

Hunger and Revolution: A New Reading of Virgilio Piñera's *El flaco y el gordo*

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Con anterioridad al 1º de enero [de 1959] nuestros escritores, pintores, músicos, etc [. . .] se morían de hambre.

Virgilio Piñera, "Balance cultural. . ."

Por motivos que no son del caso exponer, la población sufría de falta de carne. Todo el mundo se alarmó y se hicieron comentarios más o menos amargos y hasta esbozaron ciertos propósitos de venganza. Pero, como siempre sucede, las protestas no pasaron de meras amenazas y pronto se vio aquel afligido pueblo engullendo las más variadas vegetales.

Virgilio Piñera, "La carne"

Sabía que no comería esa noche, pero el alegre recuerdo del copioso almuerzo de la mañana impedía briosamente toda angustia intestinal. Tenía que hacer un largo camino, pues del Auxilio Nocturno – adonde había ido al filo de las siete a solicitar en vano la comida de esa noche – a nuestro cuarto mediaban más de cinco kilómetros. Pero confieso que los recorrí alegremente. Aunque ya nada tenía en el estómago del famoso almuerzo, me acometían a ratos los más deliciosos eructos que cabe imaginar.

Virgilio Piñera, "La cena"

When Virgilio Piñera (1912-1979) returned to Havana in September 1958 after nearly twelve years in exile in Buenos Aires, he was dismayed to see that little had changed in his native Cuba since his initial departure in 1946. Indeed, the situation of his own family – which he dramatized in his play *Aire frío* (1959) – served to remind him that many Cubans still suffered from the problems and frustrations that had plagued them for years; especially

poverty and hunger, but also social inequities and class divisions, cultural stagnation, and government corruption. Given the multiple social, economic, and cultural ills that Cuba suffered throughout the 1940s and 1950s, it comes as no surprise that Piñera, like so many Cubans from diverse walks of life, was enthusiastic about the triumph of the Revolution in January 1959.

From the pages of the newspaper *Revolución* Piñera, who throughout his literary career had tended to steer clear of direct political commentary in his writings, expressed a wide range of opinions concerning myriad aspects of revolutionary Cuba. Despite his enthusiasm with his country's newfound sense of nationhood, however, Piñera at times cautioned both his readers and the leaders of the new government to avoid the pitfalls of the past. In his first editorial in *Revolución*, for instance, which he penned just days after Fidel Castro marched into Havana, Piñera called attention to the widespread hunger in Cuba. He underscored how the lack of food had long been a chronic problem in his homeland, and he lamented the fact that no government in the past had been able (or willing) to take on the challenge of eliminating it.

¿Cómo piensa el cubano frente al problema de su existencia más inmediata? Pues viene planteándose, desde la instauración de la República, esta pregunta angustiosa: ¿Comeré hoy? [. . .] Porque digámoslo sin cortapisas: el gran fantasma de todo cubano, en realidad el tirano a perpetuidad de esta isla ha sido y continúa siendo el hambre. ("Nubes amenazadores" 4).

Piñera dramatized this notion of hunger as a tyrant in *El flaco y el gordo* (1959), which was the first literary work that he wrote after the triumph of the Revolution. In the play a poor, starving man rebels against his wealthy and gluttonous oppressor by eating him. While the few critical essays that have been written on the play have tended to focus on the play's precarious relationship to the Cuban Revolution, it is important to underscore that *El flaco y el gordo* is, above all, a fierce criticism of the social problem of hunger in pre-revolutionary Cuba. In this sense the play shares certain common ground with Piñera's stories "La carne" and "La cena," both of which implicitly condemn the rampant hunger and poverty in Cuba during the 1940s. The starving protagonists of the two short stories struggle in vain, however, to alleviate their hunger, while the skinny protagonist of *El flaco y el gordo* turns his efforts to fill his empty belly into a highly symbolic revolt against oppression and injustice.

Several critics, who seem to have been overly eager to read a text written during such an important moment in Cuban history as either

categorically pro or antirevolutionary, have insisted that Piñera's play is negative and fatalistic, and that it underscores his skepticism and his lack of confidence in the Revolution from the beginning.¹ However, such interpretations misconstrue not only Piñera's view of the Revolution, but also the play's central message and the author's primary motivation for writing it. Well aware that Cuba's chronic hunger had helped to make Fidel Castro's menu for change more palatable for so many, Piñera chose to use this familiar form of suffering in Cuba as a central metaphor in the play.

It is surprising that *El flaco y el gordo* has received little serious critical attention despite its provocative treatment of Cuba's social and political circumstances during the Batista years and the early stages of the Revolution. The plot of this one-act play is simple and straightforward. Flaco, a skinny man with a broken leg, and Gordo, a fat man with a broken arm, share a room in a hospital where they are recovering from their injuries. Gordo is a detestable power-monger whose privileged economic status allows him to purchase a sumptuous variety of foods in the hospital. Flaco, on the other hand, is poor and he barely gets by on the inadequate portions of watered-down soup and other unappetizing foodstuffs that the hospital serves him. In order to underscore his supposed social and economic superiority, Gordo constantly speaks of his wealth, eats an impressive array of tasty national dishes, and discusses food and gastronomic themes while his famished companion looks on with envy.

Though Gordo's malevolence is not initially self-evident, as the play progresses the corpulent protagonist gradually reveals a latent desire to torment and humiliate his weakling counterpart by turning his love of food and his seemingly unlimited access to it into tools of cruel psychological games. Indeed, it seems that as he becomes increasingly cognizant of Flaco's longtime hunger and his inability to satiate it, Gordo's desire to taunt him likewise increases. For example, after Flaco complains about his hunger, Gordo leads him to believe that if he accomplishes certain culinary tasks – creating menus, memorizing ingredients, and reading recipes – he will be rewarded with a minimal portion of food. Gordo, however, invariably invents a ridiculous reason to refuse to give Flaco his promised reward. When the abuse reaches an intolerable level, Flaco finally rebels by killing and then consuming Gordo. Flaco's foray into the realm of his oppressive foe is short-lived, however, since upon devouring the last bits of flesh from Gordo's bones, a new Flaco arrives to occupy the vacated bed. Fearing that the process of oppression

may repeat itself, Flaco (who has temporarily become a “Gordo”) falls to his knees and screams for mercy.

Hunger Drives One Crazy

In *El flaco y el gordo* Piñera explores several problematic topics that appear frequently in his stories, novels and dramatic works. Among the most salient issues treated in the play are hunger and its effects on the mind and body, the role of the body as an object of suffering and a source of sustenance, and the human tendency to exploit the weak and powerless. Hunger is presented as a constant and overwhelming force capable of demolishing the individual, and food is shown to have three principal functions: it is a basic human necessity, a source of intense pleasure, and an effective instrument of psychological and physical torment.

It is significant that in the play’s opening lines Flaco – who is confined to a hospital bed with a broken leg – points out that his broken leg was in large part caused by his hunger since he fell while trying to steal a chicken from an urban *solar*. Flaco also informs the audience that he initially expected that his stay in the hospital would at least assure him a satisfactory meal, but he quickly found out that such was not the case. Flaco’s complaints about the hospital’s insufficient meals recall the allusion in “La cena” to the “Auxilio Nocturno,” which is quoted in an epigraph to this essay, where the starving protagonist expects to find relief, but instead waits for hours for a meal only to be turned away with an empty stomach. In the hospital where Flaco convalesces, the hungry patients are not given enough to eat, while the rich and already well-fed patients are given whatever they want. Through Flaco’s constant grumbling about the vastly varying degrees of comfort enjoyed by him and his roommate in the hospital, Piñera implicitly condemns the country’s health services, which during the Batista years reflected the social and economic inequities rampant in Cuba. Members of the wealthy upper class, for example, enjoyed significantly better medical facilities and treatment than the country’s impoverished citizens who needed it most. But the poor in rural Cuba were especially hard pressed to get medical help not just because of their lack of money, but also because doctors were scarce and nearly eighty percent of the country’s hospital beds were in Havana. However, even in the capital, where hospital facilities were among the best in the Caribbean, urban slums led to a proliferation of curable diseases among the underprivileged, who typically went without treatment since they did not have access to medical services (Benjamin et. al. 6).

Flaco demonstrates his awareness of such disparities from the outset of the play, but his attitude toward his circumstances is largely fatalistic since he has lost hope in the possibility of receiving treatment equal to that enjoyed by the upper class. The following monologue is illustrative of his defeatist outlook:

FLACO. [. . .] Claro, muy lindo tenerme con la pierna enyesada. Parece una columna (*pone rígida la pierna*). Y mientras el palo va y viene, yo vivo del aire! (*pausa*) [. . .] Por robarme una gallina me partí la pata. Pensé matar el hambre vieja en este hospital, pero está visto que tengo mala suerte. (*pausa*) A la verdad que tengo una suerte de perro [. . .] y encima de todo eso, me matan de hambre. Si sigo enflaqueciendo sacarán de aquí mi esqueleto.² (*vuelve a mirar la pierna*) ¡La única que no enflaquece eres tú . . .! ¡Cabrona! (*pausa. Se levanta y, va hacia la otra cama, levanta la sábana, toca el colchón*) ¡Claro, puesto que a ese gordo como tiene guano, le pusieron colchón! [. . .] ¡Ese Gordo es la misma muerte! ¡Y qué manera de comer! (*pausa*). Se manda cada filete, que da gusto. El que tiene, tiene . . . (*pausa*) Y yo, tragando la bazofia que dan aquí, y sin un salao kilo para comprar nada, (*pausa*). Bueno, a quien Dios se lo dio . . . (*pausa*) Ese Gordo nació de pie. (245-46).

After weeks of watching Gordo eat like a king while he suffers from hunger, Flaco becomes progressively distraught by the social injustices that will eventually inspire his incredible revolt. Gordo's money, the soft cushion on his bed, and his access to whatever food he wants are pitted against Flaco's lack of these items to suggest the gross inequalities that plagued many levels of pre-revolutionary Cuban society. Gordo, however, in keeping with the attitude typical of his class, is at once blissfully indifferent to and acutely mindful of the social and economic differences that separate him from Flaco and the disenfranchised group of citizens that he represents.

Gordo's insensitive ridicule of his counterpart – which is inspired by trivial matters such as his ignorance of culinary matters (“usted no entiende media palabra de arte culinario” 247), and his lack of refinement (“no se inspire es sus bajos apetitos” 250) – underscores his false sense of class superiority. His shallow upper-class values are parodied when he argues that he is not at fault for being rich and then tries to justify his chronic overindulgence as a inevitable habit among his ilk: “Tengo los billetes suficientes para adquirirla. No tengo la culpa que mi padre me dejara una fortunita” (247). In light of the fact that much of Gordo's power comes from

the money that he inherited from his wealthy father, it is especially important that in the play's final scene Flaco, after eating Gordo, takes the substantial stash of bills from his wallet. This symbolic appropriation of Gordo's social and economic clout mirrors one of the central aims of the Revolution, that is, the redistribution of wealth to the lower classes.

As he becomes more attuned to his privileged financial and social status, Gordo also develops an appetite for power and control that mirrors his gluttonous eating habits. To be sure, Gordo's realization that Flaco is desperate to get a bite of his food eventually turns into a perfect pretext for a series of cruel games that turn the relationship between the two characters into one of victimizer and victim. It should not be overlooked that Flaco's constant complaints and his lightly veiled pleas for sympathy – "Hace rato que no como carne con papas," "Lo único que yo sé es que tengo hambre vieja" (247), "a mi nadie me da nada" (248) – eventually end up making his situation worse because they help Gordo to understand his emotional soft spot, so to speak. Roy Baumeister points out that the most effective cruelty relies on empathy without sympathy. "To hurt someone," he notes, "you must know what that person's sensitivities and vulnerabilities are, without having compassion or pity for the person's suffering" (245).

Once he begins to feel empathy without sympathy, Gordo becomes increasingly deliberate in his approach to using food as a vehicle of psychological torment. If at the play's outset Gordo talks incessantly about food, eats elaborate dishes in front of his starving companion, and pokes fun at Flaco's insufficient meals out of sheer habit, it is clear that Gordo's contemptuous behavior becomes more calculated and cruel as the action progresses. Gordo's response to Flaco's justified bickering about the unappetizing grub served at the hospital is typical of his insensitivity, which will later serve as the fuel for outright cruelty. He encourages Flaco to order a la carte despite the fact that it is plainly apparent that he lacks the means to do so: "Si mis ojos no me engañan, el sirviente le trae su almuerzo a las doce y su comida a las seis. (*pausa*) Ahora bien, si no le basta con la generosa ración que ofrece, gra-tui-ta-men-te, el hospital, entonces, haga como yo: pida a la carta" (247).

In the following pages Gordo's contemptible way of thinking is further underscored when he asks his hungry counterpart to help him come up with a menu for the approaching lunch hour. The ensuing dialogue underscores the fact that Gordo is initially either unconcerned or wholly unaware that such discussions of food are difficult for Flaco to bear.

GORDO. [. . .] ¿Quiere hacerme un favor?

FLACO. Hace diez años que dices lo mismo. Te hago el favor, me rompo la cabeza combinando platos, y al final es tu lista la que gana.

GORDO. Todo tiene su explicación. Si usted redacta varios menús, a la hora de sentarse a la mesa tendrá un apetito devorador . . .

FLACO. Bueno, sopa de pescado. Carne ripiada, plátanos maduros, ensalada de aguacate, arroz blanco, casquitos de guayaba y queso crema.

GORDO. (*haciendo una mueca de asco*) Es un menú tan repugnante . . . (*pausa*) Así que sopa y pescado, y después carne ripiada. (*pausa*) El hambre vuelve loco a cualquiera.

FLACO. Pues yo me comería todo eso sin chistar.

GORDO. Le tengo dicho y redicho que cuando redacte un menú no se inspire en sus bajos apetitos . . . (*pausa*) A ver, ensaye de nuevo.

FLACO. (*meditando de nuevo*) Será mejor que no siga. No estoy de suerte hoy. (*pausa*) Además, no vale la pena. Nunca me aceptas un menú.

GORDO. ¡Vamos hombre! No se desconsuele. (*pausa*) Le prometo que aceptaré uno de sus menús. ¡Fe y adelante!

FLACO. Carne con papas . . .

GORDO. Es una idea fija (*pausa*) Pero no voy a hacer cuestión. ¡Adelante! Carne con papas . . . ¿Qué más?

FLACO. (*histérico*) ¡Carne con papas, carne con papas, carne con papas! (*se echa a llorar*)

GORDO. (*encogiéndose de hombros*) No entiendo nada. (*pausa*) De manera que un plato sabroso e inofensivo como es la carne con papas, provoca en usted un acceso de llanto. Francamente, no entiendo nada de nada. (*pausa, le da palmaditas en el hombro*) ¡Vamos, ánimo! prosiga . . . Fe y adelante. (249-50)

Gordo's supposed incomprehension of Flaco's frustration is illustrative of the type of callousness that Piñera implicitly ridicules throughout the play. It can be argued that Gordo is initially blind to the gravity of Flaco's plight and to the psychological consequences of his hunger. It is important to underscore, however, that as he comes to realize how his discourse on food and his penchant for culinary games frustrate Flaco, he does not desist. Indeed, Gordo's discourse on food and the games that he invents become gradually more calculated and cruel. Gordo manipulates the conversation, for example,

so that it always focuses on food because he knows that it will drive Flaco crazy. It is worth noting here that Flaco's broken leg, which precludes his escape from the hospital room, serves to bolster Gordo's ever-increasing feelings of control over him. To be sure, it is largely because Flaco cannot escape from what seems to him like something of a prison cell that he ends up capitulating to his portly counterpart's manipulative games.³ Because "powerful people find validation in seeing others change their actions because of them" (Baumeister 245), Flaco's compliance with Gordo's demands confirms the latter's mounting control over him. Likewise, Flaco's intensifying frustration serves to further bolster Gordo's inflated self-image. When Flaco breaks down in tears, Gordo claims that he does not understand, but by continuing the games he inadvertently reveals the pleasure that he derives from Flaco's suffering.

When a hospital employee brings lunch, Gordo turns his enormous meal into bait by setting up a table in the middle of the room and then pretending to invite Flaco to join him for lunch. The following dialogue calls attention to Gordo's increasing cruelty:

GORDO. [. . .] Supongo que me hará el honor de sentarse a mi mesa.

FLACO. (*creyendo que Gordo lo invita realmente a participar de su almuerzo*). ¿De verdad que me invitas? (*pausa*) Me gustan mucho las frituras de seso.

GORDO. No exactamente. Si le digo de sentarse a mi mesa es con el objeto de disfrutar del placer de su conversación durante el almuerzo. Usted comerá lo suyo y yo el mío.

FLACO. Prefiero comer lo mío sentado en la cama.

GORDO. Si declina mi amable invitación, perderá la oportunidad de probar las frituras de seso.

FLACO. Te puedes meter tus frituras por donde mejor te quepan. (*pausa*) No estoy hoy para el paso. Y no me hables porque no voy a contestarte. (*Va hacia la cama y se sienta en el borde.*)

GORDO. [. . .] No concibo que un hombre civilizado prefiera comer solo en un rincón. Mi amigo, comer es tan sólo un pretexto. El verdadero placer radica en la conversación, en el cambio de ideas.

FLACO. ¿Cuántas frituras me darás si me siento a la mesa?

GORDO. Eso se llama chantaje. Una cosa es que de propia voluntad le ofrezca amablemente una fritura, y otra es que pretenda extorsionarme.

FLACO. ¿Pero nada más que una fritura?

GORDO. Probar no es atracarse . . .

FLACO. Claro, ancho para ti y estrecho para mi: yo pruebo una fritura y tu te metas una docena. (252-53)

In this interchange there are many important issues that deserve comment. First, Gordo's supposed "invitation" is clearly meant to entice and then to trap Flaco, who he knows will do just about anything to get a bite of decent food. Though he does not really intend to share his meal, Gordo manages to impose his will on Flaco since the latter believes that such a scenario is possible. Gordo's cruelty is effective not just because he knows exactly what Flaco wants, but also because he has the power either to give it to him or to deprive him of it. According to Baumeister knowing what the victim wants or enjoys and then spoiling it is one of the most effective methods of emotional abuse (247). This is, of course, exactly what Gordo does a number of times in the play

Gordo's suggestion that the true purpose of a meal resides in the sharing of conversation and the exchange of ideas calls attention to another of Piñera's implicit social criticisms in the play. Though Gordo's claim is not credible in his own case – since he clearly loves eating more than sharing conversation ("yo como cualquier cosa. La cuestión es llenarse" 249) – his patronizing attitude reflects the stereotypical arrogance of a wealthy, upper class citizen who is unaware of or unconcerned with the problems of the poor. While some members of his social sphere might indeed see a meal as a pretext for conversation or intellectual exchange, such an idea would be quite foreign to an individual like Flaco who spends his life wondering when and where he will procure his next meal.

Flaco grows increasingly bitter about the way Gordo manipulates and belittles him, but his complaints only serve to emphasize his helplessness and to stimulate Gordo's desire to maltreat him. Though he is painfully aware of the unjust nature of his plight, Flaco's hunger makes it nearly impossible for him to refuse to take part in Gordo's games. Therefore, when Gordo indicates that he might be willing to share a fritter if Flaco joins him at the table, the latter gives in despite knowing that he should not. Once they are together at the table Gordo sets up another game by tantalizing Flaco with a minute piece of a fritter. When Flaco begs Gordo to give him an entire fritter, the latter concedes, but insists that one condition must be met: "En esta vida, todo es condicional," he insists, "Si usted dice correctamente la receta para la confección de frituras de seso, le daré . . . ¡una fritura de seso!" (257).

It is worth pointing out here that Gordo's impossible games call attention to the play's absurd qualities.⁴ As Albert Camus observes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in an absurd world the individual is often obligated to take part in a campaign in which he is defeated in advance (93). Piñera, who was an assiduous reader of Camus' essay, referred to this aspect of the play in an interview with Rine Leal in 1959: "de más está decir que el flaco ha sido vencido de antemano" (10). To be sure, Gordo's unkindness and his enjoyment of Flaco's distress intensify in direct proportion to the latter's ever-increasing realization that he will never beat Gordo at his own games. Consequently, whenever Flaco demonstrates his inability to comply with the impossible terms and conditions, Gordo responds by creating new and more challenging games. By way of illustration, after Flaco fails to win a fritter, he begs Gordo to give him the chicken gizzard. Even though it is one of the least desirable parts of the chicken, Gordo takes advantage of the humble request to propose another challenge:

GORDO. . . . mi idea es lo siguiente: como la única música que pueden tolerar mis oídos es la música comestible, se me ha ocurrido que a medida que yo vaya comiendo el arroz con pollo usted deleite mis oídos con la lectura de la receta para la confección de dicho plato. Tenga, aquí la tiene. (*le entrega el papel al Flaco*).

FLACO. (*pasando la vista por el papel*) Es más larga que una novela. Es mucha lectura para una sola molleja. Dame un poco de arroz.

GORDO. Veremos. Todo dependerá de la ejecución. Le advierto desde ahora que tengo un oído educadísimo para la música comestible. (*pausa*) ¿Quiere empezar, por favor?

FLACO. Antes pon la molleja aparte.

GORDO. Concedido. (*pone la molleja en el plato antes ocupado por las frituras*)

FLACO. ¿Y el arroz?

GORDO. El arroz es condicional. Ejecución brillante: arroz. Ejecución discreta: molleja. Ejecución mediocre: nada. Adelante. (262)

Gordo's victimization of Flaco culminates in the lengthy ordeal that follows this exchange. As Flaco reads the recipe for *arroz con pollo*, Gordo torments him by eating the mouth-watering dish and by making fun of Flaco's poor reading skills and his obvious ignorance of culinary matters. It is highly symbolic that the meal in question during the play's most elaborate game sequence is *arroz con pollo*. Despite the fact that this national dish had long

been one of the island's most popular and traditional meals, it was, unfortunately, not part of the diet of many Cubans during the 1940s and 1950s. According to sociologist Lowry Nelson, during the Batista years "chicken with rice was the favorite dish [. . .] but needless to say, it [was] not within the reach of large numbers of the rural population – or the urban, for that matter" (qtd. in Benjamin et. al. 2).

The stage directions throughout this lengthy episode – "*con la boca llena*," "*atacando un muslo*," "*empieza a devorar la pechuga*," "*terminando de tragar un bocado*," "*siempre comiendo*" (262-264) – are especially important since they underscore not only Gordo's gluttony, but also his calculated plan to devour the meal before Flaco completes his reading. Gordo's strategy works perfectly because just as Flaco finishes reading the recipe for *arroz con pollo*, the former gulps down the last morsel of food, and with it Flaco's little remaining hope:

(A medida que Flaco da lectura al párrafo final, Gordo se mete en la boca la última cucharada de arroz y acto seguido pincha la molleja y también la come).

FLACO. ¿Pues qué haces . . . ? ¿Y mi molleja?

GORDO. *(casi sin poder articular por la cantidad de comida que tiene en la boca)*. La . . . mo . . . La . . . mo . . . *(risas)*. La molle . . . *(nuevas risas)*. Ja . . . Ja . . . *(lanza granos de arroz de la boca)*. La molleja . . . ¡Ja, ja, ja, ja!

FLACO. *(perdiendo los estribes se levanta e increpa al Gordo)*. Hijo de yegua! Te voy a sacar la molleja de la barriga. Ojalá te dé un cólico. (268)

Gordo's sadistic laughter, emblematic of his enjoyment of his victim's distress, serves as the final blow that causes Flaco to snap. It is especially ironic that Flaco's threat that he will rip the chicken gizzard from Gordo's gut materializes in the play's shocking second scene, which is foreshadowed in the quatrain that closes the first:

Aunque el mundo sea redondo
Y Juan no se llame Paco,
Es indudable que al Gordo
Siempre se lo come el Flaco. (269)

Eating the "Gordo": A Social Necessity

When the curtain rises for the second scene, Flaco stands with his right foot upon the victim's skull while he sucks on his tibia. The rest of

Gordo's bones are scattered around the room. This dramatic image clearly suggests Flaco's victory over his tyrannical oppressor, but it also underscores the notion that the oppressed often have to resort to excessive revenge in order bring about change. In his study of human evil Roy Baumeister asserts that revenge poses a significant social problem since "retaliations will tend to exceed the original transgressions, often by a great deal." He further notes: the logical structure of revenge is, as its center, a simple reversal of victim and perpetrator roles. The victim becomes the perpetrator, striking back for what he or she has suffered. The exchange of roles contains considerable danger, however, because of the crucial differences in perspective between victims and perpetrators. Foremost among these differences is the gap in magnitude. Offenses seem much greater to the victim than they do to the perpetrator. This will almost inevitably lead to disproportionate responses, especially if a cycle of retaliation develops. (157)

The drastic nature of Flaco's revenge is implied through his immediate assumption of certain personality traits that he had so detested in his oppressor. Though his notably changed demeanor at the end of the play indeed exhibits trademark signs of the black humor that fills Virgilio Piñera's works – "*(con afectación, tirando al suelo la tibia)* ¡Qué banquetazo! *(se pasa la mano por la barriga)*. ¡Oh, perdonen la expresión, pero con los tiempos que corren . . .! *(pausa)*. Me expresaré cultamente: un banquete a lo Enrique Octavo . . ." (270) – it is important to point out that the change in personality also serves as Piñera's implicit warning that those who seek to overthrow the powerful risk becoming corrupt power mongers themselves. Piñera intimates that an unchecked hunger for vengeance only leads to excessive and unproductive rebellion.

The play's final scene does not, however, emphasize the notion that such behavior is inevitable, as many critics have stressed. In fact, there is reason to suspect that Flaco realizes that he risks being eaten himself if he becomes a cruel victimizer like Gordo. When the new Flaco arrives to take Gordo's place, therefore, Flaco essentially demonstrates his desire to stop the destructive cycle when he cries out for help: "¡Pero no es posible! Es un malentendido [. . .] ¡Díganle que aquí no es! ¡Díganle que se equivocó! ¡No lo quiero conmigo, no lo quiero, no lo quiero, no lo quiero! ¡Socorro, socorro! *(cae sobre sus rodillas)*. ¡Socorro, socorro! *(Rompe en sollozos)*" (273). His final words imply that he understands that his act of violence and subsequent assumption of the role of his oppressor might be interpreted as a

perpetuation of the type of power that he revolted against, and he therefore begs for mercy from the new Flaco.

It has been suggested by many that Piñera's play, and especially the quatrain at the end of the first scene, underscores the inevitability of armed revolutions and the impossibility of stopping the vicious cycle of "gordos" and "flacos" in Cuba. Raquel Aguilú de Murphy, for example, summarizes the play's supposedly pessimistic message with the following observation: "el flaco pasa a reemplazar al gordo y, a la vez, engendrará, como su anterior, un nuevo contrincante flaco que también terminará desplazándolo. La historia de la pieza es una historia circular, donde todo volverá a repetirse de principio a fin" (31). Matias Montes Huidobro, for his part, similarly holds that the quatrain at the end of the first scene is indicative of Piñera's defeatist view of the Cuban Revolution. He insists that in *El flaco y el gordo* revolution is shown to be a cycle that repeats itself eternally and offers no solutions (224). He adds that the moral of Piñera's drama is obvious: "siempre hay un flaco que se come al gordo, el proceso es cíclico, no hay revolución definitiva, siempre habrá gordos y flacos, siempre nos tendremos que devorar" (228). However, Aguilú de Murphy and Montes Huidobro incorrectly imply that Piñera had no faith in the so-called Gordo's capacity to curb his appetite for oppression when, in fact, Piñera did believe that change was possible. To be sure, in the play and in his article "Nubes amenazadores," cited at the outset of the present essay, Piñera intimates that certain political and social ills – the oppression of the poor and disenfranchised by a power-hungry "fat man," for example – that seem inevitable and self-perpetuating, could be reversed by the establishment of a satisfactory social, political, and economic climate.⁵ Given that he was plagued by memories of Cuba's tumultuous political past, which drove him to live in exile in Argentina for nearly 12 years, Piñera's tone in both texts is reasonably circumspect, not pessimistic and anti-revolutionary. In "Nubes amenazadoras" he correctly pointed out that "Cien fundadas razones nos aseguran que ahora las cosas marcharán como es debido, no obstante, nuestra viejo cáncer aflora para ponernos en guardia" (4).

Allegations that Piñera's central message in *El flaco y el gordo* was somehow antagonistic to Cuba's reality in 1959 unfairly imply that he was disenchanted with the country's newfound sense of nationhood at a time when he was actually quite enthusiastic about the political and cultural aims of the Revolution. Furthermore, it is important to point out that while the play suggests the social inevitability of devouring political strongmen who

oppress the masses, the carefully-worded quatrain at the end of the first act merely implies that the process will last only as long there are “Gordos” who victimize the people. Indeed, almost as quickly as Flaco begins to act like his adversary after eating him, he seems to have second thoughts about his behavior. We must not forget that as the curtain falls Flaco is on his knees begging for mercy from the perplexed skinny man who, upon entering the hospital room, simply utters “No entiendo nada” (273). It seems then, that as long as the new Flaco is not mistreated, he will have no reason to rebel. In short, the final scene suggests that the cycle of oppression will end if the Flaco-turned-Gordo loses his weight, so to speak.

In her analysis of *El flaco y el gordo*, Natividad González Freire similarly misinterprets the message of Piñera’s play. She asserts that despite the play’s supposed pro-revolutionary message, it ends up casting the Revolution in a negative light: “la obra que pretende ser simbólicamente revolucionaria resulta lo opuesto [. . .] el flaco termina por comerse al gordo y sólo le importa vencerlo para convertirse en gordo. O sea, la justicia vence a la injusticia, pero cuando alcanza el poder se convierte en injusticia a su vez” (162). González Freire is mistaken, then, when she posits that *El flaco y el gordo* is a counter-revolutionary work because she also disregards Piñera’s implicit suggestion that the new Gordo will not necessarily oppress the newly-arrived weakling. More importantly, like Montes Huidobro and Aguilú de Murphy, she overlooks the fact that Piñera based his play more on Cuba’s tumultuous cycle of past social and political ills, than on its uncertain future, for which he had high hopes despite his very practical reservations.⁶ Her analysis also neglects the important fact that at the end of the play the Flaco symbolically submits to the newcomer by falling to his knees in desperation. His panicked response to the threat of future turmoil clearly suggests that his lapse into the realm of his foe is transitory.

By way of conclusion, it is crucial to emphasize, as so many other critics have failed to do, that Virgilio Piñera wrote *El flaco y el gordo* long before he adopted a negative view of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution. Given his enthusiasm for Cuba’s newborn sense of nationhood and his hopes that his lot as a writer in Cuba would continue to improve (as it did for the next year and a half), he had no motive in 1959 to write a so-called counter-revolutionary work. Rather, Piñera aimed to offer during those exciting months of rapid and far-reaching cultural and social change a sort of literary caveat to all Cubans and to the new government. *El flaco y el gordo* was written during the early stages of the Revolution, and therefore without the benefit

of the hindsight that contemporary critics enjoy.⁷ To be sure, Piñera's play is often misinterpreted as anti-revolutionary because it is read in light of his own eventual disillusionment with the Revolution. However, when Piñera penned his play in Spring 1959, he, like the vast majority of the Cuban population, viewed the events and accomplishments of the Revolution in a very favorable light.

In an interview with Rine Leal shortly after the debut of the play in Havana in September 1959, Piñera made a rather illuminating observation:

En un cambio donde exista un sistema, un clima social y económicamente satisfactorio, no se producirán los casos extremos de gordos y flacos y por tanto cesará la antropofagia . . . Yo también espero que alguna vez no haya gordos ni flacos, y que no exista la necesidad social de comerse siempre al Gordo . . . Yo espero que la situación de "El flaco y el gordo" sea transitoria. (Leal "El flaco" 10-11)

Piñera's comments underscored his conviction that the Revolution was a social imperative and the situation portrayed in *El flaco y el gordo* would only be repeated if Cuba's new government were to give the people a reason to call for another revolution. In the closing months of 1959 he still supported the Revolution and its goals, and he was reasonably confident that Fidel Castro would manage to avoid stirring up the ire of future "Flacos" by bringing about positive social and economic change and steering clear of the rampant corruption that had plagued his predecessors. Like so many of his compatriots Piñera wanted more than anything to believe that the seemingly eternal, cannibalistic cycle of "flacos" and "gordos" had finally come to an end. That, of course, remained to be seen.

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Notes

¹ See González Freire (162), Montes Huidobro (224), Aguilu de Murphy (31), González Cruz (55).

² The biting irony of this statement should not go unnoticed. At the end of the play Gordo's skeleton, not Flaco's, is removed from the hospital room after Flaco eats him.

³ Flaco's symbolic imprisonment is especially interesting when we consider that in a preliminary draft of the play Piñera set the action in a jail. See Piñera's interview with Rine Leal in *Lunes de Revolución* 7 Sep. 1959: 10-11.

⁴ For a discussion of *El flaco y el gordo* and the theater of the absurd see González Cruz (55).

⁵ In "Nubes amenazadores" Piñera insists that given the endless deceptions of the past forty years, it is only natural that many supporters of the revolution wonder if it will be like those of the past: "nos planteamos en silencio esa terrible pregunta, que no nos queda otro remedio . . . en vista de nuestra hambre perpetua, en vista de esta segunda naturaleza que años estériles de vida ciudadana han ido quemando día a día: ¿Esta será como las otras de antes?" (4). His message is not entirely pessimistic, however, since he also encourages his readers not to lose hope. He correctly insists that reversing more than 40 years of corruption and oppression will take time: "Pero resistamos un poquito más," he concludes, "un modo de pensar no se cambia en unas horas, que la desconfianza no puede, por arte de magia, pasar a confianza, que tenemos sobrados motivos para decir a voz en cuello: ¡Sálvese quien pueda! Y ¡Quítate tú para ponerme yo! Todo esto es bien cierto, pero a pesar de ello, resistamos un poco más. A lo mejor lo acertamos" (4).

⁶ Many of Piñera's articles and editorials attest to his support of the Revolution. See, for example, "La reforma literaria." *Revolución* 12 June 1959:2; "Balance cultural de seis meses." *Revolución* 31 Aug. 1959:18; "Llamamiento a los escritores." *Revolución* 22 Oct. 1959: 2; "La Revolución se fortalece." *Lunes de Revolución* 2 Nov. 1959: 15; "El arte hecho Revolución la Revolución hecha arte." *Revolución* 5 Nov. 1959: 2.

⁷ According to Piñera's own account, he wrote *El flaco y el gordo* in spring 1959 while working on the third act of *Aire frío* (Leal "El flaco" 10).

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