is caught. Arenas, Piñera's literary heir and successor, was left to pick up the baton and give voice to the injustices. As we shall see, *Persecución*, more than an anxiety of influence (Harold Bloom) or even a generic stylistic inheritance, directly and indirectly alludes to Piñera the writer as well as to Piñera's works and their disconcerting vision of human existence, the prevailing theme in his dramas.

What is most interesting about Act One ("Traidor") of *Persecución* is that with very minor syntactical and lexical changes, the act is but a dramatic adaptation of Arenas's short story by the same title, "Traidor" (dated 1974 and published in *Adiós a mamá*). Although the plot of both texts takes place in an undetermined future time after the collapse of the revolutionary regime, it is clear that the dramatic piece was written after the short story because of a reference to the events that occurred in the Peruvian Embassy in Havana that sparked the Mariel exodus in 1980 ("Traidor," 14). While both texts examine the idea of pretending to be someone else in order to survive, the story acquires another layer of meaning as a theatrical piece in which the act of performing is vital to the genre.¹² The play features a monologue by a seventy year old woman (who Arenas transgressively suggests could be played by a man) being interviewed by a young journalist and his technician in order to gain insight into the life of her son. This individual, by all accounts a committed revolutionary until the moment the regime was overthrown, standing before a firing squad, yells: "¡Abajo Castro! ¡Viva la libertad!" (16). As the play progresses, we learn that the son "acted" the role of revolutionary, despite his vehement hatred of the revolutionary regime, simply to exist. He is a performer who puts on the mask of the obedient and dutiful revolutionary in order to avoid suspicion and thus survive. The irony and tragedy of the piece is that, if indeed he can even be called a traitor, the son is a traitor not to the revolution or to those who fought against the revolution (who for that matter are ultimately responsible for his death) but rather sadly to himself. The piece vividly underscores the dishonesty and fear present within a totalitarian state

in which individuals must put on masks to fulfill and meet different societal functions.

While elaborating on Piñera's persecution by the Cuban Security Police, Arenas writes in the essay "La isla en peso con todas sus cucarachas": A partir de 1960 Virgilio Piñera fue arrestado en su casa, en la playa de Guanabo, y conducido al presidio común, es fichado y vigilado no sólo por lo que escribe, sino por lo que no escribe, por su falta de cooperación, por su manera de andar o de manifestarse, por alguna conversación o reunión íntima en casa de algún amigo. La luz antillana-cubana, nuestra traidora e implacable luz, ha llegado ahora a su *cénit*: es ese foco descomunal que nos alumbró de golpe el rostro ante el oficial que nos interroga... Para sobrevivir en un medio semejante se impone la transmutación, la máscara, el doble, o el descenso apresurado a lo oscuro, antes de que seamos aplastados. (119)

A number of Arenas's comments resonate in Act One of *Persecución*. First, the description of the Cuban-Antillean light which hounds down individuals as "nuestra traidora ... luz" (my emphasis) echoes the title of the act. Second, the huge light bulb ("foco descomunal") used in the interrogation room by the police is present in the image of the lights which besiege the old woman during her interview ("El periodista y el técnico la irán rodeando ... de distintos artefactos, cámaras, focos. Debe provocarse la impresión de que la anciana está siendo asediada ..." [8]) as well as in the image of the flood lights which protect the coast and detect people fleeing from the island ("hay órdenes de disparar en alta mar Mira esos focos..." [13]). Finally, the use of the mask or the double to avoid being flattened out like a cockroach by the boot in power, characterizes the son's existential dilemma, why he created a double of himself simply to survive. "La máscara," Piñera wrote, "transforma al hombre en *cosa* y como *cosa* no puede expresarse genuinamente."¹³

Act One of *Persecución* reminds one of Piñera's *Jesús* (1948) in which a local barber, Jesús García, son of María and José García, is declared by the people in his neighborhood to be the new Messiah who performs miracles. Vehemently denying the claim, Jesús García is forced to represent himself as the NOT-Jesus ("el no-Jesús") and takes on this campaign with Messianic integrity until he finally meets a tragic death. This absurdist piece undermines the traditional belief that human identity is created by the self, by the conscious mind en route to self-knowledge. In Piñera's *Jesús* as well as in Arenas's "Traidor," we see how society, intent on labeling individuals,

arbitrarily imposes identities from the outside. "Traitor" is a subjective and oppressive label used by whoever is in power to designate as "different" (read "dangerous") any member of society who represents challenging values that must be eradicated.

The title of Act Two ("El Paraíso") of *Persecución* is again ironic since the futuristic world that is represented is anything but paradisiacal. In fact, in the directorial notes to the act the scene is described as an artificial meadow with a plastic green rug that epitomizes an anti-*locus amenus*. As the act begins, three unnamed soldiers are carting off a writer in a large cage to "paradise"; his crime: "ese escribió una novela de caballerías. Una aventura de locos" (18). The allusion to Cervantes, whose novel *Don Quijote* underscores the power of human imagination, is apparent.¹⁴ In this future "perfect" world, writing, the art of creating imaginary worlds, is seen as a decadent and useless practice and writers are portrayed as "seres extraños; desconformes, anormales o algo por el estilo" (20). The world of this act is reminiscent of the one in *El asalto*, the last novel of Arenas's *Pentagonía*, published posthumously in 1991. *El asalto* presents a futuristic vision of Cuban society that Arenas allowed himself to imagine and completely create. More than an accurate portrayal of a given historical period, the text functions as a literary forewarning of totalitarianism left unchecked, taken to its frightening extreme.¹⁵ *El asalto*, a cynical and dark novel, derides the notion of establishing a utopia, a paradise. While many Cuban novelists have written and continue to write documentary, realistic works that idealistically present the revolution as the decisive moment that radically transformed Cuban society for the better, Arenas refused to subscribe to this utopian vision of history and portrayed the revolution as the catalyst responsible for the persecution of certain members of Cuban society who simply failed, for whatever reason, to fit the revolutionary model.

In "La isla en peso con todas sus cucarachas" Arenas comments on the hellish worlds portrayed in Piñera's texts: "Toda la obra de Piñera es la obra de un expulsado. Tocado por la maldición de la expulsión, entrar en su mundo es entrar en el infierno, o, cuando menos, sentirnos absolutamente remotos del paraíso" (116). Like Adam and Eve expelled from the garden of Eden, Piñera is the writer expelled from paradise and forced to live the existential hell called life, a life he describes with bitter and cruel details in such plays as *Falsa alarma*, *Aire frío*, *Dos viejos pánicos*, among others. Commenting on Piñera's entire oeuvre, Luis F. González-Cruz writes in the introduction to *Una caja de zapatos vacía*: "Su tema central es el de la vida

vista como una sucesión de golpes terribles; ... en su viaje por la tierra, el ser humano nunca asciende a una forma superior de existencia, sino que desciende a los más desolados arrabales de la miseria y el dolor” (10).

Act Three (“Ella y yo”) is the most absurdist act of *Persecución*. With its banal and at times meaningless dialogue, the act portrays the chaotic and hollow existence of life under a totalitarian state. The characters of “Ella y yo” simply try to survive as they wait for each other, wait in interminable lines for food, and wait for a change of existence that will not come: “Te espero bajo el aguacero y en la muda algarabía de la navidad prohibida.... Te espero en la casa espantosa Te espero en la cola de yogurt” (32). The rationing line for yogurt is a literary wink to the frightened Piñera who, after his fall from grace with the revolutionary establishment, lived a picaresque existence in Havana and who, according to Arenas, “lleno de pánico, apenas si respondía el teléfono, no contestaba el timbre de la puerta; esquivo y huidizo, salía a la calle sólo a resolver las cosas más elementales y vitales: marcar en la cola del ‘yogourt’” (“La isla en peso con todas sus cucarachas,” 128).

In Act Three, the characters of “Ella y yo” wear loincloths made from the manuscript pages the writer in Act Two carried in his cage. The key to why these characters wear loincloths can be found in a scene from Piñera’s *Aire frío* in which Laura, a next-door neighbor of the Romaguera family, stops by to borrow some green thread. The year is 1953 and economic conditions are very austere under Fulgencio Batista. After Luz Marina, the stoic and outspoken daughter of the family, informs Laura that she only has blue-green thread, the neighbor responds: “Muchacha, es lo mismo. Qué más da verde que verdoso. Dentro de poco tendremos que salir con taparrabos” (*Teatro completo*, 125). In *Aire frío*, Piñera’s most conventional and realistic drama, Laura’s hyperbolic comment describing the nation’s economic hardships portends the actual mode of dress in Act Three of *Persecución*. If the rationing and scarcity of goods were not enough, “Ella y yo” must hear the constant propaganda machine of the revolution echoing commands (“¡Acude al llamado de la patria! ¡Que no quede un grano en el suelo!” [29]) and slogans (“¡Guerra a muerte a los peludos y a los gusanos!”[30]) through a six member chorus that speaks in unison. The chorus in this act comments not on the main action of the story as is the case in classical Greek drama, but rather gives voice to the military rhetoric of the revolution. In its use of popular Cuban slang and expressions, Arenas’s chorus resembles Piñera’s chorus in *Electra Garrigó* in which the chorus’s language swings from flamboyant grandiloquence to popular speech. Act Three ends with the character of “yo” all excited because

he has heard that they are selling soda (“refrescos”) at a corner store. He exclaims: “¡Rurrrr, rurrrrrrr, rurrrrrRRRRRRRRR!...” (37). The chorus, “ella,” and “yo” repeat: “¡RURRRRRRRR!...” (37). This nonsensical sound literally sets the stage for the buffoonery and verbal mayhem of Act Four. In his seminal work, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin sees the literature of verbal nonsense, a precursor of the Theater of the Absurd, as a metaphysical endeavor that produces a “liberating effect by expanding the limits of sense and opening up vistas of freedom from logic and cramping convention” (348). Indeed, Arenas’s verbal nonsense and incoherent babblings undermine and challenge the straitjacket logic and uniformity of the Cuban revolutionary establishment intent, in the name of social equality, on silencing, by whatever means, dissident voices.

“El Reprimerísimo Reprimero” is a character from Arenas’s *El asalto*. This decrepit tyrant lords over his subjects and prohibits the expression of negativity in his society. Unlike *El asalto*, however, which for the most part is a dark and humorless novel, Act Four (“El Reprimero”) is a hilarious off-the-wall farce with improbable situations, extravagant exaggeration and violent horseplay. The kangaroo court that is set up to determine “judicially” the guilt or innocence of “Ella y yo” for their alleged attempt to escape the island on a motor boat is absurd:

Entre las pruebas evidentes de la alta traición cometida contra el pueblo y sus poderes por los agentes criminales se encuentra, en primer plano y perfectamente codificado, el rurrr rurrrrr, que el vehículo de ambos agentes traidores al servicio del imperio emitía.
(46)

The courtroom becomes a circus in which the characters are divided into two groups: the persecutors/accusers (“el Reprimero,” “dos perros,” “dos soldados,” “la secretaria del tribunal,” “el Fiscal General,” “El ujier,” “dos verdugos”) and the persecuted/accused (“Ella y yo”). Obviously the persecutors/accusers outnumber the persecuted/accused. In addition, the defense attorney (“El abogado de la defensa”) interchanges roles with one of the executioners (“verdugo”) and is more interested in defending his own position as a faithful collaborator of the regime.

The theme of justice in *Persecución*, or rather, the consideration of whether any true justice really exists, has its obvious antecedent in Piñera’s acclaimed *Falsa alarma* in which a murder investigation spins out of control. *Falsa alarma* has only three characters: a murderer, a judge, and the victim’s widow. Here Piñera’s decay of logic and abrupt disruption of anything resembling order and coherence (similar to Act Four of *Persecución*) leaves

us with the final image of the murderer, waltzing alone to the music of “The Blue Danube.” It is completely unclear as to whether he has gone entirely mad or is the victim of an elaborate joke. (The characters of Arenas’s Act Four end up dancing a mambo to the music of Pérez Prado.) More than a banal exercise in absurdity, Piñera’s piece is rooted in a critical consideration of so-called justice.¹⁶ Prior to the final scene of the dancing murderer, a directorial note states: “[El asesino] toma al Juez por un brazo y lo lleva hacia la puerta. Toda la escena que sigue es *la persecución*, por el asesino, del Juez y la Viuda, a fin de que le aclaren las terribles dudas que ellos le han despertado” (*Teatro completo*, my emphasis, 164). As we see, the expected rule of justice, in which a judge tries a murderer and hands out a sentence, is turned on its head. In *Falsa alarma*, the judge and widow, referred to by the murderer as “Usted y ella” (*Teatro completo*, 152), refuse to pass judgment or sentence and are thus “persecuted” by the murderer who first insists, then begs, to be sentenced in order to achieve closure to his ordeal.

The final act of *Persecución* is titled “El poeta.” The poet, interpreted by the old man who was incarcerated in the cage in Act Two, appears on stage, one hand tied by a rope, the other carrying a folder with the manuscript of the very play being presented, *Persecución*. His first words begin a parody of Hamlet’s famous soliloquy: “¿Seguir? ¿No seguir? He aquí el dilemma...” (60). (Piñera had used Hamlet’s soliloquy in a likewise parodic fashion in *Una caja de zapatos vacía*: “Matar o que te maten: he ahí el dilemma” [63]). According to the stage directions, the poet becomes progressively younger as he vents his anger and frustration for the repeated horrors he is forced to endure under a regime that has put into practice frightening levels of control regarding individual freedom. Among the chaotically enumerated horrors we find: “la humillación del tirano” (60), “la persecución sexual” (60), “la prisión-prisión-prisión que es una isla” (61), “el odio y la pasión en vez de la inteligencia y del amor” (61). The poet insists on leaving behind a testimony of his ordeal. In a state of frenzied challenge he cries out: “no partir sin antes decir, dejar, estampar en la eternidad, o donde sea, la verdad sobre la porción de horror que hemos padecido y padecemos [...] nuestro unánime e intransferible grito” (62). The poet proceeds to enlist the aid of his muses, a traditional and sordid group of characters, to assist, protect, and inspire him in writing his poem of denunciation. His words in crescendo reach a climax as the chorus, here in its traditional role of commenting on the main action, declares: “Esparcirás / Sobre la tierra tu canto / y él llevará el sabor de la derrota, / el sabor del odio y de la maldición” (66). At this point the poet, although

recognizing his inevitable defeat, defiantly yells out the final words of the play: “¡Mi triunfo!” (66). The ironic suggestion is that the poet’s triumph is in his refusal to be silenced, in his resistance to the persecution.

Persecución can be read as a dramatic attempt to give voice to the very real persecution Arenas and Piñera fell victim to in Cuba. Why did Arenas choose to express this concern through drama and not through fiction or poetry, his customary modes of expression? One extraliterary hypothesis: what better literary vehicle to pay tribute to Piñera than that of drama. Moreover, drama, when actualized as theater, has the advantage over fiction or poetry to stimulate not just the mind, but the other senses through the use of sounds, lights, and other visual stimuli. (As noted, an earlier title of the piece was “Teatro de la persecución.”) In the directorial notes to the acts of *Persecución*, Arenas repeatedly underscores the importance of including the audience directly in the pieces by erasing the imaginary fourth wall of traditional realistic dramas, which fosters spectator passivity. In a note to act five, for instance, Arenas writes: “El poeta ... lucirá irónico, apasionado, sarcástico, furioso – en uno de esos momentos tomará la palmera y la lanzará contra el público, la palmera lo mismo puede caer en el pasillo que en la cabeza de un espectador. Se tomarán medidas pertinentes para que el árbol artificial esté hecho de un material suave” (60). The palm, an obvious symbol for Cuba, withering on stage throughout the four preceding acts, is violently thrown into the audience to suggest the poet’s frustration with Cuba’s social and political history. *Persecución* is a theatrical spectacle in the tradition of Antonin Artaud’s experimental theater of cruelty that subverts traditional theater to shock audiences into actively contemplating humankind’s propensity for corruption, vileness, and brutality.

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Notes

1. I am indebted to the PSC-CUNY awards which supported my research for this and other projects during 1999-2000.

2. In Arenas’s papers, housed at the Princeton University Firestone Library, there is an earlier version of the manuscript titled “Teatro de la persecución: un extraño Rurrr Rurrrr.” This version indicates that acts one, two, three, and five were started in Havana in 1972 while act four was begun in New York in 1982.

3. Although *Persecución* is the only dramatic piece that Arenas wrote, earlier in his career he attempted to introduce dramatic segments into two of his well-known novels. Near the end of his first novel, *Celestino antes del alba* (1967), a theatrical section appears within the body of the text. Years later this strategy would be repeated in *El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas*

(1982), the continuation of the family saga that would become the second novel of Arenas's famous *pentagonia*. Yet, while in the first novel the change from prose to dramatic dialogue occurs rather unexpectedly, in *El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas* the dramatic dialogue is set apart in its own section titled "Función." This change of genre (from novel to drama) also includes a significant change from interior monologue to dramatic dialogue. In this phantasmagoric theatrical representation, the family members of the novel become performers who reenact their own lives and obsessions. Throughout the "Función" section of *El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas*, verses from the "Song of Songs" are appropriated and directly counterposed to the dialogues between Adolfina and the chorus of princes, both of whom attempt to adopt the style and tone of the biblical text. The difference between the lofty and sensual elegance of the "Song of Songs" and Adolfina's sexual depravation and crass vulgarity results in a text marked with elements of folk humor that produces a carnivalesque spirit. See my article, "Adolfina's Song: Parodic Echoings in Reinaldo Arenas's *El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas*," *Confluencia*, Vol. 16 No. 1 (Fall 2000).

4. Although homophobia in Cuba is clearly tied to Cuba's Spanish and Catholic cultural heritage, there is no denying that after 1959 homophobia became politically institutionalized. Fidel Castro's famous address, "Palabras a los intelectuales," in 1961, which severely limited the creative work of writers and artists to an ideological and cultural revolutionary norm and opened the door to an ever-increasing assertion that homosexuals would not be allowed to exert influence in art, culture or education, culminated in Castro's "Declaración al Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura" with its unequivocal anti-homosexual message in 1971. Also, as early as 1965 forced labor camps under the name of UMAP (an acronym for Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción) were constructed in the province of Camagüey with the so-called purpose of correcting homosexuality, which was considered to be an antisocial behavior that, according to the government, threatened the creation of a true revolutionary consciousness. This period of repression has been documented by Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal in their 1984 film *Conducta impropia*. For more detailed accounts of the problematic relationship between the Castro regime and homosexuals, see Allen Young's *Gays under the Cuban Revolution*, Marvin Leiner's *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality, and AIDS*, and Ian Lumsden's *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality*.

5. Carlos Espinosa Domínguez, "Introducción," 11.

6. José Quiroga, "Fleshing out Virgilio Piñera from the Cuban Closet," 178.

7. "The best essay on the relationship between Piñera and the revolution is still Reinaldo Arenas's verbal tour de force 'la isla en peso con todas sus cucarachas,' "José Quiroga, "Fleshing out Virgilio Piñera from the Cuban Closet": 179; "Reinaldo Arenas en un magnífico ensayo sobre Piñera ...," Carlos Espinosa Domínguez, "Introducción": 12; "Reinaldo Arenas, en un ensayo clásico sobre Piñera ...," Ernesto Hernández Busto, "Una tragedia en el trópico": 41.

8. Guillermo Cabrera Infante, "The Death of Virgilio," xiii.

9. For Arenas, writing was both a liberating act of self-expression and an act of fury in which he challenged, undermined, and subverted ideological dogmatism, especially that which attempts to silence homosexual desire. This indomitable spirit is present even in the final words he wrote. In his brief farewell letter before committing suicide, his final words as he faced the last stages of his bout with AIDS, Arenas writes: "Mi mensaje no es un mensaje de derrota, sino de lucha y esperanza. Cuba será libre. Yo ya lo soy." Reprinted in *Antes que anochezca*, 343.

10. "Entrevista con Andrew Hurley," 47.

11. Carlos Espinosa-Domínguez, "Virgilio Piñera en persona," 45-46.

12. In a letter to Luis Harss dated 5 April 1982, found in Arenas's correspondence at the Princeton Firestone Library, the renowned Cuban critic Enrico Mario Santí confesses the problems he discerned in an attempted translation by Harss of the story "Traidor." Santí's words underscore the importance of the dramatic tension in the story that is completely lost in Harss's attempt: "Al abusar del adverbio, de la elegancia estilística y de la traducción piedadosamente literal en muchos casos, se pierde

el *drama* del cuento ..." (emphasis in the original). Harss's translation appears not to have ever been published. Regardless, there are in print three English translations of the story "Traidor" (Hurley, Koch, Lane) as well as one of the dramatic act (González-Cruz).

13. Quoted by Abilio Estévez, "Primeras confidencias," 23.

14. In part one, chapter forty-six, of Cervantes's novel, the priest and the barber imprison Don Quixote in a large wooden cage, which they place on an oxcart, in order to return the "mad knight" to his home village.

15. *El asalto* can be read as a Spanish-American (Cuban) version of the dystopian novel tradition as characterized by such writers as Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*) and George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*). In fact, in one of Arenas's last interviews he stated that among the novels which affected him most when he was young were *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "Me acuerdo ... que cuando terminé de leer *Rebelión en la granja* y 1984 estaba llorando." Carlos Espinosa Domínguez, "La vida es riesgo o abstinencia," 56.

16. Commenting on the theatre of the absurd in Cuba, Julio Miranda writes: "The fact is that the absurd has not been utilized in Cuba as an instrument of metaphysical investigation, with reactionary results à la Ionesco and Beckett, in which the nothingness winds up filling the stage, with its oppressive negativity, but rather as an effort at a sociopolitical search for a judgement of an antihuman order of things, absurdly sanctioned by law and custom and penetrated, as such, absurdly, by the new theater." Quoted in Frank N. Dauster, "The Theater of José Triana," 168.

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